

Netaneh Tokef: Empowering Human Beings to Challenge Fate

Yizkor 5770 Sermon by Rabbi Asher Lopatin

I REMEMBER MY GRANDMOTHER, BIG GRANDMA, DIED, WHEN I WAS STILL A RABBINICAL STUDENT AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY. AFTER MY FATHER'S SHIVA, I LEFT FOR A WEEKEND WITH RAV AHRON SOLOVEICHIK AT THE OLD HOMOWAK IN THE CATSKILLS FOR A RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF AMERICA CONVENTION. I SHARED A ROOM WITH ANOTHER YESHIVA BOCHUR, AND AS THE CONVERSATION TURNED TO MY GRANDMOTHER'S DEATH, I SAID, "OY, WHAT CAN YOU DO?" IMMEDIATELY MY ROOMMATE PERKED UP, AND HE TOLD ME THAT I HAD JUST DONE SOMETHING WRONG. THE SHULCHAN ARUCH, THE JEWISH CODE OF LAW, IN THE RAMA'S GLOSS, RULES IN THE LAWS OF MOURNING THAT WE ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SAY, "OY, WHAT CAN YOU DO?". THIS IS BASED ON A G'MARRA IN BAVA KAMA WHEN RAV SHMUEL BAR YEHUDA TRAGICALLY LOST A DAUGHTER, THE RABBIS SAID TO ULA, "COME, LET'S GO COMFORT RAV SHMUEL." ULA RESPONDED: "I WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH THE TRADITIONAL "COMFORT" OF THE BABYLONIANS – THE WORDS I KNOW YOU ARE GOING TO SAY ARE: "OY, WHAT CAN YOU DO?" "MAI EFSHAR LEMEI'ABAD?" THAT IS IMPLYING THAT IF COULD YOU DO SOMETHING, YOU WOULD HAVE." ULA WENT ON HIS OWN, AND WHILE HE SAID SOMETHING LONG AND CONVOLUTED AND PROBABLY EVEN LESS COMFORTING, AT LEAST HE DIDN'T SAY, "OY! WHAT CAN YOU DO?"

MANY OF THE COMMENTATORS UNDERSTAND "OY, WHAT CAN YOU DO?" AS A SLIGHT ON GOD – QUESTIONING GOD'S DECREE: IF GOD DECREED A DEATH, WHO ARE WE TO SAY , "NEBECH, WE'D LIKE TO HAVE IT OTHERWISE, BUT WHAT CAN YOU DO, GOD IS IN CHARGE. IF GOD WOULD HAVE ASKED US, WE WOULD HAVE TOLD GOD TO DO IT DIFFERENTLY."

BUT PERHAPS WHAT ULA AND THE SHULCHAN ARUCH ARE TELLING US IS THAT WE ARE SLIGHTING GOD BY SLIGHTING HUMANKIND WHEN WE SAY, "OY! WHAT CAN YOU DO?" IT'S NOT IN KEEPING WITH GOD'S TORAH THAT DEMANDS US TO DO 613 ACTIVIST MITZVOT TO SAY THAT IN REALITY OUR LIVES DON'T REALLY MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO WHAT GOES ON IN THIS WORLD, AND THAT THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO TO CHANGE IT, AND ALL WE CAN DO IS SIT AND ACCEPT DECREES BEYOND OUR CONTROL. NO! ULA WAS SAYING THAT THE LAST THING HE WANTED TO SAY TO SOMEONE WHO JUST HAD A TRAGEDY, A CATASTROPHE, WAS THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE INCAPABLE OF DOING ANYTHING TO CHANGE THE WAY OF THE WORLD.

SO WHAT WOULD ULA SAY ABOUT THE NETANEH TOKEF. WHO WILL LIVE AND WHO WILL DIE... "MI YICHYEH UMI YAMUT." IS THE NETANEH TOKEF JUST A LIST OF GOD'S JUDGMENTS AND DECISIONS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD IN A WORLD THAT IS BEYOND OUR CONTROL? JUST A POWERFUL AND SCARY IMAGE OF DIVINE POWER AND HUMAN WEAKNESS? IN A POST-HOLOCAUST ERA, AND IN AN ERA WHERE WE SEE THE CONTINUING DARFURIAN GENOCIDE BEFORE OUR VERY EYES, IN AN ERA WHERE THE HOLOCAUST CAN BE DENIED WITH IMPUNITY BY A HEAD OF STATE, WHERE THE TRAUMATIZED AND KILLED CHILDREN IN SDEROT COUNT FOR NOTHING IN THE UN, IT IS

