

Laura Schwartz Harari
B'nai Israel Amarillo, Texas
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U'netaneh Tokef

Rabbi Maurice Davis told the following story:

“I love the story about the poor man who tried to get into a rich ‘shul’, and they were too polite to say to him that they didn’t want to let him in. So they put him off with one excuse after another. ‘You need letters of reference’, and then, ‘you need to wait until the committee meets’, and so on. Until finally, the poor man began to get the idea.

One day he went to the shul and got rebuffed with the same excuse, and as he was walking away feeling downhearted and depressed, he chanced to meet God. And God said, ‘Why do you look so sad?’ The man said, ‘Because I’ve been trying to get into that shul for months and I can’t get in.’

And God says, ‘I know how you feel. I’ve been trying to get into that shul for years, and I can’t get in either.’

It makes no difference how fancy the furniture, or how many times God’s name is invoked in a place. Either justice and mercy are there, or else God is not there either. That is the message of the period of the High Holy Days.”

Yom Kippur is about reflection and self-change. We engage in a process of *teshuvah*—“turning” away from actions or behaviors we wish to change, and “returning” to the core of our self-essence.

I remember attending my 30th high school reunion a number of years back, and bumping into a girlfriend I hadn’t seen for at least twenty years. Her first words to me were, “You haven’t changed a bit.” Her words were clearly meant as complimentary. I imagine that if she recognized me so easily, I must have resembled my younger self (unless she looked closely at my name tag—which bore a likeness of my graduation picture...). Inside, I **knew** how much I had changed since our last meeting. And on Yom Kippur aren’t we encouraged to make changes? Indeed, the process we Jews go through every year during the Ten Days of Repentance, has change at its core.

The U’netaneh Tokef prayer begins with the words: “On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass on and how many shall be born...”

The prayer concludes, however, with the following words:

ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה

But **repentance, prayer, and charitable acts**, lessen the severity of the decree.

Embedded in the words of this text are three ways in which we might choose to engage in “turning”.

T’shuvah- Repentance:

Discomfort often challenges us to reconsider our long held self-image and to consider carefully how we have been living. Rabbi Myriam Klotz says, “Suffering can prompt self-examination, calling us to learn from our mistakes and to move on.” Our tradition calls upon us to assess our behavior in the past year, and if we’ve made mistakes- as inevitably we all have- we are to take to heart the lessons of our interactions, to challenge ourselves to grow as a result. As Rabbi Klotz suggests, “responding to life with openness to growth and change, can help sweeten the bitterness of suffering by affording a constructive response to painful circumstances.”

T’filah- Prayer:

“By cultivating a life of T’filah,” rabbi Klotz suggests, “we create the opportunity to experience intimately the soul within us. Prayer can help us open to the vast resources within us that *know*, that *can* cope, that *do* have wisdom and potency by virtue of their *essential* connection to the forces of healing and eternity that breathe through us.”

And prayer need not be limited to the words of our prayerbooks. Prayer, our means of communication with God, gives voice to our innermost feelings and longings, our fears, and our hopes. As poet Ruth Brin writes: “through prayer, I can sense my inner strength, my inner purpose, my inner joy, my capacity to love. As I reach upward in prayer, I sense these qualities in my Creator.” “A life of prayer might not take away the decree,” says Rabbi Klotz, “but it can avert its severity and perhaps wrest from it profound blessing.”

T’zedakah- Righteous Deeds:

“T’zedakah is righteous action” rabbi Klotz teaches us. “When we suffer, we can feel absorbed and isolated in our sorrow, or we can look out and see that we are not alone, that others also suffer. We can use our personal experiences to carve within us a deeper well of compassion and empathy for the pain others endure. Having known pain, we can choose to care for those around us.”

All these actions, *teshuvah*—repentance, *tefilah*—prayer, and *tzedakah*—righteous deeds, can bring us closer to God and to our fellow human beings. Adonai has imbued us with free-will, in order that we may strive to know what it means to be created in the image of God. Or, in the

words of the Psalmist, rendered so beautifully in English by Rabbi Shlomo

Carlebach:

“Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul...”

Amen, Keyn y’hi ratzon.