

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Mussaf Piyutim Part 1: *Unesaneh Tokef* Rebbetzin Tzipora Weinberg

There have been many topics and texts that I have been privileged to learn and share over the years, from the weeping of Yirmiyahu to the pangs of Iyov, from the song of Chana to the testament of Moshe our greatest teacher. Still, now my heart drops as never before as I approach this, the apex of the *tefillos* of *kehillos Ashkenaz* on Yamim Nora'im: The prayer of Unesaneh Tokef.

And as I share these words with you now, resounding in the foreground of my mind the holy *nusach* of the *tefillah* and the sound of it as the days approach, I am in equal measure filled with gratitude for this legacy of ours, that allows us to experience the meaning of these days of awe in their depth and power in a way that binds us all together, uplifting us all in unity, forever.

Unesaneh Tokef is a *tefillah* that is recited on the two days of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur during the *chazaras hashatz* (chazzan's repetition) of Mussaf. It is the *tefillah*, the prayer, that is directly conducive to the *kedusha* of *keser*, to the coronation of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (G-d) as *Melech Malchei Hamlachim*, King of Kings, fulfilling the charge that is ours alone on these, the holiest of days. It is the one prayer that we all anticipate, replete with the message of how miniscule, how negligible humankind is in the face of judgement.

In our tradition, as written in the medieval *Sefer Ohr Zarua*, one of the most important works of Ashkenazic halacha by Rabbi Yitzchak of Vienna, we learn that the composer of this *tefillah* was a man named Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, the *gadol hador*, venerated elder of his time. Rabbi Amnon is a figure cloaked in mystery; beyond this reference, there is nothing known to us about him. But we do know that he was a man of such stature and talent that the archbishop of Mainz

engaged in a constant campaign to affect his conversion to Christianity. Time after time, he pressured Rabbi Amnon to convert, and time after time, Rabbi Amnon refused. Until one day, when Rabbi Amnon was pushed to the point where, to stem the stream of pressure exerted against him, he said-- give me three days to think about it.

The archbishop then left him. But immediately Rabbi Amnon was filled with regret. How could he have suggested, with his response – how could he have even implied – that he would consider conversion, to deny his essential self, his Judaism? When three days elapsed spent in repentance in prayer, still he stayed away, even when summoned. The archbishop then sent for Rabbi Amnon to be brought before him in chains and asked- where were you? Why didn't you come? And Rabbi Amnon said – because I answered you the way that I did, I declare my own punishment – that you cut out my tongue that spoke those words to you. The archbishop denied that his iniquity lay in his speech, but rather in his delay in approaching, and ordered his limbs to be severed and his body to be tortured, causing him unspeakable pain and suffering. And with the advent of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Amnon asked to be brought to shul where his bed was placed near the *aron kodesh*, near the *chazan*, and before Kedushah he requested the opportunity to address the gathered crowd. And then! He verbalized this prayer, the poem of Unesaneh Tokef, in which he described the proceedings on high, and the magnitude of the day of judgment. Immediately thereafter, his soul was returned to heaven.

Three days later, he appeared to Rabenu Klonymous ben Meshulam in a dream, and instructed him that this prayer be established as

a part of the liturgy of Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe, for all Jews from that year forward.

This is a dramatic story, but it is not only the story of one righteous man and his celestial vision. Looking and listening a bit closer, let us appreciate just how universal a predicament it describes. There are many people who are uncertain as to their identity among nations, among faiths. There are many who vacillate, who are unclear how and why Judaism is relevant to them. And while of course we are talking about a tremendous *tzadik*, Rabbi Amnon's fateful moment happened when a word fell from his lips that reflected a hesitation, a consideration of another possibility, a flash of confusion. Who am I in this world? What is my purpose? How connected am I to my Judaism? How thoroughly and unequivocally certain am I in my Jewish identity as I contend with the problems that surround me?

