

Rosh Hashanah 2 5784

Joint Sermon RMS/RAF

How to deal with an uncomfortable Jewish text

RMS - Introduction

Shanah Tovah! One of the hardest situations to handle in life is when two important values we hold dear seem to collide. What do we do? And during these holidays when we remind ourselves of the importance of living a life of Torah, what happens when we run into a verse, or a prayer, that seems objectionable or difficult? What do we do then? How can we encounter Torah, or our *mahzor*, meaningfully when certain lines seem to fly in the face of our contemporary values? While it might be easy to feel comfortable disagreeing with the opinion of a friend, or a present day commentator, it is often harder when we take issue with a core text from our tradition. This is true for us as rabbis just as much as it is for you. And this is also true *all* year long, not just during the High Holidays.

Therefore, today, R. Freedman and I would like to outline for you a couple of difficult texts related to these holidays. We would like to present what is so challenging about them to us and then share with you how we approach these texts to make them meaningful, even as they challenge us. It is my view that it is a true blessing for us that our tradition is at the same time so ancient and yet so committed to being relevant; so multi-voiced -- open to different opinions and reinterpretation, yet committed to our core texts and our handed-down traditions. It is in this beautiful, though sometimes complicated, dynamic that both authentic meaning and contemporary relevance can be found.

RMS - Prayer: Why Untaneh Tokef makes me uncomfortable

I am going to begin with one of the most iconic texts in the High Holiday liturgy, Unetaneh Tokef. While this is certainly one of the most well-known prayers, it is also undoubtedly one of the most *challenging* texts. First of all, it reads as very morbid and

foreboding prayer that when read in English is difficult to hear. (quote) "Who shall live and who shall die? Who in good time, and who by an untimely death? Who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by stoning, who shall have rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted". This text is stark, heavy, and potentially anxiety producing, especially when recited on the Day of Judgement. Second, Unetaneh Tokef seems to embody a theology that indicates that on this day, our fate is sealed and our future determined by Gd: "today it is decided who shall live and who shall die." I thought that we did not believe in pre-determinism? How can Jews today accept this fatalistic theology of at least the first part of *Un'taneh Tokef*? In fact, free will is a core part of our belief system from the very beginning. How can we understand why this approach to our future is shared in the heart of our High Holiday services? And finally, while it is comforting that the prayer states that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* avert the severity of the decree, what about the rest of the mitzvot? Do only these three matter? And how does this phrase fit with the first half of the text? While this prayer is certainly more complicated than it seems on the surface, read in a classic manner this prayer contains difficult messages and perhaps contains values that disagree with our own.

RAF - Torah: Why Akeidah makes me uncomfortable

I have so many questions for all the parties involved:

To G-d: How can You, a G-d of justice and mercy, call for murdering an innocent child? Even as a test?

Why would You treat Abraham, of all people, this way? After giving them this miracle child late in life and promising to build a people through Isaac?

To Abraham: How can you, a man of ethics and justice and model of righteousness, go through the motions of killing anyone, let alone your own child?

Why did you speak up to defend the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah but remain silent when it came to your own son?

To Isaac: Why didn't you overpower your father - who's 100 years older than you - to escape when you realized what was happening? Why were you complicit in this too?

To Sarah: Where were you when this was happening? Why aren't you part of this story?

To us: How can we see Abraham as a role model, which he is in so many ways, if he is capable of this?

RMS - Frame of mind/steps to take/apply to Untaneh Tokef

Rabbi Freedman and I now want to share a few tools and approaches for how to find meaning and wisdom in these challenging texts that we hope will be helpful to you *any* time you come across texts that are difficult for you.

