

U-netaneh Tokef: Days of Judgment

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DURING ROSH HASHANAH MUSAF, WE IMMERSE ourselves in a stunning Rosh Hashanah prayer-poem, *U-netaneh Tokef*.

U-netaneh tokef kedushat ha-yom

Let us make a big deal out of the holiness of this day

Ki hu nora v'ayom

Because it is awesome and terrifying

U-v'shofar gadol yitaka

A great shofar blast is sounded

V'kol demamah dakah yishama

And the subtle sound of silence is heard

U'malakhim yeichafeizun

Even the angels are in disarray

V'chil u-r'adah yocheizun

Seized by fear and trembling

V'yomru: hinei yom ha-din

They say: the Day of Judgment is here.

The Day of Judgment. Traditionally, Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, the day we are reborn into the world for a new year. Reborn partly by the hand of God, who decides what challenges should be thrown our way in the

coming year. And reborn partly through our own hands, as we decide how we are going to handle these challenges in the coming year.

Traditionally, Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment.

But in real life, every day is the Day of Judgment.

Every day God places a new challenge in our paths.

Every day we get to decide how we are going to respond.

A few weeks ago I was talking with a young man recently released from prison. This young man is in a halfway house, but judging from how hard he is working on himself, he is probably three-quarters of the way there. He spoke about how difficult it is for him to deal with the chaos outside of prison. When he was in prison, difficult as it was, he was supported, accompanied, structured; his needs were met. But outside of prison things are different.

Support and structure are not built in to the flow of reality. This young man was talking specifically about the inner chaos he experiences when faced with challenges, and the need to figure out how to respond to them. But as I listened to him, I got a glimpse into another kind of chaos, the simple outer chaos of living every day, in real time.

When was the last time you had a day that went as planned? In my own adult life, I cannot remember such a day. I'm a comfortable urban professional with a life of health and blessing, and I cannot remember a single day in recent years that went as planned. I pack a day with important meetings — and the school calls to say my son is vomiting. I'm in a hurry to drive my daughter to an activity, and the car behind us drives into us. We plan a day away in Victoria, and my husband wakes me that morning to say the basement is flooding. We rejoice that we have enough money to pay the monthly bills, and the bank calls to say our PIN number has been hacked and our savings account drained. I plan a peaceful summer week of doing nothing with my elderly mother and aunt, but Israel comes under attack and we spend our week anxiously following the news and trying to get word on our relatives. And I haven't even touched on my work life!

But my life is easy, as lives go. I know this. Even an easy life demands constant reshuffling, constant crisis management skills. Outer skills and inner skills. Everyday life gives us plenty of excuses to collapse into exhausted, angry heaps and simply give up. And it is amazing that most of us don't — this is testimony to the compassion we have for ourselves, for others, and for this crazy place we call the universe.

Every day is the Day of Judgment, but some days are more the day of judgment than others.

Some days little shofar toots are sounded, but some days a great shofar blast is sounded.

You are familiar with these great blasts.

A member of your family is diagnosed with cancer.

You realize, paradoxically, that the only way to save your family is to divorce.

Two drivers in the same place at the same time make tiny misjudgments and someone is hurt.

Three of your Israeli nephews are called to war in Lebanon and you are a peace activist.

A phone call tells you that someone you love has died, suddenly.

A bomb, a tornado, an earthquake, a flood, blows your life apart.

You can think of many examples, I am sure.

These are great shofar blasts.

These are Big Days of Judgment.

Sometimes we think of the shofar blast as a wake-up call.

But what are we supposed to wake up to?

What kind of judgment is God placing upon us at this time?

What kind of judgment is God calling upon us to make at this time?

It's not always easy to understand the concept of a Day of Judgment. In fact, the only way I can understand it is to think in terms of that famous pair of divine attributes: judgment, or *din* in Hebrew, and compassion, *hesed*, in Hebrew. Divine judgment and divine compassion.

For me, a Day of Judgment is a day that demands I open up to the flow of compassion. A Day of Judgment is a gateway to a Year of Compassion. Maybe even a Lifetime of Compassion.

When a great shofar is sounded, and we are faced with illness, pain, loss, and the need to radically rethink our lives, our first reaction is often quite negative. No surprises there. After a short period of numbness, we may experience fear, anger, a need to blame. We may blame ourselves if we cannot find someone else to blame. We may blame others if we cannot figure out how to blame ourselves. We think we are doing something by being angry — and we are. We are doing the first thing we need to do — hearing and feeling the great shofar blast in our bodies, minds, and souls.

If we are lucky, or if we are working hard on ourselves, we may do the second thing we need to do. Fear and trembling may give way to the subtle sound of silence. The angry chatter, the habit of telling ourselves we have been unfairly stung, may give way to silence. Silence makes it possible for us to hold the contents of our mind in a different way. We can become aware of the objective facts of our difficulty. And we can become aware of the objective facts of our reaction to it. And we can separate them. We can learn not to compound our pain by telling ourselves stories about how the world reaches out specifically to hurt us. This is compassion. Compassion for ourselves, because we learn to stop hurting ourselves with negative self-talk. And compassion for the world, because we begin to learn to see what is really there, not just what revolves around our powerful feelings. This is the point at which we begin to process our experiences differently. This is the point at which compassion begins to flow.

And perhaps this is the point of judgment. I once heard a talk by the great contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum about judgment and compassion in criminal law. She divided the process of justice into two parts: verdict and sentence. On the one hand, she said, the verdict should be a

After the blast:

Silence, and then compassion.

matter of strict judgment. Judges and juries should look dispassionately at the facts and pronounce: guilty or innocent. On the other hand, she said, compassion should always be exercised in the sentencing phase. Once a person's guilt has been determined, judges and juries should ask, how can the criminal justice system best help this person? That ought to be the point of justice, she said: facilitating change for the better.

This is the best way that I can understand the point of a Day of Judgment — and the only way I can understand the idea of a severe divine judgment. After the blast: Silence, and then compassion. The possibility of learning how to heal and grow, and how to help others heal and grow.

It doesn't happen quickly. It may take months or years for a person's or a people's body and mind to stop reverberating from a great shofar blast. It may take months or years of sitting in the silence for something new to

emerge. Soul time does not follow a business calendar. It doesn't follow a school calendar. It doesn't have due dates and deadlines. Soul time does not really follow the Jewish calendar either, which offers us only a ten day journey from the Day of Judgment to the Day of Forgiveness.

But we can think of Rosh Hashanah, the officially designated Day of Judgment in the Jewish calendar, as a model, a metaphor, a training visualization, a symbolic journey. In a traditional Rosh Hashanah service, a hundred shofar blasts are sounded.

A hundred blasts.

A hundred judgments.

A hundred opportunities to be shaken.

A hundred opportunities to notice the silence after the blast.

A hundred opportunities to see ourselves more objectively.

A hundred opportunities to create new relationships between our thoughts and feelings and perceptions.

A hundred opportunities to learn to exercise compassion.

A hundred opportunities for rebirth.

U-netaneh Tokef ends with the words, “*Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* lessen the severity of the decree.” *Teshuvah*, return. *Tefillah*, prayer. *Tzedakah*, righteous giving. Learning to hold our thoughts and feelings compassionately is a kind of *teshuvah*. Silence is a kind of *tefillah*. Sharing what we have worked so hard to learn along the way is a kind of *tzedakah*. Try it, this year, when the big shofar blasts sound. And try it, this year, when the little shofar toots sound. Try it every day. May you be written up for 365 days of compassion, objectivity, and growth.



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