

## The Memory of High Holidays

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In my most enduring childhood memory of the High Holidays, I am standing alongside my mother, who turns from her mahzor [prayerbook] momentarily to whisper to me, “Bubbe always cried when she said this.” The congregation has concluded the silent reading of the Musaf Amidah for Yom Kippur, and now follows its more vocal repetition by the hazzan. Poised between the *Selichot*, or penitential, section, and the *Vidui*, or confession, the hazzan and the congregation responsively chant the poignant lines of the petitionary prayer *Shma Koleinu*, taken from Psalms. The hazzan has just uttered a line drawn from Psalms 39:9, singing out *Al tashlicheinu l’eit ziknah kikhlot kocheinu al ta’azveinu*, *Do not abandon us in old age, when our strength has ebbed, do not forsake us*. Rather than repeat the line aloud with the rest of the congregation, my mother instead taps into her own childhood memories, bringing this image of my bubbe as a young mother into the sacred space of our prayer. By then, my grandmother no longer prays with us.

My mother’s comment had a particular poignancy, as though my grandmother had a prescient knowledge of the dementia that would assail her final years. As the youngest of my cousins, my memory of my bubbe is episodic: serving kreplach in the sukkah in the airshaft of the Williamsburg apartment building while my grandfather was still alive; moving into our home when she could no longer fend for herself; frantic phone calls until she was located wandering the subway system for hours on end; the acrid scent of the nursing home where she lived out her last months. When my mother recollected to me the special resonance of that liturgical verse, she was mourning the loss of her mother — not only Bubbe’s death but also the loss of dignity and memory that characterized Bubbe’s final years on earth. In the vision evoked for me of my bubbe’s passion in prayer, it is as though Bubbe is mourning her own living decomposition. In a compact way, this memory contained both Bubbe in her full strength, and Bubbe as she would become, neither image canceling out the other.

Who can say for certain what cruel malady robbed Bubbe of her independence and her memory? Alzheimer's, my aunts and uncles would say in hushed tones. Senility. They offered those terms not as diagnosis, but as description. At that time, people used those words as catch-all labels that encompassed diverse forms of senior dementia. But many syndromes entail the sort of loss of sense and sensibility that characterized my grandmother in her twilight years. Geriatric depression, for example, often brings with it memory loss and confusion. Bubbe's marked decline began with the loss of her younger daughter to cancer. Zeide died not long after. A recent study of bereaved parents noted that during the first few years after the death of a child, the parents — especially mothers — are at heightened risk for mental illness or depression serious enough to require hospitalization (*The New England Journal of Medicine*, 24 March 2005). Thus, the remembered image of my bubbe as a young mother, weeping over the specter of divine abandonment in old age, carries within it an uncanny foreboding of the kind of sharp and jagged grief that rips through a family and marks each member indelibly.

Each year, for as long as my mother and I prayed side by side on the High Holidays, she would repeat her comment. It was as though her reflection on the mahzor was codified into the Yom Kippur liturgy. Already marked with an anticipatory chill was this image of a much younger Bubbe who was not yet a bubbe, who had not yet lost a daughter, not yet lost a husband, not yet lost her memory, but inevitably would. And my mother, too, had not yet experienced her own abandonment, had not yet redoubled the loss of a sister with the loss of a grandchild that precipitated her own darkening decline into old age. *Al tashlicheinu l'eit ziknah* — *Do not abandon us in old age*: the verse occurs no fewer than four times in the Yom Kippur liturgy — first in the Kol Nidre service, and then in the Shacharit (morning), Musaf (additional) and Mincha (afternoon) services. To this day, I cannot recite it without thinking of Bubbe, and of my mother remembering Bubbe. It has come to encapsulate for me the deep and complicated meaning of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

This infusion of family history into the Yom Kippur liturgy underscores the theme of the High Holidays. In a series of shifting metaphors, the High Holiday liturgy presents God as scrutinizing each and every individual, determining the destiny of all living souls. With great drama, the mahzor repeats that human destiny is inscribed on Rosh Hashanah and sealed

on Yom Kippur. We do not yet know, but God does:

