

## Who By Fire, Who By Water

Rosh Hashanah

2017 - 5778

Each year I come back to this central prayer of our High Holy Day liturgy---Unetaneh Tokef. This Medieval prayer represents the most troubling theology. I know that people leave this service with the impression that this is Jewish thought. The words imagine a vindictive, judgmental God who rewards and punishes, meting out illness and death, based on some twice checked list of who has been naughty or nice.

Over the years I have tried to contextualize the prayer by applying it in a non-supernatural way to our own personal lives. These are not the rewards or punishments of a saintly or sinful life. They are only a recognition that at some point, this coming year, the next, ten years in the future, thirty or forty... something will happen. Cancer, heart attack, a stroke, an accident. It's going to be something. That is the inevitability and nature of our mortality. It is what defines us as humans. No matter how nobly and righteously we may act, at some point along the way we will face illness and setbacks. Death is what happens to us. We pray that it is not this year, but sometime, even if far in the distant future, we will need to confront that reality.

This year I approach this prayer a bit differently. Yesterday's Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and Tuesday's devastating earthquake in Mexico City are on the list of recent natural disasters that includes Hurricane Harvey in Houston and Hurricane Irma in Florida. And to that list we can add the wild fires of the Pacific Northwest and Montana.

We just finished reading the words of Unetaneh Tokef. This prayer asks: Who by Fire, Who by Water, Who by Hunger, Who by Thirst, Who by Earthquake, Who by Plague? This has been a year of devastation and loss. The hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and fires have been indiscriminate. Rich and poor alike have been affected. Privilege has been no barrier and offered no protection. These disasters reminded everyone in their path of how vulnerable and precarious life can be. It is frightening to feel so helpless and insecure in one's own home, whether that home is a simple fishing shack on St. John, Virgin Islands, or a luxury villa in Naples, Florida, or a condo in a downtown tower in Houston, Texas. Far too many people suffered near total losses.

In following the news reports, I was especially struck by the human interest stories of what people saved. What was most precious? What mattered? Many rescued picture albums, or a love letter, a Ketubah; some more wisely took a flash drive. The reports help remind us of those things we value, want to hold onto, that we consider most precious. Throughout the interviews with the hurricane and flood survivors, there was a recurring theme: they were most grateful for their lives and the lives of their loved ones, and the objects they rescued were universally not the most valuable in monetary terms, but sentimental, personally meaningful, irreplaceable because of the emotions attached to them. A child's hand-made birthday card. A single tea cup from a china set belonging to a grandmother. A wedding album

They didn't hold onto things, but emotions, memories. That is what they truly treasured.

These decisions are not only made at times of disaster. Many of you know that my wife, Patty's, mother died this Spring at the age of 100. She was the last of her entire generation. Both of Patty's parents have passed away, as have all of her uncles and aunts. So too in my family, my parents and all their siblings have died. That means for both of us, and all our siblings, and all our cousins, we are the next last generation.

With that reality comes the task of cleaning out the house. Patty's mother saved everything: receipts, tax returns, report cards, every letter and note—post cards from summer camp, blue airmail letters from trips; letters from her children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. There were boxes and boxes of pictures, out of focus snapshots of people and places we couldn't identify to the more formal photographs accumulated over the years.

What do you do with all of it? My mother was acquisitive in a different way. She loved things. She held onto mementoes of travel or experiences. There were vases, glassware, a piece of this or a piece of that. They served as evidence of various trips—a piece of Delftware from Amsterdam or a Limoges china box from France, or a set of Moser glassware from Prague. And she owned every imaginable ritual item from Israel. What do you save?

I know some of you are in the midst of downsizing from a home in the suburbs to an apartment or condo in the city or in the local village. It is not easy cleaning out the family home, but your children might have said to you what my children have said to me: "Promise us you won't make us do this when you die." You've probably read the articles entitled, "Your children don't want your tchotchkes." Authors have written about the spirituality of decluttering. There is the popular book, "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up," by Marie Konod.

