

Walking with Acceptance and Trust

We live in two worlds, all of us, all the time. We live in the world of nature, the world of rocks and rainforests, of tornadoes and tidal waves. And we live in the world of spirit, the world of meaning and morality, of purpose and potential. Humanity is the nexus of nature and spirit, a wonder we experience every day and one which deserves time and attention at least once a year. Rosh Hashanah is that time, a holiday that celebrates the world on which we live and the choices we make in it that truly matter.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this day of miracle and marvel is the setting for some of our tradition's most difficult texts. Each is troubling in its own way, though shared themes echo in both. First: Unetaneh Tokef, the terrible reminder that "who shall live and who shall die" is beyond our control. And second: The Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, the terrifying story of a man who would let go of his beloved son.

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*On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
How many shall pass away, and how many shall come to be,
Who shall live, and who shall die.¹*

Unetaneh Tokef is a text of infinite smallness. Facing the magnitude of matters beyond our control, we remind ourselves of the fragility of life. The litany of death sentences is rightly frightening and jostles us out of the unreflective complacency that defines most of our days. Birth, as well, remains beyond our grasp, a truth felt plainly by those who have borne a child as well as those who have struggled to do so. Even if these passages into life and death aren't subject to an active and choosing God, we also know they aren't subject to our own will. Unetaneh Tokef evokes the majesty of the natural world and its inescapable hold over us.

But the prayer concerns not only the power of nature but also our spiritual strength. וְתַשׁוּבָה וְתַפְלָה וְצְדָקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רֹעַ הַגְּזֵרָה. "But repentance, prayer, and charity help the harshness of the decree to pass." This climatic line makes a critical change from the original Talmudic source. There, we read וְשְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים מַבְטְלִין אֶת הַגְּזֵרָה קִשְׁיָה, "Three things cancel the hard decree, and they are: repentance, charity, and prayer."² Whereas the Talmud posits that God's mind changes in response to our behavior, the machzor knows what we know as well: that our greatest virtues cannot, truly, overturn our fate. Still, they do matter. They do alter our experience of hardship. A stance of humility, an

¹ בְּרֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן וּבַיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִתְמַמּוּן: כְּמָה יַעֲבִירוּן וְכָמָה יִכְרְאוּן. מִי יִחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת.

² Palestinian Talmud Ta'anit 2:1, 65b.

expression of faith, and a commitment to do what's right bring meaning to our lives in the face of glorious beginnings and painful ends.

Though we are small, and though we cannot control the circumstances of birth or the timing and manner of death, our lives do have meaning. Our actions make a difference – sometimes to the world and always to ourselves.

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We see the interplay of nature and spirit in the Akedah as well. Indeed, the story opens with this very theme.

And it was, after these things, that God tested Abraham and said, "Abraham," and he said, "Hineni – I am here" (Gen. 22:1).

We are told that this is a test, though we do not know what Abraham thinks. When God orders him to slaughter and sacrifice his son, Abraham says nothing in reply. Instead, "He got up early in the morning, saddled the donkey ... and set out for the place God had told him" (Gen. 22:3). We wonder – as our ancestors have wondered for thousands of years – why does he go? He must have some kind of choice. As the Medieval sage Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman taught: Every person, including Abraham, has a choice about what to do when facing life's biggest tests.³

Abraham does have options, but the text betrays no hint that disobedience is one of them. "No" is not an answer Abraham can conceive. He has already argued with God once – to prevent the death of the righteous alongside the wicked – and in that instance, the doomed city was ultimately destroyed. Abraham walks away knowing: Either God will do what God will do no matter what we say or God really does do צדקה וּמִשְׁפָּט, what is "just and right" (Gen. 18:19), even if it looks bad to us. Facing this new command, Abraham knows that he cannot defy God; and maybe he shouldn't even try. He cultivates acceptance or trust – maybe both – and receives with grace the demand that tears his soul.