“...who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not...who shall rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented...who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted”

*mi yichyeh u-mi yamut, mi v'kitso u-mi lo v'kitso...mi yanu'ach u-mi yanu'a, mi yishaket u-mi yitaref, mi yishalev u-mi yityaser...mi yishafel u-mi yarum.*

Year after year, I imagine, Bubbe must have prayed — as we all do — to be among the living, the peaceable, the exalted. For many years, her prayer was answered. And then, it was not.

Those lines about what the future holds come from the prayer *Unetaneh tokef* (“Let us acclaim”) whose composition is attributed to Rabbi Amnon of Mayence (Mainz, Germany), who relayed it in a posthumous dream visitation to Rabbi Kalonymous ben Meshullam. Rabbi Amnon was a prominent eleventh century scholar who, according to Jewish tradition, was pressured by the archbishop of Mayence to convert to Christianity. On one occasion, Rabbi Amnon sought to evade an uncomfortable situation by asking for three days to think the matter over. Immediately remorseful, Rabbi Amnon spent the three days in prayer, fasting. At the established time, he refused to come before the archbishop. Brought before him by force, Rabbi Amnon cursed the mouth that seemingly expressed doubt in Judaism, saying that his tongue ought to be cut out. Instead, the archbishop ordered the rabbi's feet — which refused to come at his bidding — to be severed, along with hands. Several days later, dying of his wounds, Rabbi Amnon asked to be carried to shul on Rosh Hashanah, where he spontaneously composed the prayer, reciting it with his last breath; his body disappeared. Three days later, he appeared to Rabbi Kalonymous ben Meshullam, a renowned Hebrew liturgical poet, asking that he write down the words of the prayer.

Originally inserted into the Yom Kippur liturgy, the *Unetaneh tokef* so captivated the religious imagination of the Jewish communities who recited it that it was incorporated into the Rosh Hashanah liturgy as well. The prayer dramatically captures the mood and theme of the High Holidays, envisioning each human being judged by his or her own merit. But it also underscores the unpredictability of the future, and our inability to determine our ultimate destiny.

This existential reality undergirds our life always, but — occupied with the activities of daily life — most of us do not actively think about it much of the time. It comes to us at moments of crisis, and is evoked for us ritually, liturgically, and experientially on High Holidays. As we mark time, invited to contemplate our life, we might look around us and notice people we see only on High Holidays, either because they or we rarely come to shul, or because they have moved away and return only to celebrate the New Year with family or friends. The same time each year, we look around and note the changes: this person is missing, that family is bereaved, this couple married, that one divorced, this couple gave birth to a long awaited child, that woman is bald from chemotherapy, and so on. Indeed, who shall live and who shall die, who shall be at peace and who tormented.

Other cultures also have symbols for the mystery of human destiny. The ancient Greeks, for example, envisioned the Fates, or *Moirai*, three goddesses or older women who selected, measured out, and snipped the threads of human existence. Blind daughters of Zeus, the three Fates shared one eye which passed among them. Their blind manipulation of these threads of human destiny determined who would live and who would die, and when. The blindness of the Fates emphasizes the randomness of human destiny; the threads are snipped without regard to the individual person, heightening the sense of the immutability of fate.

The metaphors of the High Holiday liturgy often echo this idea of human helplessness. We are compared, for example, to clay in the hands of a potter, or stone in the hands of a mason, or glass in the hands of a glass-blower, humankind shaped by a powerful deity, as an anonymous twelfth century liturgical poem puts it. Other prayers, however, such as *Unetaneh tokef*, evoke the image of a God who carefully weighs human behavior, which becomes the ultimate arbiter of human destiny. Still, we are mortal creatures, and there comes a time in every person's existence when the prayer for life must go unanswered.

