Unetaneh Tokef

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

When I was maybe ten years old, I was sitting in Rosh haShanah services with my parents when the rabbi began reading a prayer that listed the many ways we could all die a painful death over the coming year. He talked about how we might perish by fire, water or other gruesome circumstances – like strangulation, earthquake, famine and plague. I was most concerned about what it would be like to perish at the paws of wild beasts.

Although I thought this was supposed to be the happier of the high holy days, all we were talking about here was making sure you prayed so you wouldn't suffer massively prior to ending up dead. At that young age, I hadn't really expected that the Almighty would ask us to predict not only who would die, but what would kill them. I had been under the impression that we'd keep living, if not forever, at least for a very long time. Now come to find out that G-d might have other near-term plans.

The prayer ended by telling me that my best hope for avoiding brutal consequences like stoning was to pray, say I was sorry if I did something wrong and be well-behaved. That remedy left me uneasy, because I didn't know if I had all those bases covered. We only went to synagogue maybe weekly, I wasn't especially adept at fessing up to misdeeds and, while I was reasonably compliant, I had my moments.

I also noticed that the prayer didn't offer up much hope for good times. It did mention serenity, but only as a counterpoint to being pursued. I didn't read anything like "Who shall get a good toy for Hanukah?" or "Who might actually catch a fly ball in Little League?" I got the puerile impression that life was going to be a bumpy ride. I also wasn't sure that we were praying to an especially forgiving or comforting G-d, particularly in the context of murderous angels, cataclysmic floods and people suddenly turning into salt.

The thrust of the prayer did remind me of my paternal grandmother. She was the consummate tough cookie, one of eleven children born to parents who had immigrated from Belorussia. I might have seen her smile over the years, but that could well have been the misinterpretation of a grimace.

Her conversation always seemed to have that *Unetaneh Tokef* vibe. If I said, "Grandma, how're you doing?" she'd typically respond, "Still living." If I mentioned that a family member was sick or had passed, she'd comfort me by saying, "Born to die." She had that reverse *joie de vivre* the poet who wrote the high holiday prayer might have appreciated. She had received the prayer's message that life sucks and then you perish (unless you were super religious, in which case you might not die quite so quickly or painfully).

My father wasn't terribly reassuring when I leaned over to ask him what the deal was with this prayer. He said something like, "Don't worry, it's just a prayer." He was a chemist by training, occupation and mentality. He was certainly a good dad, just one better at engaging me in various science and home projects than in extended conversations.

Fortunately, I was an easy-going kid who tended to float along in blissful ignorance, largely unperturbed by what should have been unsettling thoughts. I figured things would work out and, besides, the rabbi told us to move onto the next page.

But I have never lost my fascination with this prayer. It's by far my favorite part of the high holy day services. I love its repetitions, its cadence and how heartily it elaborates on various ways you might buy the farm. As soon as I open the high holiday *machzor,* I search for the *Unetaneh Tokef.*

I must admit to invoking the prayer on other than Days of Awe, most commonly on Days of Golf. At the first tee, usually at the outset of a tournament, I often say to myself, "Who shall live and who shall die. Who by slice and would by hook. Who shall flail at the ball in a bunker and who from behind a tree. Who shall shank and who shall miss a two-foot putt." And so on, depending on which golf woes I've most frequently endured over the past rounds. Like the prayer, I do end on a more positive note: "But proper alignment, a good tempo and prayer (as in, 'Lord, please don't let the ball end up in the pond') will avert an embarrassing score."

I imagine that *Unetaneh Tokef* has had a profound impact on many others through the centuries. It certainly did Leonard Cohen, who put it to music in "Who by Fire" (a version of which is the theme song for the streaming show "Bad Sisters"). Rosanne Rosanna Dana must have had the prayer in mind when she famously intoned: "It just goes to show you. It's always something. If it's not one thing, it's another."

The poem does capture the fatalism and paranoia that is so much a part of the Jewish psyche — wholly understandable given our history. We have had especially good reason to wonder whether we'll make it to another year. If you're so inclined, you might decide you had better pray darn hard to fend off destruction. I choose to see the *Unetaneh Tokef* as a kind of liturgical *carpe diem* that further encourages me down the road of responsible hedonism. I've decided to add it to my list of ceremonial reminders that life is short, so you might as well make the most of it.

And there I've done it. I just admitted that I haven't evolved much in the six decades that followed that Rosh haShanah service when I was about ten. Then again, at least I've been inscribed in the book of life for a very long time. So far, so good.

FIND YOUR LEVEL OF COMFORT AND WELL-BEING AT MENORAH PARK

Independent Living at the Oaks
18 Arbor Lane, Syracuse

Live independently and give loved ones peace of mind knowing help is always available. Spacious 1 & 2 bedroom apartments, fine dining, 24-hour security, free Wi-Fi, social/cultural activities and much more!

SUMMER SPECIAL
Ask about our Summer Move-In-Special!

Assisted Living at the Inn
Hodes Way,
4101 East Genesee Street, Syracuse

Over time we all need help. The Inn provides superior accommodations and a dedicated team. Furnished apartments, all meals in beautiful dining areas, housekeeping, social programming, personal care, nursing staff and much more!

Let us help you plan your move.
Call Lisa at 315-449-3309

MENORAH PARK
To Life!

WWW.MENORAHPARKOFCNY.COM