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Can We Change Destiny?

Shabbat shalom and good yontiv. It is good to be here this evening, in this sanctuary, with our congregation. I'd like to offer deep appreciation to our rabbis - Rabbi Wise, Rabbi Karen Bogard and Rabbi Daniel Bogard for welcoming me to the bima. It is an honor. Thank you.

A long time ago, when I was the Assistant Director at University of Michigan Hillel and it was getting time for the High Holidays, Michael Brooks, then the Executive Director, shared with me a story that I *think* is true. One year the auditorium where Hillel's Conservative services are usually held was already booked for a performance during the exact time of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. There was another venue, Rackum Auditorium, that would make an excellent alternative - beautiful, acoustically perfect, and available during the holidays. But, when the Rakum Family donated the money to have the venue built in the 1920's, they included a stipulation that no "religious services" could be held there.

Not to be deterred, Michael called the woman who coordinates facility rentals on campus. He explained to her his need. She reminded him of the stipulation against religious gatherings. He said he knew all about it, but that he recalled the previous Fall there had been a huge American Indian Powwow held at Rakum Auditorium. He continued, "For many of the people coming to Holiday services, they don't think much about the religiosity of this day. In fact," he said, "if you polled people when they walk out of the service, many would contend they barely literally, believe in a single word, and yet they still come. You see," he explained, "Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are OUR tribal gatherings. They're when we get together as an entire people once a year." The woman thought a moment, and then said, "OK, you can have it." Michael was stunned. "Really? I thought it would be much more difficult to convince you than that." Well, she replied. "I'm a member of the tribe."

These High Holy Days are our tribal family reunions. From the time of Leviticus we are told to GATHER on the first of the month of Tishre. This congregating matters. Every year we come back, whether here or in congregations around the world, Jews and those who love them come back, returning both physically and spiritually to our home base. For some of us, we come every Shabbat, even daily for morning and evening minyan. But these days-

with the doors wide open and seats filling our sanctuary to the stage are markedly different.

And part of the difference is the calendar. We are in the final hours of a 10 day period that began with Rosh HaShana.

Tonight, as we begin Yom Kippur, we sit, in our in our suit and ties, in our white robes and tallitot. We wear shoes made of cloth not leather. Some of us are wearing the white kittle – the simple, pocket-less, robe that we are to be buried in. Tradition teaches that Yom Kippur – with the fasting from food and daily activities, with the wearing of the kittle, and with its themes of introspection - is a ‘rehearsal’ for death. Starting tonight beginning with the achingly beautiful minor key strains of Kol Nidre, we are being led step by step to imagining our end. In a religion that affirms life so often, with every toast cheering L’chaim!, today is jarringly different.

The message is clear. The future is unknowable. We are mortal. We do not live forever.

These 10 Days, in Hebrew called Yamim Noraim, can be translated as the Days of Awe and also as the Days of Fear. Tonight, we are to confront the reality of our deaths. Fear, especially mortal fear, if present at all times would be

absolutely paralyzing. But, to have a sanctioned, set aside time to contemplate what our life means, is such a gift.

We come here tonight at different points in our lives, bringing different perspectives. Among us perhaps are skeptics and agnostics, pious believers and earnest seekers and everyone in between. We come with our questions, our certainties, with our sorrows and our joys, with our failures and with our successes. We are not monolithic in our understanding of life and death, good and evil, but we are here together. According to rabbinic sages, when 10 or more Jews gather together, the Shekina, the approachable form of the Divine is present. So, each of us sitting here together is essential for our observance.

But, being here - really being present - can be difficult. The imagery of this day is stark – On Rosh HaShana it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed – who shall live and who shall die...

These are lines are from the disturbing and electrifying culminating prayer of the holidays- the Unetanetokef - We recited it last week, and we'll recite it again tomorrow. Rabbi David Wolpe explains, "It literally means, 'We give power.' "We give the prayer power and the day power when we realize that [our lives are] at stake." (R. David Wolpe, "Unetaneh Tokef," *Conservative Judaism* p. 80-1, www.rabbinicalassembly.org)

It has been a difficult year. For friends and families affected by the wave of hurricanes, storms, earthquakes and wild fires - the time can feel almost apocalyptic. Civil discourse in our country is horrible - with ramifications that are still unknown. When it comes to politics, science and even which news outlet to follow, friends have told me that sharing a meal together with family members can be so daunting that they are giving up the conversations altogether. They either don't talk about the hard questions with people they love, or even more troubling, they avoid spending time together at all.

