

What Do We Do With *Unetannah Tokef*?

Yom Kippur Morning

10 Tishri 5767

By Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon

Copyright © 2006 Temple Sinai, Summit, NJ

“Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day for it is awesome and full of dread.” So begins *unetannah tokef*, one of the most preeminent prayers of the High Holy Days. Unique to the High Holy Days liturgy, *unetannah tokef* is recited at no other time in the Jewish year.

Traditionally attributed to Rabbi Amnon in his dying moment of martyrdom, we now know this to be incorrect. *Unetannah tokef* was written by Kalonymus ben Meshullam Kalonymus, a famed 11th century Jewish liturgical poet in Mayence. Most interestingly, *unetannah tokef* is not a uniquely Jewish prayer. Highly similar versions of its sentiments can be found in the Christian liturgy of the same period. Thus, in the Byzantine period, Jews and Christians alike perceived God as a heavenly judge, who literally inscribes in a literal book, who metes out reward and punishment, and who annually predetermines every person’s fate.

The people of antiquity were fully aware that life is not fair. They clearly recognized that matters of life and death were not within human power to control and that our actions had little bearing on human destiny. What made *unetannah tokef* so meaningful and so moving to both 11th century Jews and Christians was its conviction that -- whatever happened in life -- it was not random, it was not haphazard, it was not chaotic. God was in complete charge. God was in control of the world.

In addition, *unetannah tokef* made what must have been a stunning assertion to those who prayed it. At a time when belief in predestination was almost universally accepted, this prayer proclaimed that human beings had some power to influence their destiny. Through acts of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, -- repentance, prayer, and charity -- there existed a chance to escape one’s destiny, to evade one’s assigned fate.

In the context of Jewish intellectual history, *unetannah tokef* will always be a remarkable prayer. In the 21st century, however, more than a few of us recoil from this prayer’s theological assertions. We find it difficult to imagine God as a king or

heavenly judge who dispenses punishment and predetermines everyone's fate. On moral grounds also we find it very troubling. All of us know of unexpected illness, the sudden death of loved ones and friends. Could a good God decree such things? We sadly shake our heads in disbelief.

So what do we do with *unetannah tokef*? *Unetannah tokef* asserts one particular Jewish conception of God. It is not the only one. We need to understand there are many ways of conceptualizing who or what God is in the Jewish religion. There is no single, authoritative definition of God in Judaism and don't let anyone ever tell you there is.

When we talk about God in Judaism we have to take into account biblical views and rabbinic views, medieval views and mystical views, modern views and post-modern views. And when you include all these voices in theological discussion you quickly understand that Moses and Moses Maimonides were two of the most famous Jews of all time – yet they held radically different conceptions of God.

This is critical to know because so many of us say we don't believe in God. I think what we really mean is that we don't believe in a particular definition of God. And assuming no other definitions are possible, we conclude we just don't believe in God. For example, when people tell me they don't believe in God, -- and you'd be surprised how many people feel the need to confess to a rabbi they don't -- I always respond by asking, "Please tell me about the God you don't believe in?" And they will usually make comments such as "After the holocaust, I can't believe in an all-powerful God" or "I can't believe that God is a heavenly parent who sits on a throne in the sky" or "I can't accept that God is a 'he.'"

And sometimes people are surprised when I say, "Good. Neither do I." But there is no reason to be surprised. Jewish theology did not stop centuries ago. Indeed, more than 500 years ago, Jewish mysticism and medieval Jewish theology had already begun to venture beyond our biblical and rabbinic inheritance of God as person, parent, and king. In this 21st century, Jewish theological inquiry continues.

Therefore the intriguing question, the really interesting question, is not do you or don't you believe in God, but rather what kind of God do you or could you believe in? What God concept does cohere with your life experience, with your scientific knowledge, with your assumptions about reality?

For example, let's compare and contrast *Unetannah tokef* with the theology of Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of the famous *When Bad Things Happen to Good*

People. Prior to writing this book, Kushner described his faith as having been a very conventional one. He believed in all those things that a Conservative Rabbi was supposed to believe, possibly including the theology of *unetannah tokef*.

