

This Year I Stand With You

Kol Nidre - 5779

Congregation Habonim

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Last year, I stood before you Holy One of life and love, open to a new year of potential and adventure, wisdom and awe. Before you on this very *bimah*, I served as witness to the holy utterances of the *Unetaneh Tokef* - מי יחיה - ומי ימות - who will live and who will die. Whose life will be extended and whose will end before they imagined. Who by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by the roar of the earth and who by plague. I listened to the litany of ways in which we could be confronted and tormented just as easily as we could encounter a year of serenity and tranquility. I stood before you present to the words; not present to the prayer for myself. Here I was. New job. New opportunity. A new chapter in a full and exciting life. The paths of the list would be borne out in the year to come. Some would be at peace. Some would be troubled. Some would feel impoverished. Some would feel enriched when they least expected. And I, I was here to help individuals and community hold all of it - whatever came their and our way. As my Yogi Tea Bag assured me, *I was to lift people up to their potential and higher self*. That is how we begin the New Year, working towards unmasking our potential, polishing the heart and soul so that we may meet and live from our deepest and highest selves. On those days last year, I stood before you. Humbled. Privileged. Unaware what the coming days would bring.

As many know, I had prophylactic surgery just under a year ago after learning I carry the BRCA2 gene mutation, more common in Jews of Ashkenazi heritage. מי יחיה - Who will live? I would of course. I chose surgery to insure good health for a long time to come.

Just weeks after my surgery, I wrote *No matter our plans, life unfolds in mysterious and unexpected ways. I've learned that I require surgery to address an unexpected diagnosis of breast cancer.* WOW. I never expected to write those words. When I asked a doctor the best time for prophylactic surgeries following BRCA diagnosis she was clear - before you get cancer. Who knew when that would be. I wasn't waiting around to find out and still. Things happen when we least expect them.

Just one month into a new year, as could happen to anyone, I found myself within U'netaneh Tokef differently than I had imagined over the high holy days. I hunkered down and made plans. Plans for surgery, plans for coverage at shul and everyday plans for my daughter. I was met with generosity of our community here at Congregation Habonim and The Heschel School, providing meals, walking Zahara to school, sending cards and email with uplifting notes. While I

may not have responded individually to every note that came my way - my deepest apologies for that - I read every one; most more than once. מי יחיה - Who will live? That would be me. While I couldn't control everything, I was determined to take control of what I could. As I wrote to the congregation, *As the saying goes, We Plan & Gd Laughs. This moment requires that I turn toward the unexpected, stand strong in the face of adversity, trust in the power of the holy and divine and move towards the future.*

Who will be settled and whose soul will be lost along the path of life?
Who will be quiet and at peace and who will be ripped apart?

Because I am human, there was one moment late at night when I thought - Oh My Gd - my child is going to be an orphan. I cried myself out and then said, some day - 50 years from now - but no time soon.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. *Massechet Rosh Hashanah* declares, *And concerning the statement that the wicked die and the righteous live: this refers to life after death.* This reframing for *olam habah*, the world to come revitalizes our ability to choose the course of our life here on earth and makes room for fate. More than that, it redefines *ma'arivin et roah hag'zerah*. In the Talmud, *Rabbah teaches חיי בני ומזוני לא בזכותא תליא מילתא אלא - Length of life, children and sustenance depend not on merit, rather on mazal - the path of the planets, a kind of luck. Consider Rabbah and Rabbi Hisda. Both were saintly sages. When one prayed for rain, it came. When the other prayed for rain, it also came. Yet Rabbi Hisda lived to 92, Rabba only to 40. In Rabbi Hisda's house, 60 wedding feasts were celebrated. In Rabbah's house, 60 deaths. In Rabbi Hisda's house there was bread of the finest flour even for dogs. In Rabbah's house barley bread was for human beings and even that was rare.* How do we understand this? Is our life so scripted that our choices don't count? Some circumstances remain beyond our control. Investment and participation in the world can shift how we deal with them.