The **first approach** I will share is defined by opening ourselves up to different ways of reading text. Some texts can, and maybe should be, read literally. But often texts make more sense, or become more meaningful, when read metaphorically, or at least as multi-layered. In other words, do we take the text as meant to be 100% literally true, or could the text be employing metaphor or other devices to represent truth through symbolism, as in a poem, a piece of art or in a serious literary novel. In the case of Unetaneh Tokef, must we believe (or think the author believed) that there is a literal book of life in heaven where someone's name gets written down by the end of Yom Kippur? Or is the image conjured by the prayer there to teach us something? Perhaps the message is symbolic. Namely that we must act now as if our life is hanging in the balance, as if there is a book in which we want our name inscribed. The dramatic words are written purposefully to convey a sense of urgency to us. This is the

time to repent, this is the time to evaluate whether we are following the ritual commandments, engaging in Tefillah or prayer, or staying true to our ethical values through Tzedakah, or righteous acts. Or perhaps this imagery is supposed to remind us in a powerful striking manner that we are mortal, in control of only so much of our lives; that we are beings that cannot know our future. Therefore the lesson is to place our faith in Gd and to make the very most of *every* moment of life because we don't know how much time we have. We don't know whether this year will bring fortune, health and success, the opposite, or somewhere in between. That truth in mind, Unetaneh Tokef may be urging us to live life with more purpose and alacrity.

Often, when we speak or write, we do not only communicate in the literal. So too with our sacred texts, often the most powerful message is expressed through symbols, metaphors and various layers of meaning.

A **second thought** is that we don't have to agree with *everything* in the text, to get *something* out of it, or to see a text as important. Akin to not throwing out the baby with the bathwater, we can disagree with parts of a text, or recognize the contextual limits of segments of a text, and still find other messages within them powerful and worthwhile. In other words, if the first half of Unetaneh Tokef does not resonate with you, that is OK. Feel free to just focus solely on the moving melody. But perhaps the second part about, Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Righteousness playing a major role on how we should be judged, or how we should judge ourselves, truly hits home. In fact, perhaps the second part of the text even refutes the first part. The world view at the time may have made people feel that all is determined but in fact, teshuvah, an enlightened mind-set, prayer, the uplifting words we use, and tzedakah, the righteous actions we take, are actually what determine our status and fate. Thus, the prayers ask us what improvements we need to make in the way we think, speak and conduct ourselves? This is an exercise that is truly worthy and meaningful.

Through these lenses, a difficult prayer like Unetaneh Tokef, which may even contain ideas, beliefs or values that seem to contradict what we hold dear, can still be profoundly meaningful. While still posing challenges, of course, Unetaneh Tokef urges us to confront issues of mortality, the fragility and preciousness of life, as well as the

power of our thoughts, words and actions to make a difference in the world. These are certainly worthy topics for a prayer on the High Holidays.

RAF - Frame of Mind: Timeless and Timely

I think the Torah's laws and stories can be divided into two categories: *timeless and timely*. The timeless stories and Mitzvot *stand for all time*: celebrate Shabbat, honor your parents, love your neighbor as yourself, people are created in G-d's image, the story in Genesis 18 about Abraham's magnanimous hospitality to the strangers walking by his tent. These lessons are *everlasting for every generation*.

But there are other commandments and stories that were given specifically to the Israelites *at that time thousands of years ago* and were not intended to be in effect forever. The law of an eye for an eye- the Talmud does not take that literally but rules on monetary compensation. The wayward and rebellious son- the Talmud creates so many conditions that it would be impossible to take effect. The story of Jacob marrying two sisters in their lifetime - today that would be against Jewish law. The Torah is *always the first word* in the Jewish conversation about any subject, but *it is rarely the last* because the conversation continues over generations, as the Torah itself instructs.

We must always ask ourselves: *is this part of the Torah timeless or timely?* Many parts that make me uncomfortable - and there are plenty - are the *timely* ones whose values are out of place with our society today. But I don't get hung up on this because I know that Jewish law develops and changes over time.

As a parallel example, there are parts of the US Constitution that are wildly out of date and make me uncomfortable. For example, the US Constitution says the only people eligible to vote are white male citizens over the age of 21. That makes me deeply uncomfortable for obvious reasons. But American law developed over a long period of time, so that now its *citizens of all races, men and women over the age of 18*, can vote. So I do look at that part of the Constitution and feel uncomfortable, but because I know

where we end up in American law, I can still hold the document in high regard because it was the *beginning* of the process, not the end itself.

