

Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die: A Call to End the War in Gaza
A kavanah for Unetaneh Tokef
Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5786

I want to pause, before *Unetaneh Tokef*, just for a moment to share something that is in my heart. This is not a sermon but just a *kavanah*, an intention for this moment and a call to us as Jews, as American Jews, and as human beings.

The *piyut* (liturgical poem) we are about to sing is perhaps the most central in our liturgy. It recognizes, humbly, our possible fate in the year ahead. It recognizes that our destiny is in God's hands, that we relinquish control. It mirrors the words of Hannah's Prayer that we chanted yesterday in the *Haftarah*:

ה' מָמִית וּמַחְיֶה

“Adonai deals death and gives life.”

But we must be careful in how we understand “God's hands.”

Yes, we are not in control, we don't know what will happen, we don't know when and how we will die.

AND

We humans have control over other humans' lives, and right now the destiny of a whole population is in our hands.

We will chant in a moment:

“Who will live and who will die; who by hunger and who by thirst.”

Right now, these questions can't be asked to God, we need to answer these questions. Sometimes it is not God's doing. It is our doing. And what is happening right now in Gaza is our doing.

Almost two years since October 7th, we know that this war is not anymore about self-defense or response to the atrocities of that terrible, black, dark day, nor about

bringing the hostages back, but it is a war with a clear vision of occupying Gaza, and it is a war of revenge. That is not a hidden vision of the extremist messianic government of Israel.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in speaking about the reasons for his involvement in the peace movement, writes¹:

“Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings... in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society some are guilty, while all are responsible.”

Heschel continues and says: “I did not feel guilty as an individual American for the bloodshed in Vietnam, but I felt deeply responsible.”

“You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,” says the Torah. Heschel teaches: “This is not a recommendation but an imperative, a supreme commandment.”

So as we are about to chant these words, “Who will live and who will die; who by hunger and who by thirst,” let's remember it is not entirely in God's hands, it is in our hands.

As an American Jewish community we must speak up, joining the majority of Israelis who want this war to end right now.

Teshuva (repentance), Tefilah (worship), Tzedakah (charity/justice), says the *piyut*, can avert the severity of the decree.

The suffering is already beyond our human understanding, but we can still do the work so this tragedy ends.

¹Abraham Joshua Heschel. “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement.” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*. Edited by Susannah Heschel, page 224.

May we recognize our responsibility.
May we do our part, even small, to end the suffering.