So, what to do? Well, we're here tonight, so let's start here. Let's use this special prayerbook, this machzor, as a guide. The Unetanetokef prayer can be a roadmap of sorts for walking this through these Days of Awe. "Let us give power to this day...The great shofar is sounded, and the still small voice is heard. Angels will be alarmed, seized with fear and trembling, declaring, "This very day is the Day of Judgement; no one is innocent in Your sight." It continues, "On Rosh Hashana it is written. On Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will pass on, and how many will be born; who shall live and who shall die; who will perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; why by hunger; and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who will be strangled and who will

be stoned; who will be at peace and who will be troubled” and so on— a litany of morbid outcomes.

I have a friend who knowing these words will be uttered chooses to sit the High Holy Days out. His sister lost her life to suicide. The prayer for him stings too sharply. What kind of God is it that punishes people through death? What is the world we live in if our God is a vengeful and merciless God? What does it mean to consider that there are 2 books – one of life and one of death, and if we just happen to follow the rules the right way, then we get inscribed in the good one and not the bad?

Untetanetokef causes consternation for many. A quick google search yields a host of “interpretive Unetanetokef prayers” that rework the language and imagery. Some commentators look to this list and build on it. Who by fire, who by water— who by neglect, who by car accident, who by cancer, who by abuse? And in doing so, they interpret the prayer as an acknowledgement of our shared frailty, our shared situation - the words imploring us to feel terrified, so that we can have a true heart to heart with ourselves.

Other searches issue trigger warnings before providing a link to the prayer.
- Perhaps we should avoid reading it altogether - such warnings imply.

But, depending how one reads it, and which parts one emphasizes, this prayer can actually be an empowering call to action. After the listing of methods of dying, we then read - U'teshuva, 'utefilla, u' tzedakah ma'avirin et ro-a ha g'zerah. Our machzor translates this as "But, Teshuvah (repentance), tefilla (prayer), tzedakah (charity) have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny." We can read this to mean that if we pray hard enough, do enough charitable deeds and acknowledge contrition, we can change our destiny. But what does it mean to CHANGE our destiny?

Let's break it down into parts- Tzedaka seems to be clearest message for modern ears: whether understood simply as charitable giving or building on the actual Hebrew root of tzedek, justice, we can understand the inherent importance and logic of how giving of our money and time, how living in a charitable, outward facing way, takes care of our community could have an effect.

Tefillah, or prayer- praying with a full heart. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, who authored the book, *To Pray as a Jew*, says that often people respond to a prayerbook, in one of two ways. For people unfamiliar with the siddur, they see it as a forest of words in which they feel lost, encountering page after page of seemingly repetitive passages. On the other hand, there are people who know

exactly what to say, which words in Hebrew to read. But even if they understand every single word, the words themselves say nothing to them. They speed through the forest of words, but they see only the trunks of the trees and catch no glimpse of the light, of the beauty and splendor of the whole.

We can enter this sanctuary and offer up our prayers in many different ways. For some of us, we offer our prayers vertically, to a Divine that can hear and make sense of our plea. We recite every single syllable through song, responsive readings, mouthing the meditations with the intention that they *will* be heard. And, there are others of us who attend – because that is what you do on the Holidays. But the images of God as Judge, as King, as Arbiter of our fate, may not resonate, may not be a source of comfort or awe. In that the case, the prayers offered are horizontal. They serve the purpose of being heard by *others* around us here, in this sanctuary. The horizontal prayer lends the power of presence, of reassuring those sitting next to us in front and behind. Each of our voices matter.

So, when we talk about Tefillah, we can understand the power of introspection and responsibility to connect to ourselves and to one another to affect destiny.

It is Teshuvah, that to me, seems most difficult to draw a direct line. Our Rabbi, Karen Bogard, spoke about teshuvah so insightfully last week on Rosh HaShana. While we generally translate this as repentance, she referred to the Hebrew root of teshuvah (shuv) meaning to return. The idea that we can ‘bridge the gap’ between who we are and who we want to be, between the world that is and the world we want it to be by teshuva – returning to ourselves and our values.

The tool we are given to make teshuvah is APOLOGY. A true apology helps us return to our core – helps us reengage our humanity.

According to psychiatrist and author, Dr. Aaron Lazare, “One of the most profound human interactions is the offering and accepting of apologies.’ Apologies have the power to heal humiliations, remove the desire for vengeance, and generate forgiveness.’ Lazare continues, “apologies ...are voluntary and human means for reconciling personal and collective differences.” (from *On Apology*)

To reconcile personal and collective differences --- that is what our sages, the authors of this machzor understood so long ago. Because, the Jewish way of apology is that in order to make true teshuva, we need to Name that wrong or slight – In Rabbi Karen’s words—look that gap in the eye---and in doing so take

responsibility for the behavior. And, more often than not, that simple, yet-oh-so difficult step, is incredibly effective. It is in that moment of acknowledgement of our weaknesses, that the other person can unclench their jaw, exhale, and hear us. Teshuva, is one of the most straightforward yet powerful things we can do.

