



Bridging Dust & Divinity in the Days of Awe: Unpacking the Unetaneh Tokef Prayer

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Unetaneh Tokef

(1) We lend power to the holiness of this day. For it is tremendous and awe filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted, your throne will be established in loving-kindness, and you will sit on that throne in truth.

(2) It is true that you are the one who judges, and reproveth, who knows all, and bears witness, who inscribes, and seals, who reckons and enumerates. You remember all that is forgotten. You open **the book of records**, and from it, all shall be read. In it lies each person's insignia.

(3) And with a great shofar it is sounded, and **a thin silent voice** shall be heard. And the angels shall be alarmed, and dread and fear shall seize them as they proclaim: behold! the Day of Judgment on which the hosts of heaven shall be judged, for they too shall not be judged blameless by you, **and all creatures shall parade before you as a herd of sheep**. As a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do you shall pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each persons days, and inscribe their final judgment.

(4) On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed - how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who

ונתנה תוקף

(א) וְנִתְּנָה תְּקֵף קִדְּשֵׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא
נֹרָא וְאֵים וְבוֹ תִּנְשָׂא מַלְכוּתְךָ וְיִכּוֹן
בְּחֶסֶד כְּסֵאֶךָ וְתִשָּׁב עָלָיו בְּאַמֶּת

(ב) אָמֵת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דִּין וּמוֹכִיחַ
וְיֹדֵעַ וְעֹד וְכוֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֵה
וְתֹזְכֵר כָּל הַנְּשֻׁכָּחוֹת וְתִפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר
הַזְּכוּרוֹנוֹת וּמֵאַלְיוּ יִקְרָא וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל
אָדָם בּוֹ

(ג) וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה
דָּקָה יִשְׁמַע וּמְלֵאכִים יִחַפְּזוּן וְחַיִּל
וְרַעְדָה יֵאֱחָזוּן וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִנֵּה יוֹם הַדִּין
לְפָקֵד עַל צְבָא מְרוֹם בְּדִין כִּי לֹא יִזְכּוּ
בְּעֵינֶיךָ בְּדִין וְכָל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבְרוּן
לְפָנֶיךָ כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עֹדְרוּ
מֵעֵבִיר צֹאנֹו תַחַת לְשִׁבְטֹו כֵּן תַּעֲבִיר
וְתִסְפֹר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נַפְשׁ כָּל חַי
וְתִחַתְּךָ קִצְבָה לְכָל בְּרִיָּה וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת
גְּזַר דִּינָם

(ד) בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוּם
כְּפוּר יִחַתְּמוּן. כְּמָה יַעֲבְרוּן, וְכְמָה
יִבְרָאוּן, מִי יִחְיֶה, וּמִי יָמוּת, מִי בְּקִצּוֹ,
וּמִי לֹא בְּקִצּוֹ, מִי בַמַּיִם, וּמִי בַאֵשׁ, מִי

shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by lapidation, who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted. But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

(5) For your praise is just as your name. You are slow to anger and quick to be appeased. For you do not desire the death of the condemned, rather, that they turn from their path and live and you wait for them until the day of their death, and if they repent, you receive them immediately. (It is true -) [For] you are their Creator and You understand their inclination, for they are but flesh and blood.

(6) We come from dust, and return to dust. We labour by our lives for bread, we are like broken shards, like dry grass, and like a withered flower; like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that passes, like dust that scatters, like a fleeting dream. But You are the

בְּחָרֵב, וּמִי בַחַיָּה, מִי בְרָעָב, וּמִי
בְצָמָא, מִי בְרַעַשׁ, וּמִי בַמַּגָּפָה, מִי
בַחֲנִיקָה, וּמִי בְסִקִּילָה, מִי יְנוּחַ, וּמִי
יְנוּעַ, מִי יִשְׁקֵט, וּמִי יִטְרַף, מִי יִשְׁלֹו,
וּמִי יִתְיַסֵּר, מִי יַעֲנִי, וּמִי יַעֲשִׂיר, מִי
יִשְׁפֹּל, וּמִי יָרוּם. וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתַפְלָה
וְצַדִּיקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רַע הַגְּזֵרָה.

(ה) כִּי כְשִׁמְךָ כֵּן תִּהְיֶה תְּהִלָּתְךָ, קִשְׁיָה
לְכַעֲוֹס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצּוֹת, כִּי לֹא תִחַפֵּץ
בְּמוֹת הַמֵּת, כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדַּרְכּוֹ
וְחַיָּה, וְעַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ תִּחַכֶּה לוֹ, אִם
יִשׁוּב מִיַּד תִּקְבְּלוּ. (אָמֵת) כִּי אַתָּה
הוּא יוֹצֵרֵם וְיוֹדֵעַ יִצְרֵם, כִּי הֵם בְּשָׂר
וְדָם.

