

Sub-Saharan Africa used to be lush and verdant. In a period dating to approximately 5500 years ago, there was a series of fresh water lakes in which fish and people swam. Cave paintings from the era depict some of the earliest known documentations of human beings swimming. In an archaeological dig discovery, the team working to uncover the mysteries of Green Sahara came across a burial site for two small children and their mother. Researchers believe the children and mother drowned in one of the lakes. The bodies of water are long gone. The fish are gone. But evidence of the tragic drowning of a family remained behind to speak their tale of sadness for the scientists who would find them five and a half thousand years later. Who by fire? Who by water? Napa is known for being a wine-growing paradise. The night of the Tubbs Fire, Charles and Sarah Rippey, ages 101 and 98 died when their roof collapsed in as the fire raged through their neighborhood engulfing their home. They had been together since falling in love in elementary school. Just as Leonard Cohen observed, Who in the sunshine? Who in the nighttime?

The haunting words of his timeless song mirror the haunting words of the prayer by which they were inspired - Unetaneh Tokef. Every year we read on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur the questions that no one wants to ask, acknowledge or even think about. The prayer is a statement of our absolute mortality and fragility in this world. Without embarrassment or apology it affirms that the world is a dangerous place. It is filled with dread and terror, difficulty, trauma, and tragedy. Worst of all, it speaks for a theology which insists that God will write lists, our fate will be sealed, our destiny is known, and all we can do in the face of the decree is offer t'filah, t'shuvah, and tzedakah, (prayer, repentance, and justice) and then hope for the best. Countless generations of Jews have questioned the Unetaneh Tokef and its message. Yet, despite the bad yelp reviews, the theology has remained in our prayer books. While it could be easy to reject the ideas represented in the prayer, these past 18 months have demonstrated how -timeless, and relevant this prayer actually is. At the heart of this prayer is a resounding shofar call to not just acknowledge that life is truly a fiddler on the roof - but to embrace it and in the face of playing a string instrument on slanted roof tops, to cultivate in ourselves the quality of resilience that we may weather the inevitable fall.

Underlying the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, and our tushes and knees when they hit the ground after the tumble from the precarious rooftops, are a series of un-asked questions. Who decided someone should have to fiddle a violin on a slanted rooftop? Truly, the question is why is there so much suffering in the world? If, as our liturgy states, God is able to affect history, nature, and our lives, why has God forsaken us? Where is God in the silence around our suffering? How could God have let my loved one, or myself, suffer so unjustly. The prayers of this day tell us that God can reverse even Divine decrees! We are told that God saved our ancestors from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm! God rescued them. Where has God been since then?

Answers to these questions often fall into two camps. The first is the prosecution and the second is the legal defense team. The prosecution says that obviously God does not exist and if God does, God is inherently unjust, God's actions are inexcusable and God's appalling silence and absence are indefensible. This is the broad theology for many Jews today in our post-Holocaust world. The alternative is that if God does exist, God is misrepresented in our prayers and tradition. God is not personal, active, or conscious, does not respond to petitionary prayers and is not able to affect outcomes in this existence as we know and understand it.

The defense team rushes to save us from such heresy and blasphemy. Defense cries foul telling us that God's ways are mysterious. We are told that everything happens for a reason. We are told that we must have faith and trust that we will understand only if we are meant to and that impertinent questions are insulting to our relationship with God who is not responding to us in a way that seems helpful or constructive. The defense team goes to great lengths to protect God from typos, history, evidence, and personal experience. They are willing to blame the sufferer for their own suffering as an earned punishment because of misdeeds. The defense team is beautifully demonstrated by Job's friends who come one by one to listen to Job, to witness his suffering, and then to lay the cause of his suffering at his own feet.

Unetaneh Tokef offers a different answer - a pragmatism grounded in an unflinching view of history and the human condition. Suffering happens because the world is filled with chaos. Some of it we can predict. Some of it we can't. Some can be prevented if we could work better as humans with other humans. Some cannot be prevented no matter

how hard we work together because this beautiful world and cosmos we exist in have only come into being through a series of violent, explosive processes and these processes continue each and every day. Hawaii is born of volcanos. California is born of earthquakes. The gulf coast is born of hurricanes and the Grand Canyon is born of ice cutting through rock.