While the brutal story of Rabbi Amnon does not appear as part of the liturgy of the mahzor, most traditional Jews are familiar with the legend

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of the prayer's origin. The brutality of human power contrasts with the divine compassion evoked in prayer. Like my grandmother in my mother's High Holiday remembrance, Rabbi Amnon intuits that his destiny has been sealed. But the cruelty of his torment and the finality of his death are mitigated by his posthumous appearance in a dream, and by the words of the prayer through which he is remembered. So, too, my bubbe is given a place in family memory of the sacred, and a story that retroactively confers upon her the dignity of knowing her fate.

The memory of Bubbe praying not to be forsaken in old age has been a complex one for me. The mother alongside whom I prayed, and who transmitted the story of my grandmother, was in actuality my aunt, who raised me as her own after the death of my mother, her younger sister, when I was a toddler. In my childhood perception, the image of my bubbe's passionate prayer always carried with it an intimation of bereavement. At a very elemental level, this image was at odds with the promise of the High Holidays, the possibility of reprieve and renewal, even at the zero hour. Most of all, it was at odds with the promise of a just God. My mother had been forsaken not in *eit ziknah*, in old age, but in the prime of her adulthood, with babe in arms. Surely her transgressions were no greater than those of other children's mothers who survived. Surely my bubbe's were no greater than those of grandparents who were not bereaved, or elderly people whose minds remained sharp and focused. And today, when I consider friends and family who have been stricken with cruel and intractable illness, or who perished in freak accidents, or who suffered the unspeakable loss of a child, I find it obscene to suggest that on Yom Kippur this fate was determined because it was deserved. One challenge of the High Holidays is to bring together the image of a just God administering a just universe, with the arbitrariness of human destiny as we live it out.

Many of us carry strong childhood memories of High Holidays into shul with us. These foundational memories encapsulate family relations and also form a kind of innate and intimate personal theology. When my mother would recollect my bubbe in the fervor of a prayer that, to all appearances, went unanswered, I believe she was yearning for a time of remembered wholeness — a time of innocence, before loss. Such a time exists, of course, only out of time — the memory of the biblical garden of Eden. Even childhood is not so pristine. My most elemental High Holiday sentiments boil down to a yearning of mothers for daughters, and of daughters for

mothers. The High Holidays inspire such impossible yearnings, which ultimately signal a yearning for God.

My mother was not given to chatter, and rarely spoke during services in shul, especially not on High Holidays. But there is another line of liturgy that she highlighted for me, a second line that she would break from praying and comment on to me. *Sas anokhi 'al imratekha k'motsei shallal rav, I rejoice over Your teachings as one who has found great spoils.* This second verse was imported into the mahzor from Psalms 119:162, part of a series of scriptural verses read responsively as a prelude to blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. When it was recited, my mother would turn to me and say, "I love this *pasuk*." She liked the vivid comparison of material treasure with spiritual wealth. I believe she also found in it a credible promise of compensation for whatever trials life held.

In the first verse, the one that captured my bubbe's desires and fears, the mahzor acknowledges the limitations of human existence. The verse in Psalms reads: *Al tashlicheini l'eit ziknah kikhlot kocheini al ta'azveini*, Do not cast *me* off in old age; when *my* strength fails, do not forsake *me*. In liturgy, the verse is amended slightly: *Al tashlicheinu l'eit ziknah kikhlot kocheinu al ta'azveinu*, Do not cast *us* off in old age; when *our* strength fails, do not forsake *us*. This shift from singular to plural acknowledges that, on the individual level, not all prayers are answered. It also shifts the focus from self-interest to the collective good.

No matter how many times we are inscribed in the Book of Life, eventually every one of us will perish. But the thrust of the Holidays is not about snagging a plum destiny for oneself. The powerful pull of the inherited remembrance of wholeness calls us to work toward its restoration, even if it cannot be attained in human existence. Our bereavements are achingly personal, but all humankind knows loss. That we can comfort one another is a mark of divine presence in the world.