

High Holidays 5783/2022 – A Climate Reading of the Unetaneh Tokef

In the story of the Binding of Isaac, Isaac speaks only once, to ask his father, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7) At some point, Isaac must have realized that he himself is to be the offering, and that his father had lied to him.

Perhaps, in the split-second after his father picked up the knife and before the angel spoke, Isaac saw what his father did not see – the angel and the ram caught in the thicket.

Are we strong enough to face the perils of climate change and move into action? Are we brave enough to leave the familiar for the unknown? Do we have temerity and strength to go on, to find— perhaps as Isaac did – hope and resilience despite ultimate danger, even when that danger comes from our own families’, communities’, and country’s inaction and inability to perceive that danger? Are we brave enough to make *t’shuvah* for climate disruption— not only for ourselves but for one another? Ultimately, we face questions of priorities and values that we must make both as individuals and collectively.

Climate change and its cascade of ill-effects force us to confront our own hubris, habits and fear of change in order to make *t’shuvah*, to mitigate what is bad now to prevent devastation later. As modern as we are, as far as we have come, as many strides we have made for progress, humanity is still fragile, vulnerable, human.

The dire consequences that loom in the *Unetaneh Tokef* mark the Days of Awe with a weight that we often try to soften, but this moment calls for its full unmitigated power. Human arrogance in our relationship to the planet coupled with disbelief that our collective actions could have such devastating impacts constitute transgressions for which the only antidote is *t’shuvah*, to make amends and repent.

A Climate Reading of the Unetaneh Tokef

On Rosh Hashanah it is written,

On Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many will [pass from the earth](#) due to extreme heat,

how many will [be created](#) even as our children and grandchildren inherit a burning world;

who will live and who will die;

who will reach [the ripeness of age](#) thanks to stolen, pillaged wealth;

who will be [taken before their time](#) because they lived in a vulnerable nation;

who by California [wildfire](#) and who by Kentucky [floodwater](#);

who by weapons of war – [sword](#) and gun – fueled by fossil fuel money and who by [beast](#) – [animals who suffer](#) because one species refuses to behave reasonably and make amends;

who by [hunger](#) in Madagascar and who by [thirst](#) in the increasingly-arid deserts of Jordan and Israel;

who by [earthquake](#) from fracking and who by [plague](#) or [mosquito-borne illnesses](#);

who by [strangling](#) smog and who by landslides of [stone](#) and mud,
who will [rest](#) as the world burns and who will [wander](#) as a climate refugee;
who will be [tranquil](#) with ignorance and inaction and who will be [troubled](#) by anxiety and rage;
who will live in worsening [poverty](#) and who in [prosperity](#) will protect them...for the time being;
who will be [degraded](#) and sold as a child bride and who [exalted](#) for their pursuit of profit.

But t'shuvah, t'fillah, and tzedakah can temper judgement's severe decree.

What might our *teshuvah* look like in the coming year if we commit to praying, giving of our resources, and acting not only as individuals but also together?

(This could become a congregational discussion, or you might suggest specific actions.)