

The chazan begins her mussaf prayer with the Hineni—  
here I am  
poor in deeds to recommend me,  
frightened and trembling before the glorious presence of G-d,  
I have come to beg and plead for Your People Israel  
who have sent me.

I say a version of the Hineni of my own  
when sitting down to write my High Holy Day sermons--  
Here I am  
charged with speaking to you  
about the meaning of this day  
about G-d  
about Torah  
about life.  
It is an awesome and intimidating task—  
to find the right things to say,  
to be a proper translator of our Jewish wisdom,  
to speak to your needs and yours concerns,  
to leave you less sure of some things  
and more sure of others.

I want to talk to you about hope,  
and I ask G-d that my own despair not get in the way.  
I want to talk to you about responsibility and connectedness  
and I ask that my own cynicism not be an impediment.

I read the news  
and the onslaught of e-mails about what we can do  
and so much needs to be done. . .  
about the hurricane aftermath  
about the war in Iraq  
about the genocide in the Sudan  
about the ongoing poverty and housing crisis in this country  
about hunger all over the world  
about anti-Israel prejudices in journalism  
about peace for Israel  
about Jewish-Christian alliances  
about torture  
about legislation which denies equal rights to homosexuals  
about breast cancer, cystic fibrosis, AIDS, Jewish genetic diseases.  
et cetera  
et cetera  
et cetera.  
I ask for clarity in the face of confusion and overwhelm.

Today  
we are commemorating and celebrating the creation of the world

and I want to talk to you about the world—  
about the global community,  
about what there is to do,  
and *Hineni aniya mimaa'as*—  
I don't have a game plan,  
I'm not a political or an economic analyst,  
I can't share a success story with you.  
But what I can do is what a *shliach tzibbur* does  
in the '*hineni*'  
after the disclaimer asking to get out of the way  
and to be G-d's conduit  
even as she is disclaiming  
the *shlichat tzibbur* davens with all her heart,  
offering . . . : herself,  
because what else does she have, after all?  
When we do what we do on behalf of others,  
we can only do it as ourselves.  
With our full selves.

I want to speak, then, to myself, for myself  
to the issues that have been perplexing me  
What do I do  
in the face of all that needs to be done in the global arena?  
how do I balance  
How do I meet my chosen responsibilities efficiently,  
not fall into the panic of overwhelm, or despair, or fury?

I come back again and again to my safety zone:  
the wisdom of the Torah and of Jewish Practice.  
Feeling that I need direction  
I look to this holy day itself for guidance.  
That is what I can do for myself  
and so--  
that is what I have to offer you.

This day is a day whose theme  
is G-d's Majesty and human surrender.  
This day of all days  
we bow down to the ground submitting ourselves  
to *melech malchei hamlachim*  
the ultimate power of all powers  
this is the day when we contemplate what it means  
to forfeit our own desires for G-d's desires  
as Abraham successfully does  
in the readings today and tomorrow.  
Knowing our place in the world is the essence of Rosh Hashana  
and it is most clearly spelled out for us  
in the *netane tokef* prayer.

“Let us give an account of the *tokef*,  
of the gravity,  
of the enormity of the holiness of this day  
*ki hu nora v'ayom*  
for the day is truly awesome and terrifying”

In this Heavenly description  
of Judgement day before the throne of G-d  
G-d sees us, watches us, knows us each and all.  
Like the shepherd herding sheep  
so too do You, G-d, pass us through,  
counting us – each and all,  
allotting to each one of us our due.  
On Rosh Hashana it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.  
Who will live and who will die?  
Of those who will die–  
who by water and who by fire,  
who by earthquake, who by plague  
who by strangulation, who by stoning?  
and of those who will live–  
who will rest and who will wander,  
who will be rich and who will be poor  
who will be made low, and who will be raised up?  
The (almost) final word is that we are powerless.  
That our sense of security  
of wealth  
of health  
can be erased in a moment  
by a diagnosis  
by an accident  
by human intent

By the time we've gotten through these two paragraphs of the *netane tokef*  
It begins to feel like there's Nothing we can do!  
And yet  
the punctuation of this prayer tells us there is something:  
there are in fact *three* things we can do:  
*tshuva, tfilla, tzedaka*–  
repentance, prayer, and giving–  
can shift, or avert,  
the distress of the decree.  
These  
can alleviate the sting of our fate in any given situation,  
repentance– changing our ways,  
reaching in to see the truth about ourselves  
prayer–hope, gratitude, reaching out to G-d  
and tzedakah–acts of generosity reaching out to one another,  
these are our powers.

It is through these three directions  
that humanity can be effective—  
not merely in removing the sting of fate  
but actually,  
sometimes,  
in changing fate.

