RH Morn 5781: Covid and Unetaneh Tokef

Shanah tovah! Shanah tovah - a good year. I do not believe that I have ever said that phrase with so much fervent hope as I do today. With all that has happened in our world, I can think of nothing more important than that this New Year be filled with goodness.

There are years when I struggle with the question of which of the many topics I have to choose from I will use in my sermons. Not this year. There have only been a few events in my lifetime that have brought America to a nearly complete standstill. One was the assassination of John F. Kennedy – then, the paralysis lasted only a few days, though the grief lingered. A second was 9/11. Then, travel was largely frozen for a week, with most of the country moving slowly back toward normal life after that – although at airports and other spots we clearly entered a new normal that has not changed back.

Now we have COVID-19. This was not, like the first two events I mentioned, one horrible moment that shocked us and froze us. This pandemic unfolded like a slow-motion train-wreck; folks knew it was coming but could not stop it. And of course, the shut-down, in its various phases, has gone on far longer than most of us thought it would.

Early on, in March and April, the word of the hour was “unprecedented.” This was an unprecedented moment, or an unprecedented event. I think by that the speakers meant that in 2020, almost no one in America has lived through anything like this. Which is true. It is unique in most of our experience. But the effects of an epidemic, or pandemic, or plague is not unique in human history, and our actions in response to this pandemic are not unique in American history.

I will spare you the many depressing things I learned about epidemics through the ages in preparing for today. I will simply say two things about them. First, they occur with a worrisome regularity, and second, almost all have led to an upswing in discrimination of convenient minorities or social classes, as people looked for someone to blame.

The best precedent for what we are going through is, as you know, what is referred to as the Spanish influenza epidemic which began in the Fall of 1918. Given how directly TBA and all houses of worship have been affected in 2020, I went looking for what the impact of the 1918 pandemic was on religious institutions. Here’s some of what I found in newspaper accounts of the time:

As the epidemic spread, state and local agencies around the country made their own decisions about closures. As we did in 2020, they too used the benchmark of being an essential business to decide which establishments would be allowed to stay open. In most places, houses of worship were not deemed essential, and were closed along with theaters and other places of public gathering. Then, as today, the reactions to the closings were mixed. Some clergymen wrote angry letters to the papers insisting that if ever there was a time people needed God, it was at that moment. Others, such as the Rev. James E. Coyle, of St. Paul’s Catholic Church in Birmingham, Alabama, wrote the following to his flock: “The vigorous efforts made by the health authorities of our city to stamp out the epidemic is, in one form or another, working hardship and discomfort to every single citizen, and this hardship and discomfort is cheerfully endured for the universal good.”

Sermons were often mailed to parishioners. Or they were printed in the newspapers, which apparently was not uncommon one hundred years ago, even during non-pandemic times. The initial public closures lasted only four weeks, from October 4 through November 2, but those weeks coincided with the last weeks of WWI which formally ended on November 11, so that many of the sermons preached focused on the war, the armistice, and on the return of the soldiers from overseas. Only some dealt with the epidemic and the closing of the churches. A few were, I have to believe, unintentionally funny.

Just one example: Dr. C Ernest Smith, rector of St. Thomas’ Church, in Washington, DC, spoke on the “Closed Church Epidemic.” He said that the closed church epidemic was caused by three microbes – the microbes of “unreasonable fear,” “little faith” and “imperfect information.” And he had this to say about “imperfect information”: “Those who feel that the churches must be closed because of the crowds which assemble there apparently know very little about churches. A church is generally a safe place to avoid a crowd.” You have to like a clergyman with a sense of humor.

And there was one extraordinarily powerful sermon that eerily connects to today’s headlines. It was written by the Reverend J. Francis Grimke, also of D.C. He writes movingly of the horrors of the epidemic in his city, and then of the beginning of its easing. Then he says, “Now that the worst is over, I have been thinking as doubtless you have all been, of these calamitous weeks through which we have been passing—thinking of the large numbers that have been sick, the large numbers that have died, the many, many homes that have been made desolate, the many, many bleeding, sorrowing hearts that have been left behind—and I have been asking myself the question, What is the meaning of it all?… Surely God had a purpose in it, and it is our duty to find out, as far as we may, what the purpose is, and try to profit by it.”

Following discussion of four possible purposes God might have had for sending the epidemic, he turns to a fifth, saying:

“Another thing that has impressed me in connection with this epidemic is how completely it has shattered the theory, so dear to the heart of the white man in this country, that a white skin entitles its possessor to better treatment than one who possesses a dark skin. … Did the epidemic pause to see whether his skin was white or black before smiting him? Of what value has a white skin been during these weeks of suffering and death? …

“During these terrible weeks while the epidemic raged, God has been trying in a very pronounced, conspicuous and vigorous way, to beat a little sense into the white man’s head; [God] has been trying to show him the folly of the empty conceit of his vaunted race superiority, by dealing with him just as he dealt with the peoples of darker hue…”

I share that with you this morning not to begin a discussion of racism in America – at least not today – but because of the theology that Rev. Grimke espouses. Referring to the terrible human toll the epidemic took, he said, “Surely, God had a purpose in it.”