Unetaneh Tokef asks us to look the suffering in the eye and to acknowledge it is always with us. We are told that every life, every soul is counted and recorded. In other words, each and every one of us is important and is sacred. Unetaneh Tokef describes God as judge, jury, prosecution and defense. And while the prayer underscores a theology that might say that the things that befall us are a result of God's judgment, we can reframe the same liturgy and see other possibilities. The obvious interpretation is to think of this prayer as Jobs friends do. We then get to assume that starvation, disease or natural disaster are the result of God's judgment and represent some gross form of Divine Punishment being righteously meted out. Judaism rejects this idea from within the book of Job itself as God admonishes Job's friends decrying their small-minded pettiness and their assumptions that they have even the first hint or clue as to God's mind, will, and wishes. The book of Job teaches us to reject such simplistic and cruel thinking and rationalizing.

Instead, we could consider the prayer as a reminder that suffering is not the result of God's anger being visited upon the sufferer, but rather, that God will sit in judgment of how we conduct ourselves in the face of the suffering of others. Unetaneh Tokef reminds us that part of the way to temper the severe decrees we face is through the work of t'filah - of prayer. Our rabbis also call prayer, Avodah Shebalev - Labor of the Heart. This then is one of the teachings we can take from the Unetaneh Tokef. We all suffer. The question is do we allow our suffering to make us softer, kinder, and more compassionate? Or, like Pharaoh, do we allow our suffering to embitter and harden our hearts? Perhaps God's judgment is about what we do with our suffering. Knowing it is a bi-product of existence, do we allow it to sweeten us or poison us? Does it drive us to help or to ignore? Do we transform our suffering into a blessing for others or do we transform it into an excuse to become deaf and blind to the suffering of others? Perhaps this is what it means to pray and to truly engage in Avodah Shebalev - in the truest labors of the heart.

This past summer, as Unetaneh Tokef promises, there was war. Like clockwork, a violent confrontation emerged between Hamas and Israel. One new aspect of this year's conflict was the rioting that broke out in towns known for having mixed heritage residents in Israel. Most of us were shocked to see violence in places like Haifa and Lod, places known to have pretty peaceful coexistence between citizens from different religious and ethnic heritage populations. While the news media covered the violence, what they didn't cover was the ~~clean-up~~clean-up work. In many of the places where violence broke out, citizens took to the streets in the days that followed to clean up their town together, Arab and Jew, side by side. They created peace rallies. They posted inspiring messages from the hospitals, the restaurants, and the bus stations where they work and the street corners they occupied together - Jews, Muslims, Druzim, standing together. Slogans ranged from "We refuse to hate" to "All of us together" and "We are one."

This growing movement of explicit co-existence and peacefulness in the face of violence and hatred certainly has many foundations but one foundation in particular should be our inspiration for this year because it is a living example of Avodah Shebalev. Back in 1995 a small group of Israelis worked with a small group of Palestinians from Gaza to try to come together over their shared grief that their children had been killed because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. They were labeled as traitors, as victims of Stockholm Syndrome, as weak but nevertheless, they persisted. From 1995 through today, they continued to find ways to enter into dialogue together, stay committed to growing together past their rage and their hatred, and for the sake of everyone else's children who were still alive, to cultivate a new heart of peace for both their peoples. They call themselves The Parents Circle Family Forum. Every year at Israeli Memorial Day, this group which now has chapters everywhere in Israel, offers an alternative Memorial ceremony in which Arab and Jewish parents mourn together all their children, their spouses, their parents, lost to the unending violence. In 2019, the last Memorial Day before the pandemic, the main ceremony numbered more than 9,000 people. This is the very living definition of resiliency and this is the wisdom of our Unetaneh Tokef prayer. The prayer asks, "who by war?" These parents have answered the dreadful truth, "our children." These parents have heard the invitation of the nechemtah of the prayer - the statement that through t'shuvah, repentance, t'filah, prayer, and tzedakah, justice, they can

temper the harshness of the decree. The decree is not from God, it is from the chaos of existence and our human capacity for violence. God's judgment, if such a thing exists, is on how we handle our pain and our suffering. The answer is resiliency nourished by kindness, compassion, and a commitment to prevent other people from suffering as we do. This is why Torah tells us over and over again that we are to remember we were slaves in Egypt! It's not so we can ignore slavery when and where we encounter it! It's so we can condition ourselves to respond to it with urgency, energy, and determination whenever and wherever it rears its head.

