

Unetaneh Tokef 5776 by Rabbi Margot Stein

There is a moment I remember so clearly, it flooded my senses like a cold shower.

“Good Lord,” I realized, “my son is going to die. Within a matter of days, he will stop breathing, and I won’t. It doesn’t matter what I want, or prefer, or desire. It doesn’t matter what I have prayed for, fought for, researched and scoured the world for. There is another Will in operation here besides my own. Dear God, really? Is this your will for my 24 year old son? That he die from this devastating and aggressive pediatric sarcoma, as the tumors fill his lungs and cause him to gasp for air?”

And with that, I fell to the floor, doubled over with intense stomach pain, as though I’d just been punched. As I lay there, I willed myself to face this truth, this inevitability. I felt myself, if you can imagine, sort of unhooking my solar plexis, seat of my life force, from his, as though we had been tied by an invisible umbilical cord throughout his illness. I released the thread of his life that I had been clutching these last months. And I let it go.

Because I had to.

A few hours after he took his last, labored breath, as we were still sitting quietly watching his pale, noble-looking countenance, the light began to fill the room. It was midnight, in NYC. The light was fierce. It was light you had to feel, rather than see. It filled the space over his head. Even after his body left us, even after burial, the light remained. By then, I felt a sense of speed, as though he were zooming around, joyful to move literally with the speed of light, joyful to be released from a failing body, even joyful to discover that there is, it would seem,

more to life than this mortal flesh, that something beautiful remains that is Eternal.

I have learned many lessons from this death. One of them is that having a strong spiritual practice, preferably rooted in a strong community of practice, can save your own life when someone you love is losing theirs. Another is that humans are terrible predictors. We cannot predict what the future will be like, although we think we can. One of the things that gets in the way for many of us when we think about death, is our predictions. What it's going to be like, how we're going to feel, mostly how very hard it's going to be. I could not have predicted how strong his presence would be still, and how vibrant.

My friends, love really is stronger than death. I did not know this until 5 months ago.

On Rosh Hashana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, "Who shall live and who shall die?"

When Aryeh realized he was definitely going to die, he did several things. He asked me to move him from his dark and tiny shared apartment on the Upper West Side to a space filled with light and windows. My brother helped me locate such a space and three days later, Aryeh moved into it. My sister, a psychiatric nurse practitioner in Boston, and single mother, left her daughter with a series of cousins and friends and moved in with us. Myriam juggled New York and Philadelphia, trying to be in both places with sensitivity and presence, as I settled into caring for Aryeh around the clock. Aryeh and Myriam experienced a healing between them that transcended personality and was expansive and inclusive, jump starting the healing that was unfolding before our eyes and hearts.

A few days later, Aryeh spent an evening doing a life review with Mordechai Liebling and Talia Malka, who sat and talked

with him late into the night. At that point, we still thought he was going to die from pneumonia. But then the antibiotics fought that back, and one day he woke up feeling well enough to go out and buy an iPhone 6. Hooked up to oxygen

tanks and in a wheelchair, he bought that phone and sat on a park bench with his beloved Katy and kissed her in the cold spring sunshine. A few days after that, he was able to get into a jacket and tie and, despite the wheelchair, oxygen tank, and medical support lurking in the background, took Katy to a spectacular 14-course tasting meal at a unique chef-driven restaurant called 11 Madison Park that was at the top of his bucket list, and which the chef and entire staff made even more memorable by treating him like visiting royalty, complete with private kitchen tour and an armful of treats and gifts. Oh, and they wouldn't take a dime from us, the entire extravaganza was on the house. Aryeh returned to the apartment pretty exhausted by that outing, but he said it was worth it. A few

days after that, Raffi visited and watched taxis from the apartment windows. At that point, sitting in his cushioned medical recliner and by now struggling to speak, he pushed himself to bless each of his five siblings and tell each what

made them special. Another day, with our help and an 11 pm visit by our lawyer, he wrote a will, leaving his possessions to his siblings and a few dear ones and setting the intention to establish a fund to support students with disabilities at Princeton, a project that many of you have generously helped transform into a reality.

