

“Fate and Destiny”
Kol Nidrei 5772
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There’s a story about the famous Baal Shem Tov– the founder of the Chasidic movement.

A day before Yom Kippur, an anxious student, came to the Baal Shem Tov and asked him to explain the conflicting messages of the High Holidays.

On the one hand, we are taught that the Book of Life is sealed on Yom Kippur – that our fate for the coming year is determined on this day (Talmud Beitzah 16b). On the other hand, we are taught that a person can always do teshuva – that we can rectify our actions in any moment and that we are judged anew each and every day of the year (Talmud Rosh Hashanah 16a).

“How can these two ideas be reconciled in our tradition?” the student asked. “How is it that today our fate is sealed, but tomorrow is still not too late to fix my mistakes?”

The Baal Shem Tov thought his question warranted a day to consider so he told the student he would give him an answer the next night on Yom Kippur.

As the Baal Shem Tov walked home he bumped into Shlomele, the water carrier, carrying two buckets of water. He beckoned to him and asked, “How are things with you, Shlomele?”

“Not good,” Shlomele said. “At my age, I still have to shlep buckets of water up the hill to support myself.”

The next day, as the Baal Shem Tov walked to shul for Yom Kippur, he again saw Shlomele. “How are things with you?” he asked.

Shlomele responded, “Rebbe, I can’t complain. If at my age I can still shlep buckets of water up the hill, I’m thankful to God.”

The Baal Shem Tov smiled. When he saw his anxious student at shul, the Baal Shem Tov said to him, “The two teachings in our tradition each have their place. On the High Holidays, our fate is determined. But how we turn fate into our destiny can vary from day to day.”

“Fate and Destiny” is the subject of a famous essay called, “*Kol Dodi Dofek – The Voice of My Beloved is Knocking*,” penned by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, one of the great orthodox thinkers of the 20th century. He writes, “Fate casts each of us into a dimension of life we cannot control. Destiny, on the other hand, is an active existence in which we confront the environment into which we are cast.”

“Our mission in life is to turn fate into destiny; to turn an existence where we are passive receivers of our fate, into to an existence in which we are active determinants of our destiny.”

Steve Jobs, Apple computer’s founder and visionary, who passed away this week, took to heart this message. In a commencement address he delivered at Stanford University a few years ago, after the discovery of his pancreatic cancer, he said, “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do

what I am about to do today? And whenever the answer has been "no" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something."

Steve Jobs was drawing upon a classic teaching in Talmudic Judaism, where "Rabbi Eliezer teaches: Do teshuva one day before your death. His disciples asked him: Does any person know on which day they will die? Said he to them: So that being the case, do teshuva today" (Talmud, Shabbat 153a).

What is teshuva?

Teshuva literally means to return – it is a process of self-awareness - about acknowledging the fate we can't control, yet choosing a destiny we can.

A powerful example of this was unveiled on the National Mall in Washington one month ago in a sculpture dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The sculpture, called the "Stone of Hope," gets its name from a line in Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, where he said, "With faith we will be able to hew, out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

At the entrance to the memorial is the sculpture of a mountain, representing the "Mountain of Despair." But a single wedge has been sliced out of the center of the mountain and pushed forward as the "Stone of Hope" – and on the front of it is engraved the form of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. King didn't choose the fate that had birthed him into an era where the black man faced great despair, but Dr. King did choose his destiny - he would dream of hope and freedom for all.

How we handle our fate is also the focus of the pinnacle High Holiday prayer known as the *Unetaneh Tokef*.

The prayer concludes that with "*u'teshuva, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah*" we can "*Ma'avirin et Ro'ah Gezeirah.*" *Ma'avirin* is a hard word to translate in this context, and I'd bet that every machzor is different. But *Ma'avirin* comes from the word "*avar*" which means to pass through. So in this case, what we are saying is that with teshuva, tefillah, and tzedakah we can "pass through the harsh decrees." In effect, we are not asking God to overturn those decrees – they are our fate. Instead, we are acknowledging some of the key tools to breaking out of a passive lifestyle burdened by fate.

The message of the *Unetaneh Tokef* reminds me of an old friend of mine named Artie Egendorf. When I was serving as a Rabbi in New York, Artie offered his time every Tuesday before lunch to lead a yoga training session for the Rabbis. There were 5 Rabbis at the synagogue, and he joked that as payment, he expected to see at least 4 of us each week. He promised to make it a very Jewish experience so we would feel like it was a natural part of our jobs.

So each Tuesday at 11am, we would quickly change into sweats and meet him in the carpeted lobby of the shul. It was a ridiculous sight. 4 out-of-shape and uncoordinated Rabbis, with a yoga guru, in a shul lobby. All we needed was a priest and a minister.

For each part of the workout, he made us yell out the final words of the morning blessings in the siddur.

"*Ohzer Yisrael Bigivurah* – Who girds Israel with strength." (shouted during jumping jacks)

"*Oter Yisrael Bitifarah* – Who crowns Israel with splendor." (shouted during yoga bicycles)

“HaNoten Liya’ef Koach - Who gives strength to the weary.” (shouted during situps)

I once asked him why he chose these verses for our exercise and, among other things, he said to me that the key to wellness is to deny the past verb.

