

Removing the severe decree

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It was the end of the 11th century in the Rhineland of Northern Germany. This was a time of great piety among Jews and Christians. The most famous act of Christian piety at this time was the first Crusade of 1096. Famous for the Christian faithful, of course but infamous among Jews who remember that on their way to rescue the Holy Land, great numbers of Jews were persecuted and killed. The inhabitants of Mayence and Speyer in Germany were massacred.

During this time, there was a rabbi of Mayence, Rabbi Amnon.¹ Rabbi Amnon was called before the local leader² and ordered to convert or he would be killed. Rabbi Amnon asked if he could think about it for three days. On his way home, the rabbi was overcome by remorse. How could he even consider such a thing? In three days time the rabbi did not return. He was overwhelmed by his own wavering and unable to return to face the punishment. Soldiers were dispatched to drag him before the leader who, furious at Amnon's refusal to return, proceeded to torture the rabbi in ways surely known to Jews suffering the Crusades and much too graphic to repeat right now.

Three days later it was Rosh Hashana and Rabbi Amnon asked that his dying body be carried to the synagogue where, just before Kedusha, the prayer that declares God's holiness, he offered the famous prayer unetaneh tokef, let us declare the power of this day. And then he died.

Three days after that, Rabbi Amnon came to Rabbi Kalonymus in a dream. Rabbi Kalonymus wrote down the prayer and from then on it was placed in the Rosh Hashana machzor.

A powerful tale. A strong message. A model of fidelity and integrity. And totally made up. The Crusades were real, Mayence is a real town that suffered real persecution but other than this story, there is no evidence of a real Amnon. There is no other evidence of him rising to the bima on Rosh Hashana to deliver the famous prayer.

Nevertheless, the prayer is real.

Let us declare the sacred power of this day for it is awesome and frightening. It sets the tone of the day. God's power, the book with our names in it, great awe for what we come to do. The loud shout of the shofar and the small quiet voice of God inside of us that so quietly points out our failings which shakes us to the core. This is the day of judgment. God considers all of us. Each one of us worthy of individual attention.

¹ <http://cf.uba.uva.nl/nl/publicaties/treasures/text/t02.html> for a short history of the prayer.

² A Chabad website has the conflict between Rabbi Amnon and the local duke. This site <http://www.chagim.org.il/kipuren.html> has a conflict between Amnon and a cardinal.

And then there is this: "Who by fire, who by water."

This list, this litany, this horrifying prediction of death. It is unbearable. It is unacceptable. And it is very real. Maybe deaths by fire are not nearly as prevalent as they were a thousand years ago but water? Katrina and now Rita and the tsunami this past winter have shown us that the unpredictable can happen. The list we read is not to be taken lightly. It is not to be dismissed as historical. Everything on that list is still to this day very real, very possible. It is liturgy that should infect you, obsess you, shake you to the very core.

Who by sword, who by beast.

Many people don't like this prayer. Many people don't like the sense of predestination. Many people are offended by the predictability. But is this prayer really about predestination?

The pshat, the simple meaning seems to say that yes, God looks at all of us and then judges and hands out punishment. Who by hunger, who by thirst. That is the simple meaning. The legend of Amnon of Mayence seems to suggest that one slip of faith in an otherwise pious life gets you tortured to death. But that is the simple meaning. I think there is something more. Something deeper.

Perhaps poor Amnon of Mayence recited this prayer to say, yes, I know that God judges all of us on Rosh Hashana but do not think that one slip up, one hesitancy is cause for our downfall. It is human beings who judge based on the last thing they see or hear. It is human beings who are quick to discredit a person's lifetime of achievement over one act of folly. God is better than that. Perhaps Amnon was telling us that unlike human beings, God is not looking for the one slip, not looking for the "gotcha" not looking for an excuse to be cruel. Perhaps God is judging us on our lives, our entire life's work, all that we are about, foibles included. Perhaps God is a better judge than we are and can see the good. Amnon said a prayer that did not warn us but comforted us. Do not fear on this day of trembling. Do not worry on this day of anxiety. God is the judge but a fair judge. Amnon tells us that his death was inflicted by evil people but his soul is judged by a God who was all too aware of the totality of Amnon's life.

But if you still think it is about predestination, if you still think it is Divine prediction, then let me make a prediction. There are people you know who are sick, who are ill, who are failing and here is my prediction. Some of them will be here next year with us. Those you think have lived a full life have more life to come. And those who you cannot imagine, some of those who are well and fine, friends and family with clean bills of health, they will die. I am making the only prediction I can promise is 100% true. By next Rosh Hashana, someone you know will have died.