All that, all those meaningful end-of-life activities took place in about three weeks. He lived them with a gusto and intentionality that many of us do not get around to in three decades or more.

This past weekend, we had house guests, including a friend in her late 70's who lost a son about 20 years ago. She told me that when people ask her how long it has been since Billy died, she says, "I blink and that's how long it's been." Just the blink of an eye. Or 20 years.

People who lose loved ones feel them at unexpected times. When I get that feeling of his presence, it washes over me. Though I still feel him reveling in racing around the cosmos, I also know and trust that he is completely OK, whole, and healed, his only concern, for us here in a fractured world. I'm relieved that his spirit seems to be peaceful, if a bit high-energy. And I have to laugh at the idea that, while in the body, only his mind was lightning fast. Now that he is in the realm of pure thought, there's nothing blocking the flow of that energy.

But down here, where there are plenty of blockages, there are also waves of grief, and they are mine. Mine and all of ours who have lost those we love. I imagine my sorrow for what I've lost will continue to wash over me for the rest of my life.

Struggling with Teshuva

Unetaneh tokef asks, "Who shall live and who shall die?"

Who shall really and truly LIVE, and who shall die a thousand deaths before the final one? Who shall live, paralyzed by fear? And who shall die in a healing circle of deep love?

Our tradition offers us a way through, a way to "avert" or at least to soften, life's severity. It teaches us that "teshuva, tefillah, and tzedaka" will help us in this life. I know now that I cannot predict the future, much less control its outcome. If I ever thought teshuva, tefilla and tzedakah would literally help me avert the severe decree, I've certainly given up that delusion.

Like many of you, I've given plenty of tzedakah, served on boards and donated funds and giving my strongest years to the nonprofit community. I've prayed and led prayer and taught prayer so I guess I've got tefillah covered. That must mean it's a matter of not enough teshuva: did I not turn far enough toward God during this crisis?

I am trying to understand teshuva in a new way these days. What am I turning away from? What am I turning toward?

Do I need to turn away from resentment at the unfairness of life?

Can't I be even a teeny bit resentful that I do all these good deeds, behave in all the right ways, and God (whatever and whoever that is) didn't see fit to save my son's life? Can't I respond by being resigned, that it doesn't matter what we do, because bad things really do happen to good people? Can I erase the pain by getting on the bandwagon, and fighting for clean water, clean air, and to heal the food supply so that we all eat only clean, life-giving nourishment? Shall I research genetics, or raise money to fund that research, until I can personally eliminate the mutations which cause cancer?

Teshuva is tough. It means we've been going along in one direction and now we need to go in a different one. What is the turning that I need to do, truly? And I hope you're sitting there wondering what is the precise turning that YOU need to do. Maybe teshuva is not about living the most upright, perfect life possible. Maybe teshuva is not about being as godly as possible in all your ways.

I read a book over the summer because I was drawn to its title: Flunking Sainthood. The book turned out to be a year-long exploration of different spiritual practices, in which author Jana Riess tries on each practice and reads the relevant writers and thinkers as she tries to understand and deepen into the practice. And, she flunks month after month. She tries to keep an Orthodox shabbat, though she is not Jewish, and her family is totally baffled by the idea of dropping everything at sunset. She tries to fast, Ramadan-style, through the shorter days of February, and is ravenously obsessed with food rather than with her inner spiritual life. She tries hachnasat orchim, welcoming strangers, and can't wait to get rid of them, and in fact takes off for a conference, leaving her

husband to deal with them. She attempts to pray devotional prayers at the set times throughout the day and finds it too difficult to compromise work, family and leisure activities so she compromises the prayer instead. At the end of a year, she looks back at her string of failures and declares them to be a kind of victory after all.