I want to say this. I have no idea how any parent finds the strength to continue on after the tragedy of ~~losing~~ a child but I know that they do. We sadly have too many examples of such resiliency right here in our own synagogue family. Like our many bereaved parents here, these people are responding to tragedy and suffering, not just with a commitment to live, but with a commitment to make the world a better place. The parents of The Parents Circle Family Forum envision and work towards a world where no other parents have to walk the path of grief they are walking. Their answer to "Who by war?" is "Not another person." They were among the first to leave their homes, their bomb shelters, and their televisions, to venture outside, and to begin to clean up the filth of the violence of hatred. This is what it means to be ~~resilient~~, and this is the spiritual challenge laid at our feet tonight.

As I look into the screen and see you in my heart, I know the path of difficulty you have walked this year. There has been so much loss. There has been loneliness. There has been frustration, isolation, fear, anger, and hurt. We have lost good people this year. We are still grieving the people we lost in years past. We are holding our breath as we pray for healing for our loved ones who's minds and bodies are plagued by disease and illness. We are in pain and fear because for some of us, we sit beside our abusers every single day. Some of us even love them which is why we can't leave. We are struggling with addiction and unhealthy choices we make over and over and over again. Our bodies ache with loneliness, with arthritis, with joints that creak and hearts that hurt. Our roads have been long and difficult.

But we are still here. We are still walking these roads. Some days we are walking on broken glass and sleeping on a bed of broken glass but still we rise and find a way to step

into the day again. This is resiliency! Resiliency, strength and courage - they only happen when we feel broken, weak and afraid. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the decision to act in spite of it. Strength is not an absence of tears but a willingness to cry and weep until we can breathe again or sleep again or pray again or eat again. Resiliency is not a quick bounce back from a set back. It is the choice to continue on even through we don't know how we will lift our foot and take the next step. It is the choice to be joyful and to count our blessings even when we only feel despair. Resiliency is the willingness to pursue happiness even when it seems as unlikely to find as a rabbi who will give a short High Holy Day sermon.

Friends, I know our roads have been long and I know we come tonight feeling tired, worried, or more alone than we'd like. But I also know this. I know that our community is strong and we are resilient. We are the inheritors of five thousand years of resiliency training. We know what it is to lose everything and we know what it is to fight for a life of dignity and freedom. We know what it is to live in fear with our only protection being a hopeful prayer for God's shelter of peace and we know what it is to rise up in the morning ready to walk forward into an unknown world with a positive attitude and hope. And when we falter, when we need strengthening, we have each other - we have this beautiful, special, and sacred community that we and our generations have built together so that when life brings us to our knees, our community is with us to catch us, to hold us, and to raise us up.

This is what it means to be a resilient people and to live out the values of this most difficult prayer. It is the embodiment of the saying... Chaos whispered to the girl "You cannot withstand the storm." and the girl whispered back, "I am the storm."

Friends, my prayer for us tonight as we take our first steps into atonement and into 5782 is for us to find our strength and our resiliency to weather the storms life has thrown at us, not just with the pandemic, but with everything we carry in our hearts and on our shoulders tonight. Our burdens and our suffering are tremendous. But so is our capacity to respond. The road out of Egypt, out of Mitzrayim, out of our narrow confinement, is long. It is not easy. But in walking it we will find our strength. We will find the pathways worn into the terrain as we are reminded that countless generations of our people have walked these same roads before us. May the labor of our hearts on this Yom Kippur help us to embrace our strength, our courage, and our resiliency. Let us not turn to bitterness but

rather instead to togetherness that when the storms come, may they find us standing resilient, ready to hold each other in strength and to face each moment with determination and love.