So what do you do with it all? We used to play a values clarification game in confirmation classes, or in youth group, or on college retreats. It went like this. You are the last survivors on earth, after some terrible disaster. You are given the chance to get on a rocket ship to the moon or Mars. You are tasked with taking one Jewish thing with you that will insure the survival of Judaism in this new colony in space. What is the one thing you would rescue and take with you? Typically, someone might say their grandmother's Shabbat candlesticks that were carried from Europe to Ellis Island. Another person thought a Torah scroll was the most important. Someone else argued for a copy of the prayer book. Another suggested the book, "Altneuland," by Theodore Herzl.

I was once on an adult retreat, where the same game was played. When asked what was the one thing to take with you in order to insure Judaism's survival, a cynic called out: "An anti-Semite!"

Many of you are collectors of some sort, whether art, books, antiques, other objects. Perhaps some of you collect watches. If so, you are probably aware that the Holy Grail of

watches is about to come up for auction at Phillips Auction House on October 26<sup>th</sup>. It might be the most expensive watch ever sold. It is not made of precious metal. It is not platinum or gold, just stainless steel. It is not encrusted with diamonds or bejeweled with rubies or sapphires. In watch collector terms, it has few complications, the various extra dials and functions that often add value to expensive timepieces. It has stop watch function.

The watch is a Rolex Daytona, but even so, it is not all that rare, a few thousand or so were made. The Rolex Daytona is known as the Paul Newman watch, because in numerous photos he was shown wearing that type of watch. But on Oct 26<sup>th</sup> Paul Newman's own Rolex Daytona is being auctioned off.

The story of the watch is this. His wife, Joanne Woodward, bought the watch for about \$300 in the late 1960's when Paul Newman started racing cars. On the back of the watch she engraved: "Drive Carefully, Me." The watch disappeared for about 45 years. No one knew what had happened to it. It turns out, Paul Newman's daughter, Nell, brought home a college boyfriend. He was working on a tree house at the Newman home in Westport, Connecticut, when Paul Newman asked if he knew what time it was. The young man explained that he didn't own a watch. Paul Newman went into the house, took the watch, tossed it to him, and said: "Here kid. Keep it."

And so he had kept it for nearly 45 years. Some experts have estimated that it will sell for as much as ten million dollars. Most of the proceeds will go to the Nell Newman Foundation. But it got me to thinking about why is this watch so valuable? It's not about the watch itself. Paul Newman was a wonderful actor. We loved him as Ari Ben Canaan, Cool Hand Luke, and Butch Cassidy. But the truth is, he was not Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton, Marlon Brando, or Kenneth Branagh. Indeed, there is a whole new generation that thinks he is famous for salad dressing, spaghetti sauce, olive oil, and popcorn. It does give me great joy to know that my three-and-a-half year old grandson loves the character, Doc Hudson, in the animated children's movie, "Cars."

I think the answer to the value of the watch goes to the iconic nature of Paul Newman, based on far more than his acting, but rather on his character and values. The watch itself is a relatively modest, simple object. It's just a thing, but not a thing. He was an extraordinary role model of a life well lived with an impact that went far beyond his acting fame. He will also be remembered for his philanthropy, establishing the Hole in the Wall camp for children battling cancer. He was a man of humility and humanity. He was loved.

So now return to Unetaneh Tokef. Who by fire, who by water, who by thirst, who by plague? After the fires, and the floods, the storms, and earthquakes, what's left? The prayer answers:

Teshuvah—Repentance. In its broader sense, humility, the ability to acknowledge one's own imperfections and mistakes and seek forgiveness.

Tefillah—Prayer. This is introspection, being thoughtful, self aware, but also acknowledging that there is something greater than just ourselves.

Tzedakah—Charity. Giving, helping, generosity.

If Unetaneh Tokef forces us to confront our mortality, our vulnerability and the precariousness of our world, the prayer also helps us define the nature of immortality, what lasts. Hurricanes and floods force us to assess, be self-aware. When staring down fire, floods, hurricanes and earthquakes, we have to determine what matters and what counts. Unetaneh Tokef reminds us that it could all be washed away in a flood or lost in a fire or destroyed in a hurricane, but the physical possessions don't really define our lives.

So now, at the beginning of this New Year, what will we take with us into this next year? For each one of us, these are tens days of accounting, adding it all up. Cherish that which is most precious. Protect that legacy. Nurture those memories. They are the most important items we carry with us into this New Year. And may it be a New Year of Blessing, Sweetness, Goodness, and Peace.

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