Why? In the epilogue, she tells us that after she turned in the book, she received a phone call from a hospital in Alabama where her father lay dying. Her father, who had abandoned her family when she was 14, emptying their bank accounts and betraying their trust. She and her brother went to his bedside, and she was able to forgive him all over again, even as she realized that her spiritual practices of the last 12 months, however imperfectly performed, had “forged her into the kind of person who could go to the bedside of someone who had harmed her and still be able to say, “I forgive you, Dad. Go in peace.” The power of spiritual practice is that it forges you stealthily, as you entertain angels unawares.” She came to understand the infinitude of God, the temptation of turning one’s work into an Idol, the delusion of trying to learn a deep spiritual practice in just thirty days, much less doing them on a DIY basis when they are meant to be done in community because, as she writes, ‘it takes a shtetl to raise a mensch.’

I love her sense of humor and the way she turns her failures into fodder. I love that she understands that spiritual practice takes time, that it deepens and ripens, and then when the crisis hits, we are more prepared for it than we thought, because we have the practices to support us.

Myriam and I had a yoga teacher named Alex whose father committed suicide some years ago, and who asked us to officiate as she laid him to rest. With tears in her eyes, she said, “All my life, I’ve been practicing yoga for just this moment.”

Teshuva, tefilla and tzedaka are among the practices that support our change, our growth, and our ability to choose life even in the midst of the crisis that will surely come. At their best, they can help us realign with our highest purpose, and help us walk the walk.

My own teshuva process has come to include learning to move away from the punitive, or self-punishing, model of self-improvement toward one that includes and embraces as much of the full spectrum of joy, delight, love and good experiences that I can bring myself to withstand (which isn't always that much). My relationship with God requires me to experience all of life, not just its sorrow but also its joys. I've been so overwhelmed with the sorrows, of course, that I haven't partaken of as much of its joys. But Judaism teaches us that we have an obligation to the Holy One to experience all the joys that come our way, rather than refusing them. How many joyful opportunities have I missed because I just didn't see them, so focused was I on being responsible and responsive to the crises?

You can respond to crisis but lose your responsiveness to life. You can become so committed to your anxieties and fears that you completely lose sight of the humor in being human. This hardly does honor to the Holy One, to the precious gift of life that we have received. We have a choice, and the moment of choice is always now. It takes courage to choose life. It takes courage to let in the pain as well as the joy. It takes determination to stay awake and pay attention to your life so that you don't miss the opportunities for joy that come your way.

Cultivating practice is how we stay awake to our lives. Teshuva is having the humility to return to our practice. It is that moment during meditation when we realize we have been galloping along with our thoughts, rather than gently letting them go. When we turn our attention back to our breath or mantra or prayer or

movement. Turning and returning to this moment is the constant work of mindfulness, and the secret to a life more available to meaning, connection and fulfillment.

There are two significant prayer moments yet coming toward us this morning. One is unetaneh tokef, a time when we recognize that we are choosing how we shall live. The other is Aleynu, the grand aleynu with full prostration. I invite you to experiment with full prostration at that time, with experiencing unhooking your will from whatever it is that you are clutching too tightly, and prostrate yourself before the Ultimate one, whose timing and design for our lives remains a mystery, and before whom we surrender our willfulness to this Truth: Whatever will be, will be.

So this, then, is the accounting. **Who shall live?** Whoever seizes the gift of life and calls it precious, whether they have half a century or half a month left to live.

Who shall live? One who lives out loud and at full tilt, not perfectly but with endless compassion for themselves and for all other beings.

Who shall live? The person who faces down their fears and anxieties, and says Yes to life anyway.

Who shall live? One who knows that experiencing sorrow and loss won't kill you. And since it won't kill you, strive to keep truly living as long as you are alive.

I think I saw this on facebook, that source of great spiritual wisdom:

“We each have two lives. The second one begins, when we realize we have only one.”

Let this be that moment.

Let now be when you wake up to this one precious life.

Let this be when you choose to live like you mean it.