Our modern, sophisticated and critical minds  
prevent us from accepting the idea that if we only pray  
if we only repent  
our actions could effect the fate of the world.  
(And we need to be sophisticated.  
Tell story of daughter who said, does this mean Ima didn't daven?)  
And so we are more comfortable reading these words to mean:  
tshuva, tfilla, and tzedakah help us to cope—  
help us to accept with open heart that which befalls us.

There is yet another level to this teaching  
which we may not be looking at.  
We may not be taking into account  
just how interconnected we all are.

The *netane tokef* portrays God as a shepherd  
the Gemara in Rosh Hashana asks to understand the specific angle of this metaphor:  
does it mean that G-d sees us each individually,  
like a shepherd at counting time  
one by one  
like a flock passing through a narrow gate each sheep by itself ? . .  
Or  
does this mean that God sees us as a herd, as a flock,  
still having the power to count us,  
discerning each and every one of us  
but beholding us ALL AT ONCE.  
Verse: *hayotzer yachad libam*.  
Another explanation offered for this phrase “*kivnei maron*”  
is that we are like army legions  
and we are beheld like an army moving before a king.  
Each soldier in step is crucial to the appearance,  
but the appearance is of a whole sea of soldiers.

Today we are celebrating the creation of the *whole* world  
Of *all* of humanity.  
We hear the question of who will live and who will die  
and we hear it, as we are accustomed to, as individuals.  
We wonder—will I die, will my loved ones die. . .  
Yes, dying and being born does happen one by one,  
but it also happens in trends,

in sweeps.  
Each individual is part of a bigger picture,  
just like the cells in our body that die one by one  
are all part of a complex system of ailments and health.  
We on this earth are like sheep in a herd,  
like legions in a throng.

when we think of trends and tendencies,  
then the question “who?” is not referring to a single “who”,  
but to the masses of “who’s” :  
who will be among those whole regions of the Sudan  
when the bad guys come trampling through  
who will be among the millions who contract AIDS  
(who will contract AIDS in Africa  
where chances to live are low  
and who will contract AIDS in the US  
where chances to live are higher?)  
who will be among those millions of uninsured?  
who will be among the thousands of enlisted military

who will be among those born into a home of Torah?  
who will be among those schooled in hatred and terrorism?  
which millions of girls will grow up free  
and which behind a veil?  
which millions of men will be raised in a culture of gentleness  
and which in a culture of toughness?  
who will get to experience life as an oppressed minority  
and who will get to live life in the comfort of the mainstream?  
who will be raised in love and who in deprivation from love?

There are many factors that go into making us who we are.  
Yes, we can,  
make our own lives, shape our destiny  
heal our soul, change our attitudes.  
but always  
when we do such personal shaping or healing  
we do it alongside [and often against]  
the forces of the sweeps and trends that shape us.  
Each particular that shapes us  
is part of a socio-economic- historical-political-religious trend  
sweeping across generations  
like a weather pattern.

And here  
is where I think  
we can look at these three cards we have been given,  
tshuva, tfila, and tzedakah,  
and look at them in a bigger way:

What if it's not just for each of us to soul-search  
to pray,  
and to give.  
What if we have to take these human powers  
and use them collectively  
in great numbers  
in organized armies  
like extensive flocks.  
soul-searching *collectively*  
examining the soul of our society  
of our civilization  
of our country  
of our People.

It may not be enough to examine: am I kind enough  
without asking: is my society kind enough?  
it may not be enough to look honestly and ask:  
have I been cruel,  
but  
is my country being cruel?

Are we the Jews being a wise People?  
are we being a loving People?  
Is our western civilization humble? arrogant?  
cold or warmhearted?  
what is the group,  
or the many groups,  
that we claim we belong to.  
what is our group's relationship to the Creator?  
do we model reverence? gratitude? appreciation?  
How generous and caring is our group to one another,  
and to other groups?  
are we internally kind and patient like a herd of elephants  
or internally selfish like the pack of hyenas?

It is an interesting challenge to behold ourselves in this way--  
at no time in human history  
has there been such a global community as there is today,  
AND ,  
at no time in human history  
has there been such an individualized society as there is today.  
We are intertwined across oceans  
politically, economically, and religiously,  
and at the same time  
we stalwartly defend freedom, autonomy, and self-sufficiency.  
As an example--  
Just think of gasoline:

it's an international enterprise that links the world  
and we use it to fill up the cars in which we sit often alone  
driving to places according to a particular, individualized schedule.

It's ironic, or at least curious, that we live these two poles  
globally connected and individually separated!