(ו) אָדָם יְסוּדוֹ מֵעָפָר וְסוּפוֹ לְעָפָר.
בְּנִפְשׁוֹ יָבִיא לְחִמּוֹ. מְשׁוּל כְּחָרֶס
הַנִּשְׁפָּר, כְּחִצִּיר יָבֵשׁ, וְכִצִּיץ נוֹבֵל,
כְּצֶל עוֹבֵר, וְכַעֲנַן כֹּלֵה, וְכְרוּחַ נוֹשֶׁבֶת,
וְכֶאֱבֶק פּוֹרֵחַ, וְכַחֲלוֹם יַעוּף. וְאַתָּה

king who lives eternal.

הוא מֶלֶךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם.

I Kings 19:11-12

(11) “Come out,” He called, “and stand on the mountain before the LORD.”

And lo, the LORD passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake. (12) After the earthquake—fire; but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire—a **soft murmuring sound**.

מלכים א י"ט:י"א-י"ב

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר צֵא וְעַמְדָתָ בְּהָר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְהִגָּה יְהוָה עֲבֹר וְרוּחַ גְּדוּלָה וְחֹזֶק מְפָרֵק הָרִים וּמְשַׁבֵּר סְלָעִים לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לֹא בְרוּחַ יְהוָה וְאַחַר הָרוּחַ רָעַשׁ לֹא בְרַעַשׁ יְהוָה: (יב) וְאַחַר הַרְעַשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בְּאֵשׁ יְהוָה וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה:

Malachi 3:14-20

(14) You have said, “It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping His charge and walking in abject awe of the LORD of Hosts?

(15) And so, we account the arrogant happy: they have indeed done evil and endured; they have indeed dared God and escaped.”

(16) In this vein have those who revere the LORD been talking to one another. The LORD has heard and noted it, and **a scroll of remembrance has been written at His behest concerning those who**

מלאכי ג':י"ד-כ'

(יד) אָמַרְתֶּם שְׁוֵא עֲבַד אֱלֹהִים וּמַה-בִּצָע כִּי שָׁמְרָנוּ מִשְׁמֵרֹתָיו וְכִי הִלְכָנוּ קְדֻרָנִית מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת: (טו) וְעַתָּה אֲנַחְנוּ מְאֹשְׁרִים זָדִים גַּם-נִבְּנוּ עֲשִׂי רַשְׁעָה גַם בְּחִנּוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּמְלְטוּ: (טז) אִזּוּ נִדְּבָרוּ יִרְאַי יְהוָה אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ וַיִּקְשָׁב יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע וַיִּכְתֹּב סֵפֶר זְכוֹרֹן לִפְנֵי לִירְאַי יְהוָה וּלְחַשְׁבֵי שְׁמוֹ: (יז) וְהָיוּ לִי אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה סִגְלָה וְחַמְלָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר יַחְמֵל אִישׁ עַל-בְּנוֹ

revere the LORD and esteem His name. (17) And on the day that I am preparing, said the LORD of Hosts, they shall be My treasured possession; I will be tender toward them as a man is tender toward a son who ministers to him. (18) And you shall come to see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between him who has served God and him who has not served Him. (19) For lo! That day is at hand, burning like an oven. All the arrogant and all the doers of evil shall be straw, and the day that is coming—said the LORD of Hosts—shall burn them to ashes and leave of them neither stock nor boughs. (20) But for you who revere My name a sun of victory shall rise to bring healing.^h You shall go forth and stamp like stall-fed calves,

הַעֲבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה: (יח) וְשָׁבַתְּם וּרְאִיתֶם בֵּין
צְדִיק לְרָשָׁע בֵּין עֹבֵד אֱלֹהִים לְאִשָּׁר
לֹא עֲבָדוּ: {פ}
(יט) כִּי־הִנֵּה הַיּוֹם בָּא בַעַר כַּתְּנוּר
וְהָיוּ כָל־זָדִים וְכָל־עֲשֵׂה רָשָׁעֵה לְקָשׁ
וְלֵהֵט אַתֶּם הַיּוֹם הַבֹּא אָמַר יְהוָה
צָבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יַעֲזֹב לָהֶם שָׂרֵשׁ
וְעֵנָף: (כ) וְזָרְחָה לְכֶם יְרֵאֵי שְׁמִי
שֶׁמֶשׁ צְדָקָה וּמִרְפָּא בְּכַנְפֶיהָ וַיִּצְאֲתֶם
וּפְשָׁתֶם כְּעֹגְלֵי מִרְבֵּק:

Rashi on Malachi 3:16:1

Then the God-fearing men spoke, etc. I retort upon your words then, when the wicked commit evil and the good go about in anxious worry because of Me. The God-fearing men spoke to one another not to adopt their evil deeds; and, as for Me, their words are not forgotten to Me. And although I do not hasten to visit retribution, I have hearkened and heard, and I have commanded that a book of remembrance be written for them. Their words shall be preserved for Me.