And that, after all, is one of the central themes of the *unetaneh tokef* prayer, the one so many of us have such difficulty with. “Who shall live and who shall die…” That prayer says that things like plague are not random events, but intentional acts of God. As Grimke said, “Surely God had a purpose in it.”

I have spoken often about my difficulty with this prayer and I know from your comments over the years that I am not alone in wrestling with it. On the other hand, some of you have asked me, if we don’t believe that God does these things, why do we come to High Holydays to pray and atone? I would be more than happy – I would be thrilled – to find a time to discuss theology with any of you, individually or in a group. For today, let me just say that one of the supreme beauties of Judaism is that you don’t have to agree with the rabbi. If the *unetaneh tokef* is in sync with your personal belief, I am not here to change your thinking and I do not want to change your thinking.

And, much as I might dislike the fatalism implied in the first part of the prayer, there is a lot to be said for accepting that many things are out of our control. The story is told that two men were discussing life, and the first asked the second if he believes in Fate. The second man replied: “Absolutely, I’d hate to think I turned out like this because of something I had control over.” This is the theology of the first part of the *unetaneh tokef*. It reminds us that, no matter how successful, how powerful, how in-control we generally are, there are things beyond our control.

This year we don’t need the *unetaneh tokef* for that. We have COVID-19. Of the many, many lessons that we can re-learn from the pandemic, it is that one. We generally think we’re in control, and on a day to day basis perhaps we are, and then suddenly our world turns upside down.

It is humbling, and it is frightening. We don’t need *unetaneh tokef* to know that. But here’s where we do need it – for our response. This prayer does not end with the decree. It ends with our response to the decree, with actions we can take, not to change what will happen, but to make it easier to bear. Repentance, prayer and charity. Events beyond our control will remain beyond our control; there are things that will happen no matter what we do. But as psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankel taught, even in the most terrible of places, what is always in our control is the way we choose to respond to adversity and to tragedy. Or, as Harold Kushner puts it, the *unetaneh tokef* is the answer not to “*Why* bad things happen to good people,” but how should we respond “*When* bad things happen to good people.”

So, having lived this far through a pandemic, perhaps the “plague” mentioned in the *unetaneh tokef* prayer, what should our response be? How can we exercise our free will in response to what the insurance companies would call an Act of God? One answer is to choose to live our lives more fully, more intensely. My teacher, colleague and friend, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, after her own bout with serious illness wrote:

“It hurts so much to live in the face of death that … we want *u-netaneh tokef* to be a metaphor. We want the inevitable question of who was here last year that isn’t here now and who is here this year that won’t be here next year to be a poem, or a parable. It’s not. It’s a wake-up call, it’s a shofar blast of warning. No one knows when the gates will close forever, so while we are inside them, we had better love passionately, fight passionately, learn passionately, live passionately. “*U-netaneh tokef kedushat hayom, ki hu norah v’ayom*: Let us declare the holiness of this day, because it contains an awful truth.” Awe-full. I’m filled with awe every day now. Every sunrise, every sunset. I say *shehecheyanu* a lot now: who has kept us alive, and sustained us, and helped us to reach this day. This day. *U-netaneh tokef kedushat hayom*, let us declare the holiness of **this day**, because it is the only day we have for sure.”

So one valid way to respond to tragedy is to look at ourselves, to grab our own lives with both hands and live them urgently, passionately. And the complement to that response, the piece that goes with it, is to also turn outward, to find within the needs of the community an avenue for making meaning in our lives. I have to tell you that I have been so incredibly proud of the response of TBA’s leadership to this pandemic, reaching out to members, keeping people connected. I know we are not the only community that has done this, but this is the one I am a part of. We reached out because it was the right thing to do, and because we had to do something. The first part of the prayer, the part that mentions the plague, was upon us. We could not sit passively. We had to follow the instruction of the second part of the prayer, and choose a response. And here’s the amazing thing. Those calls were certainly appreciated by all who received them; for some they were even lifelines. But the impact on the people making those calls was equally positive. Those folks made a choice about how to respond to the pandemic. Through that choice they were making a difference in people’s lives, and that made a difference in their own lives. COVID was no longer a crisis to get through, but a moment that called us to action. And that made all the difference.

What do we learn from the pandemic? We learn that an ancient prayer has more relevance in our lives that we may have realized. We learn while there will always be things beyond our control, we can always choose how we will respond. And we learn that in the end it is not as much what will happen, but the way we respond that will largely determine whether the new year will be a good one or not. May the choices we make, the deeds we ourselves inscribe in the book of our life make 5781 truly a Shanah tovah.