Who by earthquake and who by plague indeed! This is an amazing prayer? This shakes us to our core? I'm no Amnon and I can predict it. Car crash, AIDs, addiction, over dose. I can create a modern list of causes of death to add to the more ordinary drownings, illness, old age, accident. I can predict it. And so can you.

And that is the power of this prayer. Unetaneh Tokef isn't powerful because God predicts it. It is powerful because you can predict it. We already know the truth.

We know it's coming. We just don't know where or when or to whom. And it's not always who you think it will be. This prayer is not a prediction. It's a statement of reality.

Then there is the end of this prayer, the end that brings us the clincher, the proof that all is not in God's hands that even God cannot actually control the future. This very prayer that seems to say God decides everything ends, *uteshuva, ut'filah, utzedakah ma'avirin et roah ha-g'zeirah*.³ Repentance, prayer and righteousness, *tzedakah* remove the severe decree. Remove is how one *machzor* translates it! Removes the severe decree.⁴

Does this mean that a life of repentance, prayer and charity keep us from death? That doesn't seem to be true. Does this mean that a properly pious life makes us immortal? No, that can't be. How do we remove this severe decree we who are destined to die?

The answer is obvious, no? Though all of us will one day die, it's not like we're sitting around waiting for that day. In the intervening years and years we create, we add, we love, we care, we do great things. We bring great joy to those around us. We strive to live lives of meaning. We make this world we are in a better place in however much time we have.

You see, the severe decree is not how we are going to die but rather *that* we are going to die. There is no other severe decree. That is the most severe of them all. But we can temper the severity. We can lesson the severity. We can remove the severity. You already know how.

You live a long life, you do good things, you teach your children well, you inspire your siblings, you are a role model for the next generation and people mourn but the severe decree does not seem that severe. People die and they are missed but when that person had the blessing of living eight or nine or ten decades and when that person did good things with his or her life, the decree doesn't seem so severe. There is tremendous comfort to those left behind knowing that all those years were put to good use, that all those years added something to our lives. Who by strangling and who by stoning is a statement of fact we can never influence but who brought caring, who brought love, who advanced the Jewish people, who taught the next generation, who caused laughter and who created joy, these are the things the are in our control. These are the things that make the decree less severe. We all labor under the severe decree. Now what are we going to do until that final day? How will we best live our life? And of course, we don't know when that final day will be so we shouldn't wait to start a life of value.

Teshuva, repentance, a life of humility, of service to others, of caring for others before our own needs. *T'filah*, prayer, a contemplative life, a reflective life, a spiritual life that acknowledges a greater power out there, a religious life of attention to our faith for the lessons it brings; a life finding meaning in the truly important things. *Tzedakah*,

³ hrzgh [r ta ^yryb[m hqdxw hlptW hbWvtW

⁴ Artscroll *Machzor*, Rosh Hashana (nusach ashkenaz), 1994, page 483.

righteousness, a life of doing the right thing, of concern for the community over our own selfish needs, of charity. Live a life like that, and the severe decree is less severe for those left behind.

Why is the death of a young person so hard? Because of the years, the decades unfulfilled. Years of teshuva, t'filah, tzedakah never to be lived, the loss of dreams and hopes that are found in making oneself a better person and making the world a better place. A person should have a full lifetime to make a proper impact. Anything shorter is opportunity lost and that is the most painful kind of severe decree.

“Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day’s holiness for it is awesome and frightening. On it your sovereignty will be exalted. Your throne will be firm with kindness and You will sit upon it in truth. It is true that You alone are the One Who judges, proves, knows and bears witness; Who writes and seals; Who remembers all that was forgotten.”

Make no mistake, on a day like this all of us are judged. On a day like this we appear before God one by one to be inscribed in that mythic book. It is within the power of God to know who shall be secure and who shall be driven because we believe in a God who has the ability to imagine an infinite number of scenarios, an infinite number of possibilities. But we also believe in a God who is powerless to know what possibility, which scenario will play out. All we know for sure is that the severe decree of death will come though we never know when. So we struggle to live a life that softens that decree. A life of teshuva, t'filah, tzedakah, a life of repentance, prayer and righteousness is the life we seek. This is the life that lifts us up and defeats the pain of death.

Some of us here are sick. And we'll still be here next year. Some of us here are just fine but we won't be here next year. There is no more accurate prediction. There is no way to know. The only thing we do know is that we live now and right now we need to live a life of Torah, a life of teshuva, t'filah, tzedakah, a life of repentance, prayer and righteousness. This prayer, this day, these 10 days shake us to our core as we confront reality. This prayer, this day, these 10 days demand of us to live with teshuva, t'filah, tzedakah. And we are better for it. So let's begin this year right. Let's begin with teshuva, t'filah, tzedakah. Let's create a life of meaning and value and remove the severity of that decree.