Berakhot 6a:12

What is the meaning of the phrase, “And that think upon His name”?
Rav Ashi said: If a person intended to perform a mitzva, but due to circumstances beyond his control, he did not perform it, the verse ascribes him credit as if he performed the mitzva, as he is among those that think upon His name.

רש"י על מלאכי ג' ט"ז:א'

אז נדברו וגו'. אני משיב על דבריכם
אז בעשות הרשעים רשעם והטובים
הלכו קדורני' מפני שנדברו יראי ה'
שלא לידבק במעשיהם הרעים ואני
לא נשכחו דבריכ' מלפני ואע"פ
שאיני ממהר להשיב גמול כי
הקשבתי ושמעתי וצויתי לכתוב להם
ספר זכרון והיו לי דבריה' מקוימים:

ברכות ו' א:י"ב

מאי "ולחשבני שמו"? אמר רב אשי:
חשב אדם לעשות מצוה, ונאנס, ולא
עשה — מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו
עשה.

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2

(2) **At four times** of the year **the world is judged: On Passover judgment is passed concerning grain; on *Shavuot* concerning fruits that grow on a tree on Rosh HaShana, all creatures pass before Him like sheep [*benei maron*], as it is stated: “He Who fashions their hearts alike, Who considers all their deeds” (Psalms 33:15); and on the festival of *Sukkot* they are judged concerning water, i.e., the rainfall of the coming year.**

Ein Yaakov (Glick Edition), Rosh Hashanah 1:19

Rabbi Yaakov ibn Habib began compiling and editing the Ein Yaakov in the early 16th century in the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Spain. After his death, his son, Rabbi Levi ibn Habib completed the work.

On New Year's Day all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him, Kibne Maron. **What is the meaning of Kibne Maron?** Here (in Babylonia) they translated it "like sheep." But Resh Lakish said: "The meaning is, as the steps of the Temple (i.e., narrow, so that people ascended them one by one)." R. Juda, however, in the name of Samuel, explained it: "Like the

משנה ראש השנה א'ב'

(ב) בְּאַרְבַּעַה פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן, בְּפֶסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֶצְרַת עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו כְּבְנֵי מְרוֹן, וְשֹׁנְאָמַר (תהלים לג) הַיּוֹצֵר יַחַד לִבָּם, הַמְבִּין אֶל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם. וּבְחָג נִדוֹנִין עַל הַמַּיִם:

עין יעקב (מאת שמואל צבי גליק),

ראש השנה א'י"ט

פִּיסקָא בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם וְכוּ' מֵאֵי כְּבְנֵי מְרוֹן הֵכָא תְּרַגְיֵמוּ כְּבְנֵי אִימְרֵנָא רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לִקְיֵשׁ אָמַר כְּמַעְלוֹת בֵּית חוֹרוֹן אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל כְּחַיִּילוֹת שֶׁל בֵּית דּוֹד אָמַר רַבֵּה בַר בַּר חֲנָה אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן וְכוּלָן נִסְקְרִין בְּסִקְרֵיהּ אַחַת אָמַר רַב נַחֲמָן בַּר יִצְחָק אָף אֲנִי נִמִּי תְּנִינָן

armies of the house of David [which were numbered one by one]."
 "Nevertheless," said Rabba b. b. Ghana, in the name of R. Jochanan, "they are all reviewed with one glance." R. Nachman b. Isaac said: "Our Mishnah also teaches us so, since it makes the inference from the passage (Ps. 33, 15) He that fashioned all their hearts alike. What does that mean? Shall we assume that it means, He created every heart alike in inclination? We see that it is not so. We must, therefore, say that it means. The Creator sees all their hearts [at one glance] and [at once] understands all their works."

(תהלים לג טו) היוצר יחד לבם
 המבין אל כל מעשיהם מאי קאמר
 אילימא דהכי קאמר דברינהו לכולי
 עלמא ומייחד לבייהו כי הדדי הא קא
 חזינן דלאו הכי אלא הכי קאמר
 היוצר רואה יחד לבם והוא מבין אל
 כל מעשיהם:

Jeremiah 18

(1) The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD: (2) "Go down to the house of a potter, and there I will impart My words to you." (3) So I went down to the house of a potter, and found him working at the wheel. (4) And if the vessel he was making was spoiled, as happens to clay in the potter's hands,^a he would make it into another vessel, such as the potter saw fit to make. (5) Then the word of the LORD came to me: (6) O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?—says the LORD. Just like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in My