Several months ago, I experienced the power of apology in a personal way, not by giving an apology, but by receiving one. I had a conversation with a friend and colleague in which she said something that offended me, hurt my feelings a bit. But, I let it pass - and by letting it pass, I mean I stewed about it, and mentioned it to a few people, chewing on the hurt and resentment. I decided that I was probably being too sensitive on the one hand, and on the other hand, now that I heard that remark, it probably meant that our relationship would be a little more distant. But, a few weeks later at the end of a meeting when it was just the two of us, she stated very calmly and as a matter of fact - "I'm sorry I said X. I was really frustrated at the time." That's it. That's all that happened. No swell of music, no grand gesture, but that moment left an impression on me. She gave what Lazare calls a true apology. And when she did, my heart opened. And, in accepting that apology, I gave a bit, too. I let go of my anger- which wasn't so great to begin with, but was threatening to grow.

I started trying it myself. It's not to say I never apologized before that moment, but the simplicity and brevity of her act relative to its impact was a call to action for me. I started trying it out in my own daily interactions. At first it was hard – I started with, 'I'm sorry IF I offended you (a conditional apology, puts onus on other.) Then I moved to 'I'm sorry THAT I offended you/ didn't return your call it's just that it's been a really busy week, etc, etc.'" (Justification). Now, I'm working on, 'I'm sorry.' In particular, 'I'm sorry I did X. It was rude.'" And then I bite my tongue. Full stop. No conditions they have to agree to. No justifications.

And, what I'm finding is that my apologizing is not perfect --- but it's becoming easier- a bit more natural, more authentic. And, it's making me a happier person, a little more hopeful, a little more kind.

In thinking about this, it seems that we can apply these lessons in the public sphere as well. Especially when it comes to the big issues at hand - how we as a voting public engage in civil discourse, in activism, in considering the needs of one another individually and as a community.

Columnist David Brooks wrote a piece in mid-August that I think pertains to this conversation. In it, he was referring to widening rift in communication, in thoughtful exchange between people on both sides of the aisle. He is frightened about the coarsening of discourse- the balkanizing of one's beliefs and ideas as

the only proper way to think about a subject and be in the world. He wrote about the need today for, MODESTY. “Modesty,” he writes, “means having the courage to understand that the world is too complicated to fit into one political belief system. It means understanding there are no easy answers... that can explain away the big political questions or the existential problems of our society. Modesty means having the courage to rest in anxiety... to be tough enough to endure the pain of uncertainty.” (New York Times, August 15, 2017)

Apology, teshuvah, involves not just action on our part, but also slowing down and being more receptive. Teshuvah requires us to empathize with another, consider how our words or deeds impact a person, consider their perspective. It requires us to sometimes swallow our pride open ourselves up for a meaningful conversation.

Last Sunday in the Social Q’s column of the *New York Times*, a young woman asked Philip Galanes, the column’s advisor, if she should apologize to a former high school classmate for making up rumors about her 10 years prior. Galanes, dismissed her impulse. He suggested she parlay her guilt into supporting anti-bullying organizations today. And while he didn’t explicitly tell her NOT to write an apology, he assumed the victim had long since forgotten the incident, and the only benefit would be to assuage the writer’s guilt. In a rare break with

Galanes' analysis, I couldn't disagree more. Definitely, an outcome of making an apology *would* be to make the writer feel better. But, it is probably safe to say that the young woman who bore those false rumors remembers the hurt. And, what a beautiful moment for *her* to learn that not only wasn't she imagining the pain, but that her perpetrator felt badly and wanted to own that. A win win.

Teshuva starts with a very Jewish premise. Each of us is at our core a good person. We do not have original sin. We are not merely beasts who can only be controlled through a system of strict laws. We are given free will and with that free will, we will encounter pressures and situations that lead us away from our essential goodness.

Every year, as we confront the fact that this may be our last year, we are urged to SHUV, return to our essence, return to our core values, return to our Divine spark.

Tonight, is the time to scrape away cynicism, to jettison disappointment in the system, in others. Tonight, is about letting us be raw – for the next 23 hours or so, to let us truly confront our shortcomings. We are living in complicated times. There is so much in this world beyond our control. What we can control is the way we walk in the world. Teshuvah, tefillah tzedakah are good places to

start. Perhaps we won't change our destiny, but we can make this year better by our being in it.

As we enter the final stages of these 10 Days of Awe, we enter a sacred zone for confronting hard and unsettling truths. We may never understand the meaning of life -- the reasons for our suffering or moments of sublime happiness - - but the choice of how we use that pain or that joy is ours. We can hear the blast of the shofar tomorrow as a call from the ancient past and as a promise for the future.

May the risks we take be worthwhile, and may we always remember that we are each created with a bit of the Divine. May our fasts not only be easy, but meaningful. *Shabbat shalom* and *G'mar chatimah tovah*.