

# Three of Rabbi David's High Holy Day Teachings 5783

Hin'ni Kavana: "Imposter of Not"

Unetaneh Tokef: "Sanctifying Our Lives by Acknowledging Our Death"

D'var Torah: "Is Reciprocity Sum-Zero?"

**Kavana for the *Hin'ni Prayer* – Rosh Hashanah Morning 2022, 5783**

## **Imposter or Not**

By Rabbi David J. Cooper

Last week during the Selichot service on Saturday night, three of us who are service leaders were schmoozing about how we are subject to the imposter syndrome. You know, that nagging belief that you are not what you are all cracked up to be. That you are playing a role for which you are not really prepared.

When I first became rabbi at Kehilla, I remember from time-to-time an issue would arise that required my response. And I would think, "I wonder what the rabbi will do; I wonder what I would do if I were the rabbi." And then of course it would hit me profoundly: I am the rabbi.

When the ancient Hebrew prophets would get the call from God, they would protest that God got it all wrong, that they were not the right stuff. The question that Moses asks God at the burning bush is, "Who am I that I should go before Pharaoh?"

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"Who am I?"

In that conversation with the service leaders, I commented that anyone who does not sense that they are an impostor – is an impostor. But perhaps it is better to say that anyone who cannot confess to themselves that at times they feel that they are an impostor is lying to themselves – is an impostor to themselves.

Each of us can incapacitate ourselves by that feeling of inadequacy. To take action in the face of all this requires a leap-of-faith. It requires us to believe that despite our self-doubts that we have been appointed either by God, by circumstance, or by fate to be here with this assignment at this moment. In the words of Alice Walker\*, we need to realize that "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

The Hin'ni prayer is sung by the cantor who confesses that they may be insufficient to the task of channeling the prayers of the people. Nevertheless the cantor pleads with the forces of heaven to accept the prayers that they are offering as the cantor.

Hineni means, "Here I am."

Here I am, with whatever shortcomings I carry. And despite it all, I accept on faith that I am empowered to take action.

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\* CORRECTION from Judith Kate Friedman: "We are the ones we've been waiting for" .... Poet June Jordan wrote these words in her poem *Passion*, 1980, for South African women in commemoration of those 40,000 women and children who presented themselves in bodily protest against the "dompass" in the capital of apartheid Aug 9, 1956. The poem was presented at the U.N. in 1978. It is oft quoted by many - including by Alice Walker as title of one of her more recent books.

**Kavana for *Unetaneh Tokef Prayer* – Rosh Hashanah Morning 2022, 5783**

## **Sanctifying Our Lives by Acknowledging Our Death**

by Rabbi David J. Cooper

In the early years of Kehilla, Rabbi Burt and I were talking about how we related to this prayer, Unetaneh Tokef. When we read it superficially it made us uncomfortable. It seemed to say that we would be rewarded for being good and punished for being bad. And yet, we knew that bad things happen to good people.

But there was something important in the prayer that redeemed it. It was that this was an ultimate prayer in our tradition that reminded us on the most introspective of days to remember that all of us will someday be dead and that to truly be alive, we must not be in denial that our lives are temporary.

Life is not a reward, and death is not a punishment. Life is a precious gift. Death is the divine nothingness from which we emerged and to which all of us must return.

Last year at High Holy Days, I did not really need the Untaneh Tokef prayer. I was living right inside Unetaneh Tokef. My mother had died four weeks before Rosh Hashanah, and my long-time beloved companion Marilyn was dying and would be gone four days after Yom Kippur. My mother's approach to life was essentially existentialist. She was a fan of Irvin Yalom, a psychologist who affirmed the psycho-spiritual necessity to accept the reality of death. And now my mother was dead. As for Marilyn, an eminent disability rights leader, when she realized that her cancer was likely to be terminal, she told us that she was comforted by knowing that she had made her life count for something. According to Leo Tolstoy in his novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a true horror of facing death is, if in that moment, we realize that we had never truly lived.

And just before these High Holy Days, I became a grandfather. My child has become a parent, and her most lovable infant is a new embodiment of all of life's potential.

Unetaneh Tokef reminds us that we are located between birth and death.

For me, it is not a god in the sky that is evaluating my life. It is that divinity within myself. It is that part of me that should know that I am just visiting. It already knows that I will die someday – by one means or another. It is not asking me whether I have been a good boy or a bad boy. It is asking me whether I am truly alive, whether am I living that unique life that is mine to live. Did I contribute my energy, my resources and my love to grace the lives around me? Did I try to leave the world better for my presence? And did I fully enjoy all the good stuff that I encountered and that was gifted unto me?

It is asking me to ask myself whether, when my time comes, will I be comforted to know that I had really lived when I had the chance?

*Unetaneh tokef kedushat ha-yom* – Together we proclaim the sacred power of this day.

**Teaching on the 5783 High Holy Theme: Reciprocity/Mutuality**

- Yom Kippur Afternoon 2022, 5783

## Is Reciprocity Zero-Sum? \*

by Rabbi David J. Cooper

Reciprocity and mutuality. I was thinking about these and wondered: Are we talking about an