ירמיהו י"ח

(א) הדבר אשר הגה אל-ירמיהו מאת
 יהוה לאמר: (ב) קום וירדת בית
 היוצר ושמה אשמיעך את-דברי: (ג)
 וארד בית היוצר (והנהו) [והנה-הוא]
 עשה מלאכה על-האבנים: (ד)
 ונשתת הפלי אשר הוא עשה בחמר
 ביד היוצר ושב ויעשהו פלי אחר
 כאשר ישר בעיני היוצר
 לעשות: {ס} (ה) ויהי דבר-יהוה
 אלי לאמור: (ו) הכיוצר הגה לא-
 אוכל לעשות לכם בית ישראל נאם-
 יהוה הגה כחמר ביד היוצר כן-אתם
 בידי בית ישראל: {ס} (ז) רגע

hands, O House of Israel! (7) At one moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be uprooted and pulled down and destroyed; (8) but if that nation against which I made the decree turns back from its wickedness, I change My mind concerning the punishment I planned to bring on it. (9) At another moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be built and planted; (10) but if it does what is displeasing to Me and does not obey Me, then I change My mind concerning the good I planned to bestow upon it.

אֲדַבֵּר עַל-גּוֹי וְעַל-מַמְלָכָה לְנִתּוֹשׁ
וּלְנִתּוּץ וְלִהְיֶה אֲבִיד: (ח) וְשָׁב הַגּוֹי הַהוּא
מִרְעֻתוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי עָלָיו וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל-
הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר חֲשַׁבְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת
לָּו: {ס} (ט) וְרָגַע אֲדַבֵּר עַל-גּוֹי
וְעַל-מַמְלָכָה לְבָנוֹת וּלְנִטּוֹעַ: (י) וְעָשָׂה
(הַרְעָה) [הָרַע] בְּעֵינַי לְבִלְתִּי שָׁמַעַ
בְּקוֹלִי וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל-הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר
אָמַרְתִּי לְהִיטִיב אוֹתוֹ: {ס}

Isaiah 40:7-8

(7) Grass withers, flowers fade
When the breath of the LORD
blows on them.
Indeed, man is but grass: (8) Grass
wITHERS, flowers fade—
But the word of our God is always
fulfilled!”

ישעיהו מ'ז'-ח'

(ז) יָבֵשׁ חֲצִיר גַּבַּל צִיץ כִּי רוּחַ יְהוָה
נִשְׁבָּה בּוֹ אֶכּוֹן חֲצִיר הָעָם: (ח) יָבֵשׁ
חֲצִיר גַּבַּל צִיץ וּדְבַר-אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִקּוּם
לְעוֹלָם: {ס}

Psalms 144:3-4

(3) O LORD, what is man that You
should care about him,
mortal man, that You should think
of him? (4) Man is like a breath;
his days are like a passing shadow.

תהילים קמ"ד:ג'-ד'

(ג) יְהוָה מִה-אָדָם וּתְדַעְהוּ בֶן-אָנוּשׁ
וּתְחַשְׁבֶהוּ: (ד) אָדָם לְהֶבֶל דָּמָה יָמָיו
כַּצֶּל עוֹבֵר:

Job 7:7-9

(7) Consider that my life is but
wind;
I shall never see happiness again.
(8) The eye that gazes on me will
not see me;
Your eye will seek me, but I shall
be gone. (9) As a cloud fades away,
So whoever goes down to Sheol
does not come up;

Isaiah 5:24

(24) Assuredly,
As straw is consumed by a tongue
of fire
And hay shrivels as it burns,^g
Their stock shall become like rot,
And their buds shall blow away like
dust.
For they have rejected the
instruction of the LORD of Hosts,
Spurned the word of the Holy One
of Israel.

איוב ז:ז'-ט'

(ז) זָכַר כִּי־רוּחַ חַיִּי לֹא־תָשׁוּב עֵינַי
לְרָאוֹת טוֹב: (ח) לֹא־תִשׁוּרְנֵי עֵינַי רָאִי
עֵינַיִךָ כִּי וְאֵינֶנִּי: (ט) כָּל־הָעֵנָן וַיִּלְגֵּךְ בְּנוֹ
יֹרֵד אֶשְׁאוֹל לֹא יַעֲלֶה:

ישעיהו ה':כ"ד

(כד) לָכֵן כָּאֵלֶּל קָשׁ לְשׁוֹן אֵשׁ וַחֲשִׁשׁ
לְהִבֵּה יִרְפָּה שָׂרָשָׁם כַּמֶּקֶה יִהְיֶה וּפְרִתָּם
כָּאֲבָק יַעֲלֶה כִּי מֵאֲסוֹ אֵת תּוֹרַת יְהוָה
צָבָאוֹת וְאֵת אִמְרַת קְדוֹשׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵל
נֶאֱצַו: