

A Certain Plot Twist
Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5782
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We thought we had turned a corner. We thought *at least* we would be seated together in this sanctuary. We've been vigilant and vaccinated; we've been resilient and resourceful; we've been worried, and wearied; we've been on guard, on top of it, and *online*; we've zealously taught *zayde* to Zoom and *bubbe* to broadcast, and nevertheless, we usher in another New Year through high def instead of holding hands. How are we *still* here? What do we do with this plot twist? How can we build up our endurance?

I don't have any answers to these questions, or any satisfying answers, but I am certain of one thing:

Uncertainty.

We live with it, confront it, tolerate it, manage it, wrestle with it, and hopefully, God willing, make peace with it.

Not surprisingly, our tradition has much to say on the topic of uncertainty. On these High Holy Days, we read a poem which is known by its first two Hebrew words "*Untaneh Tokef*."

The words of the prayer *Untaneh Tokef* begin by declaring “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day--a day whose holiness awakens our deepest awe.” The prayer continues posing harder questions: “Who shall live and who shall die? “Who by fire, who by water? Who by earthquake and who by plague? We are troubled by these questions, some of us are even put off by them, but are they not a mirror of the uncertainties with which we all live?”

Contemporary scholar, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, asks: “Why do I, for one, want to hear all of *Untaneh Tokef*, not only the comforting parts? [Her]... answer comes from the octogenarian violinist Olga Blum, founder of Barge Music in Brooklyn. Olga was once asked by the mayor of New York: “Olga, why don’t you put the barge on pilings so that when a large boat passes and causes a wake, the barge won’t rock any more and the piano won’t ever roll across the stage during a performance (as it once did)?” Olga replied: “I will never put the barge up on pilings because all beauty, all art, is in some way, a wrestling with impermanence and death.” *Untaneh Tokef* is an artistic wrestling with impermanence and death, with deeds and their consequences, with power and powerlessness, with fear and reassurance, with mistakes, and second chances.”

Life itself is an artistic wrestling with impermanence and uncertainty. One particular uncertainty that stands out during these recent months is the uncertainty of illness. Who shall test positive and who shall test negative? Who shall have symptoms and who shall be symptom-free? Who shall even know to quarantine and who shall unwittingly pass the virus on to others?

While we are all pandemic weary, I get it, another prayer may provide a source of strength, especially as we cope with the prevalence of the Delta variant.

In each worship service, we offer a prayer called “*Hodaah*” or gratitude. The prayer begins “*Modim anachnu lach*” which means “We thank you,” O God. There is even traditional choreography where one bows on the word “*modim*” which means “thanks” and then straightens up, when the word “*Adonai*” is said.

Reflecting on this prayer, Rabbi Milton Steinberg, one of the great rabbis of the 20th century, wrote about his experience upon leaving the hospital after a lengthy stay. He writes: “After a long illness I was permitted for the first time to step outdoors. And as I crossed the threshold, sunlight greeted me. So long as

I shall live, I shall never forget that moment...and everywhere the firmament above me in the great vault between earth and sky, on the pavements, the buildings--the golden glow of sunlight. It touched me, too, with friendship, with warmth, with blessing...And I remembered how often I had been indifferent to the sunlight, how often, preoccupied with petty and sometimes mean concerns, I had disregarded it. And I said to myself, How precious is the sunlight, but alas, how careless of it we are.”

“The prayer of *ho-da-ah* reminds us not to wait for a crisis. But to develop within ourselves the capacity to cherish life and its miracle every day.” (Mishkan HaNefesh, p.65)

In my own prayers of *ho-da-ah*, I am profoundly grateful for the ability of human beings to organize and respond to a crisis. Upon receiving my vaccine this spring, I was moved by the efforts of volunteers at the vaccine hub; those who had gotten up early, those in full PPE, standing in rain, checking us in on ipads; those who staffed the hundreds of makeshift consultation cubicles, outfitting them with supplies and sanitizer. Supervisors monitoring shift changes, the massive amounts of spreadsheets, emails, memos, and team meetings, all the work of human beings. I was moved. I sat in my chair in the recovery room at a high school in the Bronx and I cried behind my mask,

words of hoda'ah pouring out of me. I think about those volunteers and I can say with unwavering certainty “shana tovah,” this will be a *good* year.....because of *them*.

In a recent op-ed piece in the Times entitled “The Great Unmasking,’ David Brooks argues that the pandemic experience might even improve our lives if we take initiative and pay attention to make change. He writes: “Many are gripped by the conviction that if they are *working*, and their children’s schooling returns to normal, they do not want to go back to their old lifestyles. No more frenetic overscheduling and pointless travel. No more shallow social whirl. This is the moment to step back, be intentional and ask: What’s really important, and how should I focus on what matters? It’s a matter of ranking your loves and then making sure your schedule matches your rankings. ”

Acts of kindness. Time with loved ones. Saying ‘thank you.’ Caring for others. Healing the sick. Our tradition teaches us that after healing from an illness we are meant to recite a blessing entitled “*birkat hagomel*,” sometimes referred to as “*benching gomel*” which is a Jewish prayer of gratitude for surviving something terrifying.

According to the Talmud (Berachot 54b), there are four types of people who recite *Birkat HaGomel*: (1) those who go down to the sea; (2) those who travel through the desert; (3) one who was ill and has recovered; and (4) one who was been imprisoned and is now released.

This is not to say that God is in charge of our survival. It is, however, a way to express relief, appreciation, and gratitude for coming through a treacherous experience. Surely we know that not everyone is granted the gift of life, and we mourn the loss of those whose lives are cut short. But the words of *birkat hagomel* re-affirm for all of us the precious gift of life and remind us to live as fully as we can with the years we are granted.

It gives me great joy to invite our members Peggy and Jerry Sturman to “*bench gomel*” to offer these words as they have returned to us in good health. There is a congregational response which I invite you to read with me. I’d like to ask Peg and Jerry to unmute, and for Jesse to put the words in the Chat:

Peggy and Jerry: Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Sovereign of the universe who bestows goodness upon the accountable, who has bestowed every goodness upon me.

Congregation: Amen, God who has bestowed goodness upon you, may the Eternal bestow every goodness upon you forever.

Birkat HaGomel. The blessing for having been saved from an evil fate. Peggy & Jerry, we do thank God for your good health. In some ways, given the uncertainties of this year now past, we all qualify for *Birkat HaGomel*. Thank God we are here. Thank God we are healthy.

But uncertainty reigns. It is like when you get a Covid test and learn, with great relief, that you are negative. And then you remember: that reading at that moment was negative....but tomorrow? Who knows?

The fact is, we don't know. And that is why we have these Days of Awe. My colleague and friend, Rabbi Jenny Sherling Solomon, teaches, "...the Days of Awe remind us about the uncertainty of life. The "Book of Life" opens and we write it with our deeds. How will I relate to this inescapable uncertainty, fragility, and vulnerability? I will continue to live with *emet* (truth)

and *hesed* (love) and let those acts be the “words” for my next chapter.”

May we all turn the difficult challenges of our lives into acts of kindness and love. May all that we do not know afford us a newfound humility and graciousness, may the uncertainties lead to gratitude for our lives. Then, indeed, the year to come will be a year when our schedules will match our values, when a *Birkat HaGomel*, a prayer of redemption, can be recited for all the world.

Shana Tovah.

