

***The Spiritual Challenge of Vulnerability:
Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story*¹
Yom Kippur 2017 ~ Rabbi Yael Ridberg**

I am often asked about writing sermons for the High Holy Days: “Are there ‘pre-packaged’ sermons at the ready?” A veritable library of sermons to just pick one and deliver it? If there are such resources, I have never found them, and even if I did, I could never make them work. I have always needed to deliver a sermon that I myself need to hear.

So, in truth, it has not been easy approaching this particular sermon arc of vulnerability. But this is where my heart and mind have been this year. All of us as vulnerable as we will get today.

Fasting,
Praying,
Thinking,
Feeling,
Repenting,
Reflecting,
Hoping,
Standing and sitting,
Anticipating what will come after all these things.

We stand here, on Yom Kippur, aware of our mortality, our vulnerability, the extent to which events in life are beyond our control. We have only to look at the last 3 weeks of hurricanes and earthquakes to know this well.

For some of us, this is an awareness which we have carried with us for months or years before this moment, an awareness borne of our own encounters with hardships, illness and death, or perhaps an awareness we have gained through spiritual practice. For others of us, this is an awareness which has driven its truth into our hearts through the news cycle this year, the post election shock for some, and realization for others that we could no longer take things for granted.

And along with this awareness, we do yet retain the notion that over against our own experience of vulnerability, there is something abiding, something eternal, something that serves to connect us in space as well as time.

The High Holy Day prayer book is really one of the most accurate descriptions of human life that we have. Of course I wish it weren’t true, for there are sections in our liturgy that are quite difficult. But the *machzor* teaches us that life is fragile, that we can be here today and gone tomorrow. The *machzor* says that our lives are fluid and that they never stand still, that we can rise all the way up and slide all the way down in an instant.

¹ Lin Manuel-Miranda, *Hamilton: An American Musical* 2015

In a few minutes, when we begin the Musaf Service we will chant together the haunting words of *Unetaneh Tokef*. It is a prayer that is a difficult piece of liturgy to swallow. The prayer speaks plainly about the uncertainty of life, asking the most painful of questions—who will live and who will die.

The *paytanim*, the rabbis who wrote this text lived in a different world. A world where punishment from God was clearly associated with natural disasters: plagues, wars, and other woes that could swoop down, changing their lives forever. That feeling—that life’s tragedies are largely externally imposed—is one we know all too well. There is so much that we simply cannot control about our lives.

We jockey between fragility and stability; between the quest for a sense of security and trust and the awareness at the edge of consciousness that awakens us in the middle of the night that at any moment everything that we take for granted might change, might end, might disappear.

Unetaneh Tokef attempts to get at a fundamental spiritual and existential truth that speaks to us every year. God, according to the prayer, may be the One who remembers and transcribes, but I am the author of my actions, and on some level I am held accountable for those actions.

*Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
You have no control
Who lives who dies who tells your story
I know that we can win
I know that greatness lies in you
But remember from here on in
History has its eyes on you.*²

These lyrics from the musical *Hamilton* reflect a tension in the prayer itself. How much *is* in fact within our control? How much do we actually write, and how much is written for us?

There is a Reality that includes events which are beyond our control, and a Reality that contains within it the possibility of transformation brought about by our actions. Both things are true; both are aspects of one Reality. Another way to say this, is that there is much that is beyond our control, but there is also an arena in which we do have power.

“A human being’s origin is in dust, and her end is dust; with her life she earns her bread. Like pottery, we break; like grass, we wither; like a flower, we fade; we are like a passing shadow, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, like scattered dust, like a dream that flies away.” This passage is the existential heart of the prayer. It poetically affirms the ephemeral nature of our lives as human beings. The simple reality stated here is that our lives on this planet are limited. It is in the nature of this world that all living things come into being and then pass away. We are no

² <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-who-lives-who-dies-who-tells-your-story-lyrics>

different. This basic truth is unconnected to who we are, or to what we do with our lives. It simply is.

We don't choose the day we enter this world or the day we leave it. We are responsible for the quality of love and connection we create in between those bookends of life. No one really knows when the gates will close forever, so while we are inside them we had better love passionately, fight passionately, learn passionately, and live passionately.

Which is why the text of the prayer doesn't leave us with the question "who lives and who dies?" We are invited to think about the other lyric of Lin Manuel Miranda—*Who tells your story?* And what will be the elements that fill your story in order that it is remembered.

Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook who lost her husband suddenly while on a family vacation, wrote in a Facebook post at the conclusion of *sheloshim*—the 30 days after his death:

"A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: 'Let me not die while I am still alive.' I would have never understood that prayer before losing Dave. Now I do.

I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe.

Or you can try to find meaning. These past thirty days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void. And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well.

