

Yom Kippur Morning
Sinai Temple
Springfield, Massachusetts
October 12, 2016

Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die...?¹

Who shall live and who shall die...? It was but a few weeks from the pulpit of Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati and my ordination to the dirt of Fort Dix, New Jersey, and the “night infiltration course” of basic training. As I crawled under the barbed wire in that summer night darkness illumined only by machine-gun tracer-fire whizzing overhead, I heard as weeks before the voice of Nelson Glueck, *alav hashalom*, whispering now in the sound of the war-fury ever around me: carry this Torah to *amkha*, carry it to your people.

Who shall live and who shall die...? I prayed two prayers that night: Let me live, God, safe *mikol tzarah v'tzukah*, safe from all calamity and injury; don't let that 50-calibre machine gun spraying the air above me with live ammunition break loose from its concrete housing. And I prayed once again. Let me never experience this frightening horror in combat where someone will be firing at me with extreme prejudice.

Who shall live and who shall die...? I survived. The “terror [that stalks] by night” and “the arrow that flies by day” did not reach me.”² The One who bestows lovingkindnesses on the undeserving carried me safely through. But one of my colleagues was not so lucky. He was a Roman Catholic priest. They said he died from a heart attack on the course that night. I think he died from fright.

Who shall live and who shall die...? The litany echoes in our ears. It fills our sanctuary as Yom Kippur's most potent and poignant prayer, the *unetaneh tokef*, pierces the air. Who shall live and who shall die...?

Rabbi Amnon intoned the words first, centuries ago. “Let us proclaim the great solemnity of the day,” he cried out.

It was the tenth century then in Mayence, in Germany. He was a wealthy leader of the Jewish community, and, just as so many of our community leaders, he was also a great scholar.

Now the local ruler of Mayence and its very influential bishop tried constantly to convince Rabbi Amnon to convert to Christianity. They offered him all kinds of incentives, both financial and personal. They even offered him a ministerial post. But he was steadfast. A Jew he was. A Jew he would remain.

One day, the bishop subjected Rabbi Amnon to a particularly long harangue. In

¹Some ideas in this sermon have been taken from “The Highest Holidays - A Survival Guide” by Eli Birnbaum (The Hagshama Department, The World Zionist Organization); and “Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah” by Dr. Jonathan Sacks (© United Synagogue - London, provided by BRIJNET), to whom I am grateful.

²From Psalm 91:5.

a rush to leave that day, and just to get the bishop off of his back, he asked for three days to consider.

The Bishop was ecstatic. The possibility of hooking this large fish now before him, he could feel the fame that the conversion of one as great as Rabbi Amnon would bring him.

But for Rabbi Amnon, no sooner than he had left the palace did he realize the enormity of what he had spoken. He repeated the words his mouth had uttered to the bishop, and he immediately felt a searing, jolting pain shooting through his heart. "What have I said, and what have I done? Perhaps someone will think that I have actually considered converting?"

He began to fast, to repent for giving in to a momentary impulse. "Convert?" His sorrow knew no bounds.

Three days passed, and no food nor drink passed his lips. He was weak and ill now, and reckoning day came. The Bishop, waiting to acknowledge his triumph over his foe (and, through embracing the rabbi in Christ, save the rabbi's soul), summoned him to the palace. Rabbi Amnon refused to leave his house.

"He refuses to come?" the bishop angrily proclaimed. "The Jew now mocks me? I'll show him. Bring him to me, by force if necessary."

And this is what happened. The bishop waxed still more furious between the time his guards went out to fetch the rabbi and the time they brought him to the palace, though it is uncertain whether more it was because Rabbi Amnon clearly was denying Christianity or more because the rabbi refused to come.

"What should be your punishment?" the Bishop demanded.

"Cut out the tongue which told you I would even consider converting!" the rabbi told him.

"No," the bishop retorted, "Your tongue spoke the truth, and that will be spared. Rather, your punishment will be that your legs which didn't bring you here will be amputated."

He ordered the rabbi tied down. Then, as the bishop had spoken, so it was. The horror was unspeakable. But it did not end. Both of Rabbi Amnon's legs were cut off, and the bishop asked him again if he would convert. The rabbi refused, his determination continuing unabated. But so the determination of the Bishop. "Cut off one of the Jew's arms, and then we'll see if he refuses to accept our faith." The cruel servants only too willingly did the dastardly deed. "Now, Jew, convert!"

