

Fear and Trust

Yom Kippur Morning 5775 – Saturday, October 4, 2014

Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina

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Ted called the rabbi about his wife Doris, who was dying in the hospital. Ted wasn't a Temple member and was concerned about whether or not the rabbi could do Doris' funeral.

"How is Doris?" the rabbi asked.

"Doris is dying. They say a day or two. Do I call over to the funeral home and make preparations now? We have cemetery plots but no funeral plans."

"Is Doris in any pain? Is she awake and aware? Is she frightened?"

Ted still had more questions about the funeral. "Ted, Doris isn't dead yet. The funeral director will be available later. What can we do for Doris now? Would you like me to visit her?"

Ted thought that a visit would be nice, but the rabbi shouldn't make a special trip.

The rabbi found Doris alone in a room with two beds. "Hi Doris, I was in the hospital and heard you were here, so I thought I would come by and say hello. We met once before. Do you remember me?"

Doris opened her eyes fully. "Rabbi," she managed to say.

"Yes." He slid a chair close enough to the bed so he could sit and hold her hand. "How are you doing?" She didn't answer, but she looked at him steadily. "Are you in pain?" Her eyes rolled up to the IV drip. The medication was adequate. "You don't have to say anything. If it's alright with you, I'll sit here for a while. Is that all right?" She nodded.

Her eyes were open to him. Some of her history stared back at him. She knew why Ted had called the rabbi. It wasn't the first time he had buried her.

There was no denial, but no acceptance either. Only resignation.

His eyes were open to her. She saw in them a reflection of her situation. She saw his concern and compassion. She knew he had made a special trip to see her.

"Would you like me to pray for you?" he asked her, still holding her hand.

Her surprise was evident. She had never prayed before. She had no notion that someone else could pray for her. To her surprise, she wanted him to say a prayer. She sincerely wanted it. Her desire struggled with her notion of hypocrisy. All her life she had never seen the point of prayer. Now that she was dying, she welcomed prayer. For the moment, she was stuck between her desire and her disbelief. Her desire won out. More than anything else in the world, at that moment, she wanted a prayer. "Yes, I would like that."

“What do you want me to pray for?” the rabbi asked, knowing how crucial that decision would be.

He felt her shock through her hand. It flashed across her face. She knew for a certainty that the gates of prayer were open. She had two choices. She could pray to die.

She could pray to live. She had known she could die. She had not known she could live.

The rabbi read the argument in her eyes. She had a good reason to die. Could she find a good reason to live? He saw and felt the shift in her when she found it. He didn't know what her reason was, but she had found it.

“I want to live,” she said.

“Can you say that again, please?”

“I want to live.”

In that instant her prayer broke through. The rabbi sealed it with a quick prayer of healing. The rabbi's words were unimportant. The real prayer had burst from Doris' heart. The rabbi had been there as witness, and nothing more.

He squeezed her hand. “I'm going to leave now. I hope to see you again soon.” She smiled in response.

Doris recovered. The doctors called it a remarkable spontaneous remission. She lived another six months during which she healed a rift with a son from whom she had been estranged for years. The next time she came to die, the son was present to hold her hand.

In this story originally told by one of my teachers, Rabbi Mitchell Chefitz, in his novel, *The Seventh Telling*, Doris rediscovered her ability to choose. Choice is a fundamental aspect of our humanity, and our Judaism, and may be the most frightening thing we need to reclaim on this day.

We are about to talk about the “Power of this Day”, how it causes us to stand in awe, and full of dread. This is one of the culminations of the Days of Awe, and *Un'taneh Tokef*, one of the central prayers of these days, stands before us as a declaration of a great decree upon the year to come. Have we done what we needed to do in order to end up on the correct side of the statement, “Who shall live and who shall die”?

Have I done what I needed to do?

Can I face the year to come feeling like God will decree for me a good year?

No.

You may not believe that a rabbi feels this way, but I do not actually believe this. In no way do I feel that there is a supreme personality weighing my year to come and deciding my fate for it and that if I do or don't do something in particular at this

moment, on this day, then my fate will be changed by some supernatural force.

Because, if I believed in such an idea, that God made a decree on October 4, 2014, on the basis of my level of sincere repentance, which would impact whether or not earthquake or plague struck my neighborhood in Charlotte sometime before the next year's Yom Kippur, on September 23, 2015, (God forbid – I am both a rationalist AND STILL superstitious!), then my whole way of thinking the rest of the year wouldn't work.

If my prayer or repentance could alter weather patterns, stock markets, or whether or not my family would suffer from hunger, then why would I do anything but pray?

What use would any of my actions be if I believed in the supernatural impact of prayer?

We know that this is not a choice for some being in the sky to make for us – it is ours to make – I must be the one to choose life. We must be the ones figure out how to navigate the twists of fate that will come our way, for better or for worse. And the prayer before us reminds us of that too – it concludes emphatically:

“But REPENTANCE, PRAYER, and RIGHTEOUS DEEDS, temper judgment's severe decree.”

These words, sung out every year at the end of our worrying litany of potential fates remind us that when all is said and done, our fate is in our hands.

Maybe this is the problem.

While it may feel great to know that it is all up to us, I am frightened about it.

A day “full of dread” indeed – Yom Kippur, when we remind ourselves that the entirety of our year is in fact on us to improve or ruin.

On top of all of that, like Doris in the story, we must accept that this choice before us is real and that choosing makes a difference. Our prayers reflect our willingness to open ourselves to possibilities – to go beyond the fear of the worst-case scenario and accept that we can choose something else. We must make a choice even though we fear to do so.

There are so many fears out there – the notion that we might be less responsible for some of the things going on around us would be a comfort. Taking all that on is just one more thing to be anxious about.

The future often holds the worst of our fears.

The future leads to death. I fight that all the time, and I hope mostly in a healthy fashion. I even joke that the reason I am so serious about running is that I am fleeing from death. I want to live long to see our kids grow up and live as adults.

After all, I am a forty-four year old with a seven-year-old and a ten-month-old!

Is that a positive desire, or just another expression of our fear of everything going wrong? I am not sure.

I do know that when I face up to my fears, I accomplish things that are truly important.

I fear that my struggle with the memory of my father, with my anger and resentment towards him, gets in the way of me being a better person, a better husband, father, and rabbi.

On Sunday I ran twenty miles, yes, all at once, and so had a lot of time to listen to podcasts. One of them, an interview between “On Being’s” Krista Tippett and yoga instructor Seane Corn, who talks about taking yoga “Off the Mat and into the World”, highlighted Ms. Corn’s experience of coping with great difficulties. Her experiences reminded me that I needed to choose to forgive my father. I needed to choose to transform whatever injury I felt I received from him into a gift, and even to be grateful for the things that I once thought were hurtful. I need to choose to live my life, and let his life, now over for seven years, be an asset for me. After all, I am the only one in the relationship now, I had better figure out a way to make it work to my advantage.

When I hear “Who shall live and who shall die” I can take it as an inspirational statement to choose a better life in the year to come.

The rest of this frightening prayer goes beyond life and death and into quality of life:

“Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degraded and who will be exalted.”

This gets deep into the heart of our difficulties – every single one of us wants to come out on the right side of these. And we want these things answered for our families and friends too.

It would be terrifying to think that our demeanor and seriousness on this day, on the days leading up to this day over the last month of our repenting, would actually result in harmony or suffering for us for the next year.

We want to accomplish the thing that would make this all work out – it would be so great if there were ONE thing we could do today to accomplish this.

Not so simple though.

Think about the consequences of a wrong action.

This summer we watched an Israeli documentary, “The Gatekeepers” – interviews with former directors of the Shin Bet – the general security agency tasked with Israel intelligence and counter-terrorism in the occupied territories since 1967.

In one of the opening scenes, as a surveillance camera tracks a van, one of the Shin Bet directors talks about the decision to take action. He says:

“Acting out of fear means killing people who shouldn't be killed.

“People expect a decision, and by decision they usually mean ‘to act’. That's a

decision. ‘Don't do it’ seems easier, but it's often harder.”

Our responsibility for others' lives isn't usually so self-evident. Others' lives are not directly in our hands. We are not pushing any buttons that can end someone else's life at any moment.

Still, everyone's lives are in our hands, every moment, every action, every inaction – each of these makes a huge difference, even when we don't notice it.

Fear leads us to not merely make the tough decision to not act, or to act rashly, fear leads us to turn away and wash our hands of the whole thing.

To see ourselves in this prayer, to see ourselves as responsible at all times – this is what we are asking of ourselves on this day. We feel dread, because we can make a difference. We ease our fears, as individuals and as a community, when we realize we are not alone. We are in it together.

This is one of my definitions of God.

Instead of imagining that God will suspend the rules of the world for us – change the course of the reality on which we depend – merely on the strength of our prayers today, let us use these moments to connect with each other, and remind one another that these connections are the point of *Un'taneh Tokef*.

God is in what we create when we connect.

“Who shall live and who shall die...” – who among us will remember the value of our lives, and the lives of those around us, and use every day to make those lives worth living.

“Who will be degraded and who exalted...” – who among us will reach past our fears of connecting to a person in need. Who among us will reach past our fears of asking for help, and bravely turn to someone when we are in need. We are truly here for each other – we must ask and we must answer.

This moment is not about how we pray but how we live.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson says:

“We are most God-like when we open ourselves up to the vulnerability of real relationships.”

When we open ourselves up to the choices and choose to connect with each other, with the world, with the sources of our fears and our hopes, then we can accomplish miracles, just like Doris did. We can choose life.

Feel our fear, because on this day we remind ourselves about the choices that lay in front of us every day of the year.

“But REPENTANCE, PRAYER, and RIGHTEOUS DEEDS, temper judgment's severe decree.”

And we have the power to overcome this when we are open, when we find openings, when we offer openings – to our selves and to one another.