But then there is one occasion in our year that everyone is recruited, all Jewish souls are enlisted to accountability, to pledge allegiance of heart and mind and pronounce that there are no doubts. While our daily lives might contain instances of uncertainty even up until the Day of Judgment, on Rosh Hashanah we join in reciting Unesaneh Tokef! We will proclaim, we will relate the strength, the holiness of this day! And of *Hashem Elokenu*:

on this day, your sovereignty is supreme	ובו תנשא מלכותיך
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You are the one who sits upon the throne of judgement that is upheld in empathy.	ויכון בחסד כסאך
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In truth, You know all, You remember everything. There is no pomp or circumstance, the airs or pageantry necessary when one needs to be convinced of elemental value. But here? NOT EVEN AN ECHO- *vekol demama daka yishama* - the judgement is rendered in stillness, in silence- *um'elev yikarei*, it emerges, as it were,

practically on its own. In equal measure, we need no further proofs of Hashem's majesty, just as Eliyahu Hanavi proclaimed on Har HaCarmel, our G-d is the one true King, and in this temporal space, this singularly sacred circumstance, it is evident for all to see.

Indeed, Rabbi Amnon's name reflects his role as a teacher of *emunah*, of belief in the power of this opportunity when we have the ability to recognize that we are completely at his disposal. Our lives and our destiny are in the hands of Hashem, so clearly and completely. It is this realization we need to access right before we proclaim *keser*, the reason we are all here, to stand before Him because of our certainty that He is the only king.

Unesaneh Tokef encapsulates that vulnerability- the decision of *mi yichye, umi yamus*- who will live, who will die; This is the recognition! When have we been more poised to understand this than now, as humanity stood helpless this past year, suspended, with hospitals and doctors completely at a loss, that we have no control at all. There is nothing **we** can do; we are completely dependent on Him.

Then, in the blink of an eye, as we continue in our prayer once we set the power where it belongs, we learn that there is something we CAN do. Hashem gives us the ability to transform our destiny- on that very day as we proclaim His unmitigated authority, we state:

ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה

Teshuvah- the possibility that we can change ourselves from within;

Tefillah- the recognition that all that we have is from Him- the expression of our connection to G-d, and

Tzekadah- the responsibility we have to care for others in this world.

My engagement in these activities can avert evil decrees.

This stark and sudden shift to agency is an emotional reframing of fear to hope. And once our stance shifts to action, the frightening aspects of *din*, of judgement, are cloaked in *chesed*, in compassionate understanding:

a person is basically an earthy creature	אדם יסודו מעפר
because You are our Creator, You understand us, in all our frailties	כי אתה הוא יוצרם ואתה יודע יצרם

Now, with all of this, we recognize our powerlessness and yet with the power You have imbued within us. We are now ready to proclaim Your kingship.

The present Slonimer Rebbe trains his focus on a key phrase within the prayer:

Hashem is likened to a shepherd, who passes each of his sheep beneath his staff, and we are His flock.	כבקרת רועה עדרו מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו
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He explains that on Rosh Hashanah, all the souls that ever did and ever will inhabit the Earth come before Hashem, from the days of Adam and of

Noach, up until today and into the future. What significance can one mortal soul attain amidst them all? How could one person's life, one person's humble prayer, mean anything in light of all the multitudes that surround Him? Yet, concerned and attuned as a shepherd to his charges, Hashem watches each and every one of us:

counting, and supporting, and remembering every living soul	כן תעביר ותספור ותמנה ותפקוד נפש כל חי
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Veyikon bechesed kisecha. There is no *din* that happens without *chesed*.

So this moment is a call to arms for each and every Jew. There is no difference or separation, whether man, woman; young or old; whether fervent and devout or spiritually, emotionally remote and outlying; whether we are at home or in a formal house of prayer. It is a time that each and every one of us counts in our stance before G-d. We all participate in this acceptance of judgement and in the glory of his coronation.

May we all be inscribed in the book of good life. *L'shana tova tikasevna v'sechasemna l'alter l'chaim*.