The same is true with the Torah. There are parts that make me uncomfortable, but those parts frequently end up changing over time. I still hold the Torah in high regard because it's the *beginning* of the process of articulating Jewish values and ethics, not the end.

Step 1 - Read backwards and forwards.

Backwards means learning about the *historical context* of the given law or story.

Remember, we're talking about 5,000 years ago so life looked a lot different than it does today. Context is really everything. The Etz Hayim Humash, in which we follow the Torah reading every Shabbat, has a commentary in the middle of each page below the Hebrew filling us in on the historical background of our ancestors. When we compare the ancient Israelites to their contemporary neighbors, we end up in a very different place than if we compare them to our society today. In fairness, we have to learn more about their world before we can judge them.

And read forwards.

That means read on to see how the story ends and how the law develops. The Torah is a long book, and sometimes it returns to the same subject later on. Do the rabbis of the Talmud maintain the law as it's described in the Torah, or do they interpret it differently as the next generation of rabbis? In the Etz Hayim Humash, the occasional gray box at the bottom of the page - called *Halacha LMaaseh* - tells us how a law is practiced today: sometimes it's the same while other times it has been reinterpreted completely. Next time you follow the Torah reading in our Humash, feel free to explore the rest of the page beyond the Hebrew verses themselves.

Step 2 - Read peripherally.

That means read what *other commentators, rabbis, and thinkers* have had to say about this particular topic. I assure you, if a story or law makes you uncomfortable, you are not

the first Jew to feel uncomfortable reading these same words! These other thinkers have done considerable research and thinking, and their insights may lead you to a new understanding. There are too many good books to name, and we have lots in our Beth El library. But now all you need is a computer because there is plenty of good Torah content on the internet. To sum up: keep reading!

Apply to Akeidah - There isn't enough time today to address every specific point of discomfort I mentioned at the beginning. But I will take these tools and apply them to the story of Genesis 22. First, I understand that the story is *timely*, not timeless. I know that because I read forward and see that at the end of the chapter, G-d instructs Abraham *not* to sacrifice his son Isaac. We can't forget how the story ends.

Steps one and two tell me to keep reading. Reading backwards, it's clear that thousands of years ago *human beings sacrificed other people* all over the world, usually to guarantee a bountiful harvest or to appease the gods. That's horrifying but it's true. The Torah itself later describes its neighbors as worshiping the god Molech by offering children through a fiery ritual. It's appalling, but it appears to be not uncommon in the ancient world.

Reading forwards, we see that the Torah itself *specifically outlaws* child sacrifice in Leviticus and Deuteronomy by saying *we are not* to emulate our neighbors by sacrificing children to their gods or to ours. *It's the Torah* that reminds us that each person is created in G-d's own image.

Reading peripherally brought me to the commentary from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, contemporary Modern Orthodox author on Jewish subjects. I share with you a few lines from one of his essays that helped me understand this better, specifically the question of how we are to relate to Abraham:

“While today we regard child sacrifice as grossly immoral, it is largely because the Bible outlawed it, not because it is self-evident. When G-d demanded that Abraham sacrifice Isaac, the Patriarch probably was more distressed than surprised, for he had no way of knowing then that human beings were not to sacrifice their children; certainly, he had heard of his neighbors doing so. What is new in the “binding of Isaac” story, therefore, is not G-d's initial request but His final statement, that He doesn't want human sacrifices. Thus, Abraham is to be praised for not withholding from G-d what was most valuable to him but, as the text makes very clear, he is not to be emulated. G-d's disavowal of Isaac's sacrifice is, in fact, the first attack on child sacrifice in any literature.”

I am still uncomfortable with many parts of the story, but Rabbi Telushkin widens the context that allows me to understand Abraham's actions as a test *for his time only*.