The rabbi — and who knows how amidst such pain — again refused the bishop. This time the bishop ordered that the other hand of Rabbi Amnon be cut off, finishing this cruelest of tortures. Then, in still another act, the bishop himself poured salt on the rabbi's wounds.

They wrapped the rabbi in rags. He was thrown out the door and brought

home.

It was the next day, and as it happened that day was Rosh Hashanah. In all of his agony, Rabbi Amnon, dying, asked his servants to bring him to the synagogue. They did. They laid him down beside the *bimah*, and he waited until the beginning of the Mussaf service. Then he asked the congregation to stop. They did, and he began to chant: “*Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom*, let us proclaim the extreme force of this day. It is awful and full of dread...*mi yichyeh umi yamut*, who shall live and who shall die...? As soon as the whole prayer passed his lips, he died.

Tradition has it that three days later Rabbi Amnon came to Kalonymus ben Meshulam in a dream. Kalonymus ben Meshulam was a well-known rabbi, and Rabbi Amnon repeated the entire prayer to him as if in a vision. Rabbi Amnon asked him to remember the prayer and see to it that all communities put it into their New Year and Day of Atonement prayers and so remember what a moment of weakness can bring. He did. The prayer lasts to this day.

But a story? Perhaps. But the words of the *unetaneh tokef* weigh heavily upon us to this day. Leaving angels gripped with fear, they penetrate to the very depths of our souls. They are the non-rational speaking to the deepest levels of our unconscious. The prayer is upsetting to the core.

But what is the prayer really about? A book of life, a page for each of us written in our very own handwriting, that is opened on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur, saying, Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water...who raised up and who bowed down?

The *unetaneh tokef* is not the first place we read of the *sefer hachayyim*, the book of life. Listen to what the Talmud says that R. Kruspedai, quoting R. Yohanan, said: ‘On New Year’s Day, three books are opened – one with the names of the completely righteous, one with the names of the completely wicked, and one with the names of those neither completely righteous *nor* completely wicked. The completely righteous: their verdict – life – is written down and sealed at once. The completely wicked: their verdict – death – is written down and sealed at once also. Those neither completely righteous nor completely wicked: their verdict is suspended between New Year’s Day and the Day of Atonement. If they are deemed to deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they are not, they are inscribed in the book of death.’³

Rabbi Amnon knew that Talmud passage. It is very famous. He also knew that some of it is poetry. He knew, for instance, that the majority view of the Talmud is that *no one* is *completely* wicked, just as *no one* is *completely* good. The Talmud reached that conclusion as it tried to find an answer to the question of why some very wicked people prosper while some extremely righteous people suffer wretched lives. Perhaps the real payoff will be done in the world-to-come, where justice of a certainty is swift and complete. But Rabbi Amnon knew this clearly: no one is complete wicked, just as no one is completely good. The otherwise all-good Moses, our teacher, may his memory

³RH 16b and En Yaakov, *ad loc.*

be for a blessing, missed the mark and maligned God instead of sanctifying God. In a fit of anger he struck a rock for water rather than speaking to it. And did not Hitler, may his name and memory be blotted out, love and compassionately protect, Germany's animals?

That meant that the *unetaneh tokef* and the notion of a book of life, for Rabbi Amnon, as well as for us, speaks about real people. It speaks about us.

My grandmother and my mother, *aleihen hashalom*, fully believed in a book of life in the way so many people have long believed and understood it. They literally believed that our destiny for the coming year is written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed at the end of Yom Kippur. For them, what we do during this period does affect our fate, and anything that can make it turn out for the better is something to be done. I once asked my grandmother what people did when they visited the graves of their loved ones at the time of the high holy days. As a young child, I wanted to know what those old men always on the cemetery said when they came up to people, asked, "*Mach an azkoro?*" and then at a head-nod started to intone what sounded like a very sad prayer. My grandmother said, "They are asking the dead to intercede with God for our forgiveness." I didn't know what intercede was, but I knew it was very serious. It had to be because what those men said made everyone cry!

I grew up, studied Hebrew and Jewish practices, and learned what an "*azkoro*" was, learned it was the *El Malei Rachamim*, the prayer for the repose of the soul of the dead, something we recite at funerals and *yizkor* services and at graves of loved ones and other places where it is proper to invoke God's mercy upon our departed loved ones. And while my mother could not hear the *El Malei Rachamim* without bursting into tears, and while I knew that it was *not* a prayer asking the dead to intercede for us, I'm sure for her it was all of her days.

But that wasn't what made me look again at the *unetaneh tokef* of Rabbi Amnon and start questioning. It was, after deep contemplation, the prayer itself. I want to share what I learned. It has a profound message for all of us.

This is what I learned. The prayer contains some extremely sophisticated thinking. It proclaims a very forward belief in future destiny manifesting itself out of past events. It is like something I heard talked about when I studied mathematics at the university: the belief in the possibility of creating some differential equation from which *all* future events could be predicted. *That* I can't accept, but we all know there are events happening in the world today that result from events of the past. World War II was predictable the minute the conditions of peace were laid down at the end of World War I. And every time the Fed plays around — or doesn't play around — with interest rates or whatever else the Fed plays around with, the stage is set for an economic process to affect much of the entire world. And are we not each of us a product of some genetic structure, the codes of which were set in motion generations ago and which were fixed for us the exact instant we were conceived?

But just the same I cannot believe that it was written down on a Rosh Hashanah

and sealed on a Yom Kippur that a particular couple of hundred people, many of them college students, would die many years ago on Pan Am 103 as it went down at Lockerbie, Scotland, because they were unrighteous. They died because a group of vicious, sick, twisted, and perverse terrorists, who totally misunderstood their own religious truths, went out in warped fanaticism and murdered hundreds of people. They died because those terrorists randomly blew up that plane rather than another. The consequences of their act continue to affect so very many people, maybe all of us who hesitate if only for a second as we walk onto an aircraft, even to this day.

I know one of those people. His name is Seth. Seth was supposed to be on Pan Am 103 that day. He and a colleague were late in arriving at the airport before the plane took off and missed the flight. I asked him about it once or twice. He wasn't comfortable talking, but I know it powerfully affected him. He did tell me he initially felt frustrated at having to go through the hassle of rescheduling another flight after missing his own. But then when he found out...well, I know he, in what I saw as his quiet reserved way, had to have spent a lot of time dealing with what his life was and was going to be about given the fact that he, by a quirk of fate literally, *was* alive.

I told the story of Seth to a religious school class at Temple Beth Shalom in Parsippany a couple of years ago. As I concluded, one of the students in the class raised his hand. I called on him. And this is what he said: "My uncle wasn't so lucky. He *was* on that plane."

So go with me to the later part of the *unetaneh tokef*. These are the words: *ut'shuvoah ut'filah utz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zeirah*. Understand them with me literally, not as the prayerbook translates them. They mean, *t'shuvoah*, *t'filah* and *tz'dakah* cause the *harshness* of the decree to pass.

But is it like that really? Can it be, for instance, as this story?

Once in a small town in Poland, there was a Rabbi who was sick. He wasn't just sick; he was *really* sick. The townspeople wrung their hands and pulled at their hair, "What can we do to save the Rabbi?"

One of the more learned of the town suggested, "Let's do what our forefathers did. We'll all fast."

"Great", everyone cried out, and they declared that for the next three days no one would eat or drink, and everyone would pray for the Rabbi's life.

Two days went by, but there was no change in the Rabbi's health. On the third day, someone was passing the local tavern and saw a fellow Jew, the town drunk, drinking. "How can you do that when the Rabbi's life is at stake?"

So the poor Jew was pressured to leave the tavern and go to the shul where he sat silently for a few moments. "How long will this last?" he asked the beadle.

"Until the Rabbi is better," the beadle replied.

"If that's the case," he murmured and closed his eyes, 'Dear God, please heal the Rabbi so I can go back to my drink.'"

Lo and behold, the Rabbi miraculously began to recover. When he did, he held a feast in honor of the town drunk. "What happened?" the people asked.

"Simple," the Rabbi replied. "All of you prayed, but the only one who *really* prayed with all his heart was the drunk."

I began thinking of this sermon while I was in Parsippany. I had the entire notion of repentance, prayer, and *tzedakah* averting the harshness of the decree all worked out. Then a congregant, truly one of the most active and dedicated and committed members of the congregation and a past president, approached me one day. She asked me if I would drive with her to a place that had impacted heavily upon her life a number of years earlier and that continued to haunt her even now. The place was in New York. You can guess where it was. It was the World Trade Center. She was one of the lucky ones. She was a survivor on that fateful 9/11 day that saw thousands of people killed and that irrevocably changed the lives of us all.