This is what Unetaneh Tokef looks like on the individual scale. Abraham is like so many of us who have faced difficult, life-changing circumstances. We may empathize with Abraham in our memories of losing loved ones or losing a job, of facing a life-changing illness or the life-choices another makes without asking our consent. Natural disasters and new laws, accidents and affairs. In every one of these trials, the event is beyond our control. But we still have choices.

And so does Abraham.

³ See Ramban's commentary on Gen. 22:1.

והאלקים נסה את אברהם. ענין הנסיון הוא לדעתי בעבור היות מעשה האדם רשות מוחלטת בידו אם ירצה יעשה ואם לא ירצה לא יעשה יקרא "נסיון" מצד המנוסה אבל המנסה יתברך יצוה בו להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל הפועל להיות לו שכר מעשה טוב לא שכר לב טוב בלבד דע כי השם צדיק יבחן (תהלים י"א:ה') כשהוא יודע בצדיק שיעשה רצונו וחפץ להצדיקו יצוה אותו בנסיון ולא יבחן את הרשעים אשר לא ישמעו והנה כל הנסיונות שבתורה לטובת המנוסה.

“And Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar” (Gen. 22:4).

“And he said, ‘I am here, my son’” (Gen. 22:7).

“God will see to the sheep, my son” (Gen. 22:8, adapted).

“And the two of them walked together” (Gen. 22:8).

There is tenderness and quietude here, acceptance and trust. These surely help the harshness of the decree to pass. Abraham knows the power of “who shall live” – Isaac is the son of his old age, a miracle-child he never could have hoped would exist. And he faces now the power of “who shall die” – as said by Job, another tortured soul: *יְהוָה נָתַן וַיְהוָה לֵקַח יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ*, “God gives and God takes away. Blessed be God’s name” (Job 1:21).

In the end, Abraham witnesses once again a life-giving miracle. In a classic *deus ex machina*, an angel calls down from heaven, Isaac is spared, and Abraham returns home. He has passed the test. Not a test of “will he or won’t he” – there is no resisting the inevitable. But rather the test of “how shall he?” How shall he comport himself, how shall he walk with his child, how shall he face that which he cannot change?

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These are our questions as well. The High Holy Days speak to the vicissitudes we encounter on earth even as they speak also to the moral strivings and personal growth that define our inner lives. In the world of nature, our choices lead us to improve the world as much as we can, even as we know that much lies behind our reach. And in the world of spirit, our choices lead us to broaden our perspective, deepen our relationships, and adopt an openness to acceptance and trust. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a refugee from Nazi Europe and no stranger to suffering:

Every experience opens the door into a temple of new light, although the vestibule may be dark and dismal. The pious man accepts life’s ordeals and its need of anguish, because he recognizes these as belonging to the totality of life.⁴

I believe Heschel is reframing a famous passage of Talmud, in which the 613 mitzvot are reduced to one: *וְצַדִּיק בְּאֵמִנותוֹ יֵחִיָּה*, “The righteous by their faith shall live” (Habakkuk 2:4).⁵ This is not a faith of passivity or submission. Or as Heschel puts it, “Such acceptance does not mean complacency or fatalistic resignation.”⁶ The faith by which we live is Abraham’s faith, a faith that our actions matter even when the world threatens to overwhelm us, a faith that reminds us that we *live* even in the face of death,

⁴ *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 287.

⁵ BT Makkot 24a.

⁶ *Man is Not Alone* 287.

and even as we all walk toward the same inevitable end, the choices we make and the people we meet and the imprint we leave behind measure some meaningful impact that our lives have on the world and suffuse our years with purpose.

We are vessels of spirit and nature, humans miraculously born and treasured heirs to destinies beyond our ken. The sacred power of this day reminds us how great we are and also how small, and Abraham's haunting test offers one illustration of the choices we make in a world not our own.

May we receive these gifts with open hearts as this new year begins. May we acknowledge and affirm the blessing of life in the dual worlds of body and soul. And may we face the joyful and difficult decrees that lie ahead with acceptance and with trust.