

Psalm for the Season of Repentance,” Psalm 27 is a composition filled with a sense of overwhelming dread juxtaposed with God’s protection, raising an interesting question and a number of compelling answers.

The psalmist declares, “when evildoers draw near to slander me, when foes threaten — they stumble and fall. Though armies be arrayed against me, I have no fear. Though wars threaten, in this do I trust” (Psalm 27:2-3). Not surprisingly, commentators have sought to explain the latter clause — one, by suggesting that the psalmist is referring back to the opening of his song: namely, that “God is my light and help.” Many say this means that the psalmist places his trust squarely in the hands of God. Another interpretation comes out of the following verse where the psalmist says he seeks “to dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of his life.” Perhaps it is in God’s Abode that the psalmist places his trust? Another possible reading is that it is the synagogue, or, as Psalm 27 would have it, the Temple, that is the refuge for our psalmist. *Midrash Tehillim 27:4* offers yet another possible interpretation. It has been suggested that our verse actually refers to Yom Kippur. In this respect, perhaps the psalmist is referring not to a national war or battle, but to a battle within himself, “though wars threaten [referring to the perpetual conflict between one’s good and bad inclinations], in this [Yom Kippur] do I trust.”

The use of ambiguity in Hebrew verse allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. So, in seeking to establish what our psalmist places trust in, the answer is perhaps, all of the above: God, the Temple (or synagogue), and Yom Kippur. All of these come to play vital roles in our atonement. May each of us make an effort to open our souls during this season of Elul, to the words of the Psalms, especially Psalm 27. May we each take a moment to reflect on the true meaning of teshuvah. “We seek to return to God. Return us O Lord to You and we will return; renew our days as of old,” (Lamentations 5:21).

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Rosh Hashanah 5781

ראש השנה תשפ"א



Tip the Scales

Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Chancellor, JTS

“—who will live and who will die . . . who will come to an untimely end . . . who by plague . . . who will be brought low, and who will be raised up?” (*U-netaneh Tokef*, from the High Holiday liturgy)

In my earliest memory of this prayer, I am a young girl standing between my mother and grandmother in synagogue amidst hundreds of others. Both women are sobbing uncontrollably, as they recited these words. I was puzzled by their outward display of anguish but knew enough not to interrupt them to ask what caused it. They grasped in a way I had yet to comprehend just how tenuous life is; they understood that this one prayer more than any other captures the fragility of human life that the Days of Awe magnify. As I grew up and experienced pain, suffering, and loss, first in others and then eventually intimately, I appreciated the yearning in their supplications. I too felt the fervent hope that they undoubtedly shared, that our prayers and actions might spare us, our loved ones, the Jewish people.

This year, the words of the *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer resonate in new ways. In a matter of months, our lives have been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. We feel its devastating effects at all levels, from personally to globally. So much death, suffering, economic devastation, widening inequality and entrenched injustice. As our worlds became smaller during these past six months, we experienced anger, frustration, anxiety, and even hopelessness, feeling like bystanders watching our social fabric seemingly disintegrate and our lives grow more precarious. This unrecognizable state of existence led some of us to inadvertently begin early the process of introspection that culminates on Yom Kippur. For many, this focus inward initially heightened our insularity. But our fears also began to awaken within us newfound gratitude for

what matters most—having a roof over our heads, food to eat, and cherished family and friends—and our self-reflection eventually impelled our gaze outward. Just as the prayer ends with a call to action—*teshuvah*, *tefillah*, *tzedakah* (repentance, prayer, righteousness)—this pandemic period of introspection and proximity to the fragility of life has ushered in a greater desire to repair the world.

At first, we took tentative steps, discovering new ways to offer comfort, celebrate happy milestones with those we love, and meet the needs of those who depend on us. For those of us who have been able to emerge from lockdown, we found new ways to act on our values by working to rebuild our communities, our country, and our planet.

As humans, we continually straddle conflicting impulses—between hope and despair, action and lethargy, generosity of spirit and destructive self-absorption. The “call to action” in our times can feel unachievable, for the need is enormous and our actions may seem too small and insignificant to make a difference. Chanting the *U-netanah Tokef* and thinking of the wonderful people who died despite pious and good lives, we might feel inured to its call to action. I take comfort from the teachings of the twelfth-century Torah scholar, philosopher, and physician Maimonides, who understood human nature well and believed that even flawed humans—that is, all of us—are capable of taking action that will impact society for the good. “Every person,” wrote Maimonides,

. . . needs to see himself all year as if he is equally balanced between innocence and guilt. . . . If he does one mitzvah, behold he has tipped himself and the entire world to the side of innocence and brought about salvation for himself and for [everyone else]. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4)

In Maimonides’s view, we all carry within us the potential for both righteousness and sin. None of us will ever be wholly selfless or perfectly righteous. But, he notes, if we perform even one mitzvah, we tip the scales just a bit toward the good. And that can be enough to influence not only our own fate, but that of the world as a whole.

Let’s take to heart the words of Rambam, and read *mitzvah* expansively. If each of us undertakes even one action—in this moment we think about wearing a mask, feeding the hungry, voting, and taking even small steps to

promote justice and equality in our communities, but it could be almost anything—we could tip the scales and make a real difference for the entire world. Our actions are necessary, though surely not sufficient, to make the world more whole. But they can light the way. This realization probably would not have sufficed to dry the tears of my mother and grandmother—the pain of loss and tragedy can never be erased—but it would have surely heartened them to dwell on the power of individual goodness to transform tears of sadness and fear to ones of joy and hope. May this indeed come to pass.

Wishing you and your loved ones a *shanah tovah u-metukah*—may 5781 bring you joy, fulfillment, good health, and a better future for us all.

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A Taste of Torah



A Psalm for Repentance Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

The Hebrew month of Elul offers us an opportunity to repent. It is an auspicious time granted us each year, during which we can shake off the shackles of our spiritual apathy and seek an engaging and loving path back to ourselves, our fellow human beings, and most importantly, God. One of the traditions prescribed to arouse the feeling of teshuvah, repentance, is the recitation of Psalms. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, in his classic guide entitled *Days of Awe*, writes, “there are many barriers to doing teshuvah. One person may not sufficiently awake and even one who arouses one’s self faces many barriers, for the gates of teshuvah are shut in the face of many. There are those who do not know how to do it... But, even if a person is not awake for teshuvah, he will merit the awakening by the recitation of Psalms, and will open all of the closed gates and come into the gate of teshuvah.” Yet, one’s reading of the Psalms not only has the potential to open the gates of Heaven but also the gates of our hearts.

The addition of Psalm 27, recited twice daily during the High Holiday season, is an example of this increased presence of Psalms. Known as “the