As we wandered through the site and she pointed out where her office had been, and as we then spent hours in the museum there, and finally as we walked around the memorial and saw the names of the individuals whose lives had been snuffed out in the horror of 9/11, my mind went back to the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef*: "Who shall live and who shall die?" Had no one who perished prayed that day? Had no one performed an act of *tzedakah* that day? Had no one, on his/her way to work not contemplated how he/she could do more to make the world a better place?

And then I remembered. I had confronted the complexity of this issue even before 9/11. And that confrontation flashed through my mind as I walked through the grounds of the World Trade Center, looking now for answers to the unsettling question that once again was pounding in my head as a jackhammer against pavement. Who shall live and who shall die...? Who shall live and who shall die...?

Then the answer came. It was in the story of a remarkable young woman named Lauren.

Lauren was my confirmand years earlier. When she was nine or ten, she had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. Blessed with good doctors and a very loving home, the tumor was excised. Lauren spent the next years dedicating herself to the task of living.

Not that having had the tumor hadn't had lasting effects. Lauren remained slight of size after her surgery, and there were some things that she, as a result of having had a brain tumor removed, had difficulties in learning.

But a more sweet and loving person didn't live on the earth. The tradition says that at all times there are thirty-six righteous people for whom the world stands. Neither we nor they know who they are. I believe with all of my heart that Lauren was one them.

Lauren was confirmed at age 16. She wasn't, because of some of her limitations, able to go with us to New York on the class trip we were part of each year, and maybe

she didn't master some of the academic things that others did, but — God! — she was a spiritual giant. And as far as what being Jewish *really* is all about, well, this little 16-year-old taught me a trick or two.

How proud Lauren and her family and all the rest of us were at Confirmation. The *shehecheyanu*, the prayer where we thank God for letting us all reach a happy time, was a *shehecheyanu* I have never heard since.

One day we rejoice, but who knows what tomorrow will bring? Two and a half years later, Lauren's cancer returned. It came back with a vengeance. Her doctors knew, her parents knew, I knew — and most important *she* knew — that there was no medical cure for her. This magnificent child/woman had but a few months left to live.

Lauren called me one day and told me she wanted to see me. "Fine, I'll come by."

"No," she said in her typical way, "I'll come to see you. I have some questions for you."

A couple of days later she came by my office. Not able to remember her own questions, she pulled a paper out of her pocket and began reciting. She asked five of the most difficult questions anyone has ever asked me, questions made still harder because they were coming from an eighteen-year-old who wanted to know about justice in the universe. Here is one of them: "Tell me, Rabbi, why does God let little children get cancer. Me, I can take it, but why the little children?"

I didn't know the answers to *any* of Lauren's questions. I told her so. I also told her that I would walk with her as she walked down the path she was now going to walk. "Good," she said. "That's the answer to the questions that I hoped you would give me."

I will share with you two other conversations I had with Lauren. The first was on the Shabbat afternoon a week before Lauren's 19th birthday. She was in Children's Hospital in Boston then, their favorite patient, as only one who had been in and out of the place for the last ten years could be. As I walked into her room, there was a big sign taped to the wall. On it, in humongous letters, were the words, "S--- happens." Surprising as this might sound, I had never heard that expression before. So I asked.

"Tell me, Lauren, what does it mean, S--- happens."

"What it means, Rabbi, is that S--- *happens*."

It was at that moment that what started when Lauren came to me with her questions months before became complete now. Lauren had now fully become *my* teacher, and I was the student in *her* classroom.

The middle of the following week, two things for which Lauren had been living came to pass. The first was that she celebrated her 19th birthday. The second was that the principal of her special high school came up to her room and conferred upon her a graduation diploma. It was not a gift. Lauren really did at last complete all of her required high school work.

I went to see her, again on Shabbat afternoon, two days after her birthday and hospital-room graduation. Lauren had taken a terrible turn for the worse. She was very weak. I sat beside her for a few moments, and before I prayed with her I asked her this question: "Lauren, do you have any advice for me?"

"Yes I do, Rabbi," she replied weakly as the edges of her lips curled upward in a faint smile. "Keep on trucking. Just keep on trucking."

The heavenly academy opened its doors and welcomed this wondrous teacher of the household of Israel the very next day.

Who shall live and who shall die...? May we, even as we wrestle with the question, find the way to bring fullness to our lives, and may we start to walk today on a path which will carry us to goodness throughout each day of the coming year. May we know abundant blessings from it always, and may our days endure long on the good land which the Eternal our God has given us.

Amen