TOUGH TO JUST ACCEPT THESE DECREES WITHOUT SHOUTING OUT: ENOUGH DYING! ENOUGH STARVATION! ENOUGH BURNING AND DROWNING! ENOUGH TERROR AND TERRORISM! DOESN'T OUR GENERATION HAVE TO SAY: WE WILL NOT ACCEPT THE FATE OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS BEING CHASED OUT OF THEIR HOMES FROM HEVRON IN 1929 OR GUSH ETZION IN 1948 OR GUSH KATIF IN 2005 OR SDEROT IN 2006 THROUGH ROCKETS - OR INNOCENT CIVILIANS BEING STARVED AND KILLED AND CHASED OUT OF THEIR HOMES IN DARFUR IN 2009 OR ANY OTHER PLACES IN THE WORLD – AND JUST LOOK ON AND SAY, “WE LEAVE IT TO GOD TO DETERMINE WHO WILL LIVE AND WHO WILL DIE; WHO WILL HAVE CLEAN AND SAFE DRINKING WATER IN OUR CITIES, AND WHO WILL HAVE LEAD IN THEIR WATER; WHO WILL BE A PAWN IN THE WORLD OF TERROR AND ANTI-SEMITISM AND WHO NOT.” IF WE DO, THEN WE KNOW FOR SURE THAT ONE GENOCIDE WILL FOLLOW ANOTHER, ONE TERRORIST STRIKE WILL FOLLOW ANOTHER, ONE ANTI-SEMITIC RANT IN THE UN WILL FOLLOW ANOTHER – IN THE 70S IT WAS ZIONISM IS RACISM AND IN THE 2000S IT'S JEWS CONTROL THE WORLD, AND RATHER THAN THE MORAL STATEMENT OF “NEVER AGAIN,” ARE WE TO JUST LIVE WITH FATE AND LIVE WITH THE STATEMENT OF “AGAIN AND AGAIN, AND OY, WHAT CAN YOU DO?”

ULA, WHO REJECTED THE “WHAT CAN YOU DO” ATTITUDE, WOULD LOOK AT NETANEH TOKEF WRITTEN JUST 1000 YEARS AFTER HIS BIRTH, AS EMPOWERING HUMANKIND TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY OF WHAT HAPPENS ON EARTH, ESPECIALLY THOSE THINGS LIKE WAR AND NATURAL CATASTROPHES AND ECONOMIC WOES WHICH THE BABYLONIANS OF HIS TIME MIGHT HAVE JUST DISMISSED AS THE WORK OF THE GODS.

NETANEH TOKEF DESCRIBES GOD'S JUDGMENT OF OUR ACTIONS. BUT THINK ABOUT IT: OUR GOD OF JUDGMENT IS REACTING TO HUMAN ACTIONS. GOD IS SITTING ON THE DIVINE THRONE READING THE BOOKS THAT DESCRIBE OUR HUMAN ACTIONS. IN FACT, THESE BOOKS CONTAIN OUR SIGNATURE “VECHOTAM ADAM BO” – AS IF GOD IS EXCITED TO HAVE THE REAL AUTHOR'S AUTOGRAPH RIGHT THERE ON THE BOOKS THAT GOD IS READING. THE SCRIPT IS WRITTEN BY HUMAN BEINGS. YES, WEAK AND FLAWED HUMAN BEINGS, BUT THESE ARE THE CHARACTERS THAT GOD EXPECTS WILL TAKE ACTION IN THIS WORLD. THAT IS WHAT GOD IS DOING ON THESE HIGH HOLIDAYS – READING ABOUT THE ADVENTURES OF HUMANKIND! GOD EXPECTS US TO BE THE AGENTS OF CHANGE, AND MORALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN THIS WORLD.

ON THIS HOLY DAY OF YOM KIPPUR GOD EXPECTS US NOT TO SAY, “OY! WHAT CAN YOU DO?” GOD EXPECTS US TO **do**, AND WHEN WE DO RIGHT OR WRONG , OR NOTHING, IT GETS RECORDED AND WILL BE JUDGED. GOD IS THE GREAT MOTIVATOR AND CHEERLEADER FOR HUMAN ACTION BECAUSE GOD IS WATCHING.

THE ANGELS IN NETANEH TOKEF ARE NERVOUS – THEY ARE NOT MERITORIOUS IN GOD'S EYES – BECAUSE THEY CANNOT ACT ON THEIR OWN. BUT WE HUMAN BEINGS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY OF BEING MERITORIOUS IN THE EYES OF GOD – IF WE WORK TO STOP THE NEXT GENOCIDE, OR WORK TO CURE THE NEXT DISEASE – OR FLU EPIDEMIC – OR WORK TO MAKE SURE THAT OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS ARE SAFE FROM TERRORISM AND VICIOUS ANTI-SEMITISM. WE ARE THE ONES WHO CAN DO MITZVOT; WE CAN FAIL, BUT WE CAN SUCCEED.