Don’t say, “I’m tired.” Instead, you can acknowledge that you *have been* feeling tired today. But the moments in front of us have not yet been written. So don’t cede your life to them.

Don’t say, “I’m lazy.” Instead, you can acknowledge that *you have been* lazy. But that doesn’t mean it has to define who you are a minute from now.

These morning blessings may not always describe how we *have been* feeling, but they renew for us the opportunity to feel differently now.

To deny the past verb, allows us the opportunity to take our fate by the horns, and chart a destiny of our choosing. My experience with Artie was that the right word choices unburden us from fate and can be instantly energizing.

Sometimes, however, our fate seems too heavy to bear, especially when we face untimely death and illness.

When confronted with such inexplicable suffering we should remember the words of Esther Wachsman, mother of Nachshon – the young, kidnapped, Israeli soldier murdered by Arab terrorists many years ago. She said, “When tragedy befalls us, we ask, ‘Why?’ and there isn’t an answer. So then, when we are ready, we must also ask, ‘What shall we do now?’”

Over Rosh Hashanah, I saw one of last year’s graduates from the New Orleans Jewish Day School. The school only goes up until 5th grade, so this year she ended up at a local public school for 6th grade. A day before Rosh Hashanah, she asked a question to her teacher after misunderstanding something he said. Her question may have seemed inappropriate, but it certainly didn’t warrant the teacher’s harsh response when he said to her, “Are all Jewish kids this stupid?”

Obviously, this girl’s mother was irate and unloaded on the teacher and the principal the next day. When I called her back a few days later to see how they were doing, the mom was still very frustrated, but feeling a bit helpless about the situation.

I suggested to her that we *strongly* recommend the school to the ADL’s “No Place for Hate” program, an initiative that has been successfully introduced in many other schools in the area. As we talked about this idea, I could hear a certain calm come into her voice. It felt good to think constructively how she could bring change. Yelling about her daughter’s fate wasn’t accomplishing anything and it was frustrating her. But thinking about how this experience could become a teaching moment, helped provide her with a sense of destiny – that maybe she could be a part of something good coming out of this.

Turning fate into destiny is also the core message of five particular traditions we are invited to observe on Yom Kippur. We do not eat or drink. We do not bathe. We refrain from lavishing ourselves with special oils. We refrain from sexual intimacy. And we refrain from wearing leather soled shoes – an ancient sign of luxury – by the way, if you’re wearing leather soled shoes, you are welcome to place them under your chairs and go in socks like me!

In observing these five customs we abstain from the pleasantries of this world. In fact, when we don't eat or drink, or care for our bodies, or engage in the creation of new life, we are distancing ourselves from life altogether.

In this way, the intention of these traditions on Yom Kippur, is to cause us to brush death - not to sit with death - just to brush death slightly, so that when we walk away from Yom Kippur, we can appreciate life all the more. Death is the extreme passive state. Brushing up close with it reminds us that while we cannot escape our overall fate, we can be active participants in *life*, appreciating each day that comes our way.

This theme is also found in the Torah reading for tomorrow, which describes the ancient Temple Service performed on Yom Kippur by the Kohanim – the priests.

Just as an aside, I have to share that I was studying this with my son Elyon and I asked him, "how you know if someone is a Kohen?" He said, "They are the ones that bless us." And I said, "how else do you know who is a Kohen." And he said, "They are the ones who wash their hands during davening." And I said, "But how do you know who is a Kohen outside of shul." I seemed to stump him on that one, so I told him that to be a Kohen means your father had to be a Kohen, and his father, and on and on. And that almost all Kohanim come from just a couple of families and therefore they all have almost the same last names – like Cohen or Katz. So you can always find a Kohen if his last name is Cohen or Katz!" Elyon's eyes grew very wide with this information and he said, "Oh! And I always thought that Katz was a weird last name. But now I know it's really special!"

Anyway, in the Torah reading, Aaron, the Kohen Gadol, is commanded to select two identical goats and, by lots, designate one as an offering to God and the other is to be sent off into the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:6-11) The goats are identical in every way, but they experience two totally different fates.

The intent of the ritual is to portray the two paths in front of us as we come to Yom Kippur. One is the passive trail through the wilderness, subjected to the elements, carrying the burden of our fate. The other is a determined trail cut along a purposeful path, enriched by the call of destiny.

So I come back to Shlomele, the water carrier, who could also have been Shlomele the lawyer, or the librarian, the doctor, the rabbi, the teacher, the street cleaner, the babysitter, or Chanale the parent, the grandparent, the engineer, the philosopher, or whoever.

In every case, the challenge is the same. Can we turn an existence where we are passive receivers of our fate, into an existence in which we are active determinants of our destiny?

As we turn now into the Yom Kippur service, we hope through our prayers and actions that we can seal for ourselves a good fate in the Book of life. But how do we know what is good fate?! It is more important that we learn to acknowledge the fate we can't control, yet choose a destiny we can. Let that be our kavannah – our meditation, during this Yom Kippur.

Gmar Chitima Tovah – May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.