

## What Are We to Do with UnetanaH Tokef?

Yom Kippur Morning

October 8, 2011/10 Tishri 5772

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For some, this prayer is beloved. It rivals Shakespeare in its poignant and masterful description of the human condition: “man’s origin is dust and dust is his end. Each of us is a shattered urn, grass that must wither, a flower that will fade, a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by, a particle of dust floating on the wind, a dream soon forgotten.”

For others, this prayer is dreaded: “on Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not....”

What are we to make of *unetanaH tokef*? *UnetanaH tokef* envisions the High Holy Days as an annual season of divine judgment. The divine court is in session and God presides, depicted as a stern judge, prosecutor, and witness, who decrees our fate: who will live on, who will die, and how we will die.

*UnetanaH tokef* describes a world where the righteous are rewarded with more life and the wicked are punished with less. *UnetanaH tokef* contradicts empirical reality, our lived experience of the world. We know all too well that we live in a world that is neither just nor fair. Since all of our hearts have been broken by the loss of loved ones and dear friends, we know for a fact there is no correlation between righteousness and mortality.

The problem with *unetanaH tokef* is not only that we know this prayer is false, factually untrue. The problem is that *unetanaH tokef* doesn’t comfort us at all. Actually, it makes us feel even worse.

It leads us to believe that God is the cause of our pain and suffering. It leads us to believe that our loved ones deserved to die, even those who died young. It leads us to ponder what sin we have committed that will bring about our own premature demise. It is no wonder that *unetanaH tokef* causes pain to some, frightens others, and makes still others angry.

So what are we to do with *unetanaH tokef*? I believe that the ancient concept of a punishing God is one of the worst theological mistakes of all time. It has

caused terrible damage to us emotionally, not to mention the huge harm it has done to our belief in the existence of a moral and just God.

As a rabbi for 23 years, I cannot tell you how many people have walked into my study in tears, wanting to know why God is punishing them or their loved ones with cancer or a car crash. Even people who do not believe in God still want to know after a tragedy why God is punishing them. How deeply ingrained is this concept of a punishing God within us.

And this is what I tell them.

God is not punishing you. That is not at all the way God operates. God loves you and cares about you. God created you. The concept of a punishing God is an archaic and anachronistic belief of another century. It does not belong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our ancestors lived in an era of merciless emperors and brutal kings. It is totally understandable how they projected these same qualities upon God, the King of Kings. But that's all it is. A psychological projection onto God. A human interpretation of how God operates, and a mistaken one at that.

The concept of a punishing God is as false and untrue as the concept of a correlation between righteousness and mortality is false and untrue.

And this is what I go on to tell them.

You must stop looking for a punishing God, because that's not where God is. You will never find God there. Whatever pain or suffering you are coping with is bad enough. Never add insult to injury by believing that God is punishing you.

This is where you can find God. Look for God in your inner strength and courage, your resilience and will to fight. Look for God in the love of all those who love you and care about you. Look for God in the brilliance of your doctor. Look for God in the amazing compassion of your nurse. Look for God in every new scientific breakthrough and technological advance, in every new miracle drug.

As a rabbi and as a Reform Jew, the God I believe in never, ever engages in reward or punishment. The God I believe in does not punish anyone and does not decree the destiny of anyone. I know of no Reform or Reconstructionist Rabbi who believes God punishes you. For that matter, I know of no Unitarian Minister, liberal Catholic Priest or liberal Protestant Minister who believes that God punishes you.

So what do we do with *unetannah tokef*? Should we just skip the recitation of *unetannah tokef*? Should we take *unetannah tokef* out of the High Holy Days prayerbook altogether?

No. What we need to do is study *unetannah tokef* more carefully and we will be surprised by what we discover. Let us plumb the depths of *unetannah tokef* with new and fresh eyes.

Please turn to page 106. There you see that tradition ascribes authorship of *unetannah tokef* to a 13<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Amnon of Mayence who chose to die rather than renounce his Jewish faith.

Scholars now teach us that *unetannah tokef* was not composed in medieval Germany but in the land of Israel and much earlier too. It was composed in the Byzantine period, circa the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The upshot here is that whoever wrote *unetannah tokef*, whether it was the illustrious liturgical poet, Yannai, or some other unknown author, *unetannah tokef* had nothing to do originally with Jewish martyrdom.

In its original context, *unetannah tokef* sought to come to terms with the universal condition of human life, the tragic ends that befell individuals in late antiquity: “who by warfare and who by wildlife, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague...”

Now please turn to page 312.

The first thing I want you to notice about *Unetannah tokef* is that it repeatedly contradicts itself.

*Unetannah tokef* begins with that famous image of God as the inscrutable judge, prosecutor, and witness all rolled into one. Now look at the second paragraph on page 313. Here *unetannah tokef* compares God to a shepherd, a mighty protector of the weak, and the opposite of a stern judge.

At the bottom of page 313, *unetannah tokef* proclaims that our fate is irrevocably determined by God. There is no free will. We have no say in the matter. Now look at the top of page 314. Here *unetannah tokef* proclaims the opposite. Our destinies can be changed through acts of repentance, prayer, and charity. So human free will does exist. We do have a say after all.

If we had more time, I would demonstrate to you how the rest of *unetannah tokef* continues to contradict itself at every turn. Was the author of *unetannah tokef* meshuganah? No, he was brilliant. *Unetannah tokef* is not a masterpiece of theological contradiction. It is a masterpiece of theological point versus counterpoint.

I would suggest to you that the author of *unetannah tokef* faithfully cited the traditional beliefs of his day, then expressed his doubts about them and offered an alternative theology in their stead.

Let me show you. Point: yes, it is taught that God is an inscrutable judge. Counterpoint: but I believe God is a shepherd who protects his flock. Yes, it is taught that everything is predestined but I believe in the power of human free will.

And here is the most significant point versus counterpoint of all. Please look with me on page 314. “Lord, it is not the death of sinners you seek, but that they should turn from their ways and live.”

Point: it is taught that God rewards and punishes with life and death.

Counterpoint: I believe that God wants everyone to live.

Does *unetannah tokef* bluntly remind us that we all die. Yes, and it is an important reminder. Does *unetannah tokef* remind us that being human means being fragile and vulnerable. Yes, and it’s an important reminder. Does *unetannah tokef* remind us that life is uncertain, we never know what will happen tomorrow, we never know what the new year will bring? Yes, and it’s an important reminder.

*Unetanan tokef* is not morbid. It is simply realistic about the precariousness of human life, whether that life is lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The true intention of *unetannah tokef*’s honest realism is to challenge us to live our lives with a sense of urgency.

*Unetannah tokef* says to us: no one gets forever to get your act together. So what the heck are you waiting for? Live your life the way you most yearn to live it – now. Bring your life into balance – now.

Love your loved ones the way you truly want to love them – now.

The big question *unetannah tokef* asks you: how will you choose to love well, to live wisely, and to give generously of yourself for this New Year of 5772?