SO WOULDN'T ULA READ THE ENDING PARAGRAPH OF NETANEH TOKEF – MI YICHYEH UMI YAMUT – “WHO WILL LIVE AND WHO WILL DIE,” “WHO SHALL PERISH BY FIRE, AND WHO BY WATER” NOT AS ONLY DIVINE ACTIONS OR DECREES OR FATE, BUT, AS EVENTS OVER WHICH WE HUMAN BEINGS DO HAVE SOME MEASURE OF CONTROL, ACTIONS FOR WHICH WE HAVE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY. WITH GOD’S HELP AND GUIDANCE, WITH THE GUIDANCE OF OUR TORAH AND TRADITION AND HISTORY, WE CAN HAVE A PROFOUND EFFECT ON ELIMINATING MANY DEATHS FROM THIS WORLD, TO KEEP PEOPLE SAFE FROM FIRES IN THEIR HOMES, OR HELP THEM RECOVER FROM FLOODS, OR FROM THE RAVISHES OF ECONOMIC CYCLES. WE CAN CARE AND SHOW COMPASSION AND STRENGTH, OR WE CAN SAY, “OY! WHAT CAN YOU DO?”

AS WE THINK ABOUT YIZKOR AND THE COMFORT WE SEEK FOR THOSE WE HAVE LOST – WHETHER AT A TENDER AGE OR A RIPE OLD AGE, WHETHER THEY ARE CLOSE RELATIVES OR JUST YESHIVA STUDENTS GUNNED DOWN, OR A DOCTOR AND HIS DAUGHTER BLOWN UP IN A CAFÉ, OR SOMEONE’S PRECIOUS CHILD OR DEAR PARENT – MAYBE THE BABYLONIANS ARE RIGHT, AND THE MOST COMFORTING THING WE CAN SAY IS, “OY! WHAT CAN YOU DO?”

FOR DAYS AFTER MAYA HIRSCH, OF BLESSED MEMORY, WAS KILLED BY A CAR WHICH DROVE RIGHT THROUGH A STOP SIGN, A POLICE OFFICER STOOD BY THE INTERSECTION OF LINCOLN PARK WEST AND BELDIN, WHERE MAYA WAS HIT, AND GAVE OUT TICKETS ALL DAY TO MOTORISTS WHO DROVE THROUGH THE STOP SIGN. ON THE BACK OF EACH TICKET WAS A STICKER WITH MAYA’S PICTURE AND THE DESCRIPTION OF WHAT HAPPENED. GOD BLESS THE MEMORY OF MAYA, FOUR YEARS OLD, WHO DESERVED THE CHANCE TO LIVE HER LIFE. THERE IS NO WORD OF COMFORT – NOTHING THE BABYLONIANS OR ULA COULD SAY. BUT THE OFFICER DID NOT JUST SAY, “OY! WHAT CAN YOU DO?” HE DID WHAT HE COULD. THE TICKETS COULDN’T BRING MAYA BACK, BUT HE DID SOMETHING.

THE CITY HAS MADE THE STOP SIGN BIGGER AND HAS MADE THE ROAD NARROWER. TOO LATE, TRAGICALLY, BUT THEY ARE DOING SOMETHING. TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS ARE NOT INEVITABLE: THERE ARE THINGS WE CAN DO.

AND MAYA’S FAMILY DID NOT JUST SAY “OY!WHAT CAN YOU DO?” THEY STARTED A FOUNDATION, STOP FOR MAYA, WHICH, READING FROM THE STOP FOR MAYA WEBSITE: is a non for profit which serves...our community in the memory of Maya Hirsch ...[and is] dedicated to raising awareness around the importance of responsibly sharing the roadways, and equally committed to supporting families who have lost loved ones due to tragic traffic accidents. HOPEFULLY, OTHER CHILDREN AND ADULTS WILL BE ABLE TO CROSS THE STREET IN SAFETY. IT’S NOT JUST FATE: THERE IS SOMETHING WE CAN ALL DO.

Every time you stop at a stop sign, you are helping to decide, “Who will live and who will die”, and you are refusing to say, “Oy, what can you do?”

Every time we try to make this world a better, more fair place, every time we stand up and say, “I am going to do something” about anti-semitism, in my work, or school, or the media; or I am going to do something about tragedies on the road, whether in our own personal actions or by being part of a protest, or help in a protest for Israel or a protest against the genocide in Darfur, or volunteering to help the homeless in our neighborhood through Night Ministries, or going to an AIPAC policy conference in DC, or feed the hungry at Uptown Café – just something which says

that we are not throwing up our hands and saying “OY, what can you do?” – that is the Jewish way of Yizkor – that is our reaction to the sadness of losing those who were so precious to us.

If we feel we are doing something to determine our own fate and moving someone from the hunger column to the satiated column, or from the death column to the living column, then we are fulfilling Yizkor, and we are being true to the 613 mitzvot of action. And in some way that perhaps only Hashem can understand, we will be giving comfort to the memory of those we cherish and pray for.

There is so much we can do, and may Hashem bless us at this time of Yizkor, to go out into this world, cleansed from sin and ready to write our own chapter in the great book that God will read on God’s seat of mercy. Our books, our actions, our signature.

G’mar chatima tova.

A good signature – human and Divine

Please rise for the prayer for the United States of America

State of Israel

Israeli Soldiers

Martyrs

Members of ASBI including rabbis