Introduction to Uentaneh Tokef
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G'mar Hatimah Tova!

We're all familiar with the prayer Unetaneh Tokef.

In these Days of Awe -- Yomim Nora-im -- we recite it in the Musaf services on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It's most recognizable verse is about our fate for the coming year:

"B'Rosh Hashana, yika-tevun u'v Yom tzon Kippur yeicha teimun." "On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed."

Unetaneh tokef, which means "let us ascribe power,"
begins by declaring:

"We acclaim this day's pure sanctity, its awesome power. This day, Lord, Your dominion is deeply felt."

The prayer's origin is not clear. Modern scholars say the poet Yannai wrote it in the late fifth to early sixth century in Byzantine Galilee.

Legend attributes it to the 11th century Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. The local archbishop pressured him to convert but he refused. His hands and feet with cut off, and he died in his synagogue on Rosh Hashana while chanting the piyyut.

In the 20th century, Leonard Cohen gave it an update in his song "Who by fire."

Unetaneh Tokef is a poem with spectacular imagery.

"The great shofar is sounded. A still, small voice is heard. This day even angels are alarmed, seized with fear and trembling as they declare, 'The day of judgment is here!'"

“This day all who walk the earth pass before You as a flock of sheep. And like a shepherd who gathers his flock, bringing them under his staff, You bring everything that lives before You for review. You determine the life and decree the destiny of every creature.”

This parade of “human sheep” reminds me of the Jewish-born composer Gustav Mahler’s monumental take on the Christian belief of Resurrection. In his notes on his Resurrection Symphony, he wrote:

“The voice calls, the end of all life has come. The Last Judgment is announced and the horror of ‘the day of all days’ has come upon us. The earth trembles, the graves burst open, the dead arise and march forth in endless procession. The great and the small of the earth – the kings and beggars, the just and godless – all press forward – the cry for mercy and forgiveness sounds terrible in our ears.”

I honestly have trouble with both these visions of the Day of Judgment. They are more than a demonstration of “awesome power.” They are mind boggling.

In the millennia before A-I, God on this day determines how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, according to Unetaneh Tokef. How will each individual destined for death die? Who shall be at peace and who shall wander? Who shall be poor and who rich? Who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted?
I was asked to introduce this piyyut by a master story pitcher – Kol Rina’s real Treasure – in part because of my experience as an obituary writer. Her decisive prod said:

“From all the life stories that you have written you uniquely can teach us about what it means to live a good life.”

How could I say no?

The obits I have written include those of Pope Francis, Jimmy Carter, John Lewis, Henry Kissinger, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, Nelson Mandela, John McCain, George HW Bush, Bernie Madoff – and Donald Trump. (Yes, we often write them in advance. At The Associated Press, we called our pre-written obits “preparedness.”)

Suffice it to say, it's the subject of any obituary who is the real author. They created their own stories through the lives they lived. The obit writer is just a vessel, the medium, through which someone's deeds -- or misdeeds -- passed.

Take Alfred Nobel, who had been best known for inventing dynamite. After his brother died in 1888, a French newspaper mistakenly reported that Alfred had died. It published his obituary under the headline, "The merchant of death is dead."

Nobel, who died eight years later, had the rare opportunity to read his own obituary. He didn't like what he saw. Not wanting to be remembered as the man who created a means to kill more people more quickly than anyone or anything, he recast his life.

He used most of his fortune to create the prizes that recognize the highest achievements in physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature and peace. They were first awarded in 1901, five years after Alfred's death at age 63.

In her inspiring book, "Heart of a Stranger," Central Synagogue Rabbi Angela Buchdahl notes that Judaism, unlike Christianity, is a religion more of deed than creed. She writes:

"The Torah is less concerned with telling us what to believe than how to behave. When people tell me they don't believe in God, or aren't sure if they do, I understand their hesitation. There is often resistance to the idea of the divine. I say that the belief itself is not essential to living a life of faith. I am more interested in asking what kind of spiritual aliveness might you feel if you did certain acts that felt godly – kind, selfless, reparative – even if you reject the idea of being commanded by God."

She continues: "I've maintained my nightly prayer ritual for almost 50 years even though I don't actually believe that God will answer my prayers like a genie granting a wish. But I trust that articulating my deepest wishes and hopes orients my heart and energy in the right direction and strengthens my aspiration to make them real."

These thoughts bring me to the bottom line -- the kicker, as we journalists like to call a story's ending. A journalist's goal is to write something so compelling that the reader will get to the kicker.

In the case of Unetaneh Tokef, one must not stop reading at the paragraphs that say God determines who shall live and who shall die.

In Leonard Cohen's "Who by fire," his kicker is a cynical "And who shall I say is calling?"

Our prayer today ends with the congregation proclaiming forcefully: "U-t'shuvah, u-t'fillah, utz'dakah maaviririn et roa hag'zerah – BUT PENITENCE, PRAYER AND GOOD DEEDS CAN ANNUL THE SEVERITY OF THE DECREE. "

In other words, deed more than creed is INDEED something we all can accept without much trouble.

G'mar tov!