But then tragedy struck. Kushner's young son, Aaron, was diagnosed with progeria, the aging disease, and he died. The death of his child sent Rabbi Kushner into a theological tizzy. His conventional faith fell apart. His life experience taught him that he could no longer accept his conventional faith. Kushner felt some of those beliefs had to go. And so, in 1981, he wrote a book that struck a tremendous chord all over the world: When Bad Things Happen to Good People. But why did it strike such a chord? What exactly is Kushner's theology?

Kushner's theology is characterized by the rejection of two classic biblical beliefs: First, divine retribution, the concept that God punishes us for our misdeeds. And second, divine Providence, the concept that God controls everything and watches over us all the time. Kushner argues that our human experience of life clearly proves that God does not really operate in the all-controlling ways that are depicted in the Bible or in *unetannah tokef*.

In the world we know, God does not intervene to stop murderers from killing innocent men, women, or children. In the world we know, God does not intervene to stop natural disasters. There will be earthquakes and tsunamis and people will die from them. But why doesn't God intervene? Is it because God doesn't exist in the first place? Is it because God is punishing us?

Kushner's response is that God is real and God does not operate in the punishing way the Bible or *unetannah tokef* depict. Bad things happen to good people for two reasons: 1) Human beings choose to do evil and unjust things to other human beings, and 2) Human beings are subject to the forces of nature and random chance. You can be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the world we know, says Kushner, God cannot intervene to stop human free will or human beings would just be puppets on a string. There would be no point to humanity's creation. So, too, God cannot interfere with nature, or human beings would be unable to count on the predictability of the universe, so necessary for human life.

Why did Kushner's book strike a chord with so many millions of people around the world? Since there are some things God cannot control, and since there are some ways in which even God is limited, we can stop thinking that God is an adversary who takes away our loved ones or decrees our destiny. God is not the enemy. God is on our side – and when bad things happen to good people God

sympathizes with our anger and hurt, for God feels the very same way. When we cry, God cries with us. Even though bad things happen to good people, God loves us and we can still love God.

In comparing and contrasting Kushner with *unetannah tokef*, we clearly observe how the theological beliefs of one era may not be meaningful or comforting to another. Some theological beliefs withstand the test of time and others do not. The people of antiquity felt God's love in God's absolute control of the world, in God's setting the parameters of everyone's fate, even in determining who will live and who will die. They found no comfort whatsoever in the thought of random chance. Given the choice, they would take predestination. They preferred an all-controlling God to a limited one.

We moderns tend to see God's love in precisely the opposite way. We feel God's love in human freedom and in the beauty of natural law. We find little comfort in the thought of predestination or God's intervention in the natural order. Given the choice, we will take random chance. We prefer a limited God to an all-controlling one.

But in rejecting the all-controlling God of *unetannah tokef*, we also let go of the expectation that God, like a heavenly parent, can do everything, fix everything, make everything okay. Parents cannot really do that. Nor can God. It is just not the way that our universe really works. And the sooner we give up that expectation the better, says Kushner, because if we don't we will always feel disappointed in God. We will always feel that God is withholding something from us and that, besides disappointing us, makes us angry at God as well.

Once we accept that even God has limits, says Kushner, we will know what we can and cannot reasonably expect from God. And then we will be much more appreciative and grateful for what God can do and does do for us.

So what do we do with *unetannah tokef*? The liturgical purpose of *unetannah tokef* was not to focus our attention on the theological issues of determinism or predestination, but rather to evoke a sober awareness of our human mortality. That it surely did for our ancestors and it still does for us. While most of cannot accept the literal truth of *unetannah tokef*, all of us can affirm its symbolic truth. For the last 1,000 years, *unetannah tokef* has been admonishing our ancestors and now us to take seriously how precious and unpredictable life is, and how quickly the years fly by. This message was never intended to scare us but always to inspire us. So, "Let us declare the sacred power of this day" to motivate us as no other day can do, to

imbue our lives with clarity, nobility, and purpose; with light, with laughter, and most of all – with love. With love.