But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning."³

Life and meaning. The authors of the prayer thought the same thing: *U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et ro'ah ha'gezerah*. But *teshuvah* (turning), and *tefillah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (acts of righteousness), transform or mitigate the harshness, the difficulty, of the decree. They enable us to not die while we are living.

This possibility, this partnership, presents itself to us in this moment as a spiritual challenge. We can see, quite clearly, the limits of our human existence, the reality of our vulnerability and mortality. There is a certain assumption of "safety" that we need to function in our everyday lives, but in our deeper moments of truth, or in moments of crisis, whether communal or personal, we become aware of this reality. This is the truth of "like grass we wither, like flowers we fade, we are like scattered dust, like a dream that flies away."

This awareness can be frightening, but it can also be liberating. I would suggest that this understanding, although we may achieve it in painful and difficult ways, is the most important

³<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155617891025177&set=a.404308695176.365039.717545176&type=1&theater>

awareness we can have. It is our opening to living the fullest life possible in the days given to us. It is the ground of compassion, of being able to connect to others. It is, in a way that is at first hard to grasp, a true source of peace, of a sense of wholeness. In this awareness, there is enormous potential for transformation.

Teshuvah as a process of turning can be understood as an opportunity to return, to remember and reclaim that *nekudah tovah*— that point of goodness within.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh translates it as “Direction.” Turning-to-God/liness, is the process of deciding the direction of our lives.”⁴ *Teshuvah* is about our actions, our willingness to make changes that will allow us to lead lives that express the Godly essence of our being.

Teshuvah can also be translated as “answer” or “response.” I may not be able to control all of the events that shape my life, but as long as I am alive, I have some measure of control over my response to those events. I can shape my actions and intentions and the quality of my living.

Teshuvah is the examination of our lives.

Tefillah is translated as prayer, but the verb *lhitpalel* is reflexive, which points to connecting from within to something beyond ourselves. To pray is to confront the challenge that we are not the beginning and the end, that there is some Power beyond ourselves that calls to us, that waits for us, that is there to hold and comfort us.

Through *tefillah* we are encouraged to look deeply within ourselves, to reflect on that which holds ultimate meaning for us, and also to look beyond ourselves, to realize our place in the broader scheme of things.

Yom Kippur is rendered in English as the Day of Atonement. But what if we saw it as the day of **at-one-ment**. We stand together in a community that gives praise, that seeks comfort, that joins voices in song and in silence, and yet we are each alone at the same time.

In moments of vulnerability, we are given the gift and the challenge of *tefillah*. How am I connected not just to the Divine within myself, but to that which lies outside of myself?

Tefillah is about trust.

Tzedakah is most simply understood as giving financial support to those who are in need, but in this context it has a broader meaning. It speaks of how we connect to others, of our responsibilities to those around us.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, our community raised nearly \$2000 for the purchase of gift cards that we sent to Congregation Emanu El for them to distribute to needy members cleaning out and rebuilding their homes. We also collected four boxes of gently used children’s

⁴ Kol Haneshama Machzor p. 352

books to send to Congregation Beth Yeshurun, whose library was decimated in the flood waters of Houston. We will find something similar for Puerto Rico as well.

The laws of *tzedakah* mandate that I recognize that the bounty I enjoy is not entirely of my own making, and I am obligated to share what I have with those who are in need. I do this out of the recognition that I, too, might one day be in need, and will have to receive from the abundance of others. *Tzedakah* teaches us that no one is truly self-sufficient, that we are bound up in responsibility for one another.

In moments of vulnerability, *Tzedakah* challenges me to open myself to others, whether in my immediate community or on the other side of the globe. It challenges me to realize that what I have been given is given on condition that I use it well.

Tzedakah is about generosity.

We are vulnerable. We know this personally, communally, and globally. *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah*—Direction, reflection, and connection are the ways in which we as individuals and as a community, can respond to the spiritual challenges of this moment.

They are not meant as foolproof, or as some simple install program to remove our stumbling blocks. They are meant as reminders that in the face of vulnerability, we can control the way we respond to those stumbling blocks.

As challenging the world is, that every new year, every new moment, holds the hope and the potential of our response. Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav taught *assur l'hitya-esh*— don't despair! Find ways to experience gratitude and joy.

My sincere prayer for all of us is that we find our own way, through our own process of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, of turning, of reflecting, and of connecting to others, to make that potential manifest in this new year.

I pray for strength of spirit, for compassion, for wisdom and clarity for all of us, in which we meet the spiritual challenge set before us.

Gmar Hatima Tovah – May our journey from vulnerability towards resilience, integrity and hope be inspired.

This sermon was inspired by the 1993 sermon of Rabbi Richard Hirsh and the 2001 sermon of Rabbi Toba Spitzer.