Tshuvah, t'fillah and t'zdakah have the power to transform and move us past the severity of what will be. Immersed in the storm of illness, I called on the power of knowing one's true self, turning to the divine and bringing justice and equilibrium to the fore. I set aside tangible and emotional expectations of who could offer support and opened to those who appeared as angels right when we needed them. I called on Psalm 13, particularly the *hatimah*/signature found in verse 6 that speaks of trust, kindness and love with which to sing out to Gd. I made a personal commitment to raise awareness about BFOR - the BRCA Founder Outreach Study - offering BRCA genetic testing at no cost to men and women age 25 years or older with at least one grandparent of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jewish Ancestry (www.bforstudy.com). *T'shuvah, t'fillah and t'zdakah*

were to be my anchors. Ecclesiastes teaches a threefold cord like that cannot easily be undone.

In *parashat B'shallach*, the Israelites find themselves at the sea with the Egyptians in hot pursuit.

ויראו מאד

ויצעקו בני ישראל אל ה' (Exodus 14:10)

Fearful, the Israelites cry out to the Holy One. Then they complain to Moses who responds,

(13) אל תיראו התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה' אשר יעשה לכם היום (13) - *Don't be afraid! Stand by and see the deliverance Gd will do for you today....The Lord will battle for you.*

You hold your peace. Gd is not too pleased with this offering of leadership. Stand by? Gd riles at Moses, מה תצעק אלי - *Why do you cry out to me?* Rashi says Moses was standing in prayer. At this time of potential at the sea, the Divine has no interest in extended prayer. Gd is clear with Moses. Tell the Israelites to move. Journey onward (15). T'fillah - prayer can take many forms. Sometimes it is the prayer of the lips. Other times it is as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel demonstrated, the prayer of the feet. Like Nahshon, we can walk into the water - even until it rises to our nostrils - to bring about change.

The Midrash teaches, *When the Holy One, ascends and sits upon the Throne of Judgment, Gd does so with intent to do [strict] judgment. What is the reason for this statement? Gd is gone up amidst shouting. But when Israel takes their horns and blows them in Gd's presence, - הקבייה עומד מכסא הדין ויושב בכסא רחמים - The Holy One rises up from the Throne of Judgment to the Throne of Compassion as it is written, The Lord amidst the sound of the horn. And Gd is filled with compassion for them, taking pity upon them and changing for them the Attribute of Justice to one of mercy (Leviticus Rabbah 29:3).* This is amazing. We have the power to move Gd from judgment to mercy. In 24 hours, the sound of the shofar will fill this room, reverberating within our hearts. It is our call to action, our siren of awareness. As I said on Rosh Hashanah, without us, without the holy sacred breath it is merely an animal horn. The shofar moves things; we move the Holy and Divine One, filled with compassion for humanity.

On Thursday, October 18, 7:30pm at The Jewish Theological Seminary, I'll moderate a panel with leading genetics researcher Dr. Kenneth Offit and premier radiologist Dr. Miriam Levy discussing risks of cancers affecting the Jewish community and new options for genetic testing and medical management. The amazing writer Letty Cottin Pogrebin, breast cancer survivor and Dr. Michael Bergstein, prostate cancer survivor will speak about their experiences. I hope you'll join me at this free lecture.

As we mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, this year our community will invest in the holy work of *shomrei adamah*, serving as guardians of our earth. Reducing, recycling and reusing tends to our planet as we hope to tend to our bodies. All these intentions come to life as actions that enrich our world with compassion, moving our lens from one of judgment and fear to one of hope and mercy.

Dear Gd, last year I stood **before** you on this bimah. This year, blessed with good health I stand **with** you as a partner in what is to be. From the depths of my being, I pray my deeds will be received with love in the coming year. May we all have strength to turn and face adversity in the New Year and find our way to you.

I close with this exquisite Unetaneh Tokef written by my colleague Rabbi Joseph B. Meszler

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: That this year people will live and die,
some more gently than others
and nothing lives forever.
But amidst overwhelming forces
of nature and humankind,
we still write our own Book of Life,
and our actions are the words in it,
and the stages of our lives are the chapters, and nothing goes unrecorded, ever.
Every deed counts.
Everything you do matters.
And we never know what act or word
will leave an impression or tip the scale.
So if not now, then when?
For the things we can change, there is teshuva, realignment. For the things we cannot change, there is tefilah, prayer. For the help we can give, there is tzedakah, justice. Together, let us write a beautiful Book of Life for the Holy One to read.*