Even spiritual life,  
which is all about connection,  
for which community was once an essential component  
is now all about self-discovery.

self-help kabbalah,  
self-actualizing Judaism

In this latest issue of Moment magazine  
I read two pieces about private bar or bat mitzvahs  
ceremonies which take place outside  
of the context of a lifelong Jewish community.

Families now can hire or rent a private rabbi and a space  
have a private service and a party  
because they don't belong to a Jewish community.

So here is this milestone of coming-of-age  
when a young man or woman can be counted  
as a member of the community at large.

And yet for more and more families, while something of the spiritual meaning of Judaism  
remains compelling,  
the community at large does not exist!

This is the newest face of assimilation—  
that American Judaism is changing to be a private affair!  
The danger is no longer that people don't care about their Jewish identity,  
it's that they think they can have a Jewish identity  
without belonging to a community of Jews!

Part of Jewish culture  
is the recognition of the importance of community.  
Not necessarily at the expense of the individual,  
but yes, at some cost to the convenience of the individual  
some commitment, some 'buying in'.

We as Jews have always seen ourselves as collectively responsible and intertwined.

There's an economic metaphor we use:

kol yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh (zeh la'zeh)

All of Israel are guarantors for one another.

This means we cover for each other.

We take blame and responsibility for each other  
and we worry about each other

as if we were economically interdependent.

My son is studying in a wonderful Jewish school  
which is affordable to us

because of some generous philanthropists

who care about Torah education for Jewish children.

There is the biological metaphor:  
that we are like a single body,  
if one limb is infected the whole body is sick.  
The stuff that flows through one part flows through every part.  
We can never ignore and isolate a piece of our bodies without the entire body suffering.

The boat metaphor was the one my high school principal  
Rabbi Simcha Teitelbaum used to evoke:  
you can't bore a hole under your own seat in the boat  
and tell the other people on the boat to mind their own business.  
These teachings are about Jews and intra-responsibility  
but the wisdom of the metaphors extend to all of humanity.  
In short:  
We are all in this together  
so our *tshuva*—our introspection-- needs to be collective.  
our prayers need to be on behalf of all of us.  
our caring needs to be a collective caring, a responsible caring.

One of the challenges of collective *tshuva* is that *tshuva* demands close self-examination.  
part of this living in such an demarcated privatized society  
is the culture of finger pointing, blame and defensiveness.  
It's not my fault, it's her fault.  
But we can't do collective *tshuva*  
with such an attitude of being separate entities.

we can't ask what went wrong if we are standing on the outside  
we must ask it from the inside.  
From within the same self.

the 9-11 commission  
is a good example of an attempt at self-examination  
maybe that was simpler  
because there was so much coalescing against the enemy  
who was to blame.  
But the way our country is addressing torture,  
the way we are addressing many of our other short-comings,  
we are not yet on the path to responsible *tshuva*.

The task may seem daunting,  
it certainly seems that way to me.  
But looking at the *netane tokef* again  
I can learn something about powerlessness:  
There is a powerlessness that comes from beholding G-d's power  
and that feels awesome.  
and there is a powerlessness that feels more like fatigue, despair, fury  
not awesome and grand

but awful and small.

what's the difference between the *good* powerlessness,  
–the powerlessness of true humility,  
and the bad powerlessness  
–a powerlessness of despair?

The Good powerlessness comes  
through seeing that we are small in contrast to God.  
It comes from remembering that we are not alone.  
The 'bad' powerlessness comes  
from forgetting that we are not alone.

We stand shoulder to shoulder with all humankind.  
We are not singular  
not unconnected  
not ineffective  
not unaffected.

Being small is true and awesome.  
Being alone is not our nature.  
It is in fact our greatest source of suffering.  
Everything—even death  
is bearable when we remember that we are not in it alone.  
As Jews we are commanded to love G-d completely  
with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.  
This command of the Shema is given in the singular  
“thou shalt”  
but the second paragraph of the Shema  
repeats the command to love  
b'khol levavkhem—with all your hearts, plural  
with all your souls, collectively.  
This task of knowing G-d,  
of being aware of who is really in charge  
and what that requires of us  
this is a *joint* effort, a *societal* effort.  
It's not just something we can do privately in our homes.

And this brings us to where we are today, gathered together.  
In just a few minutes we will hear the sound of the shofar.  
The tekiah the unbroken sound is a gathering call.  
The broken sounds were the sounds to disperse  
(the broken sounds are also the sounds of crying).  
There are multiple interpretations of these sounds  
but notice their placement  
whole– broken– whole  
tkiah shvarim tkiah  
always-- whole broken whole

We are being GATHERED.  
Once we are gathered, *then* we do our work  
be it celebrating, crying, warring, building  
but we do it together  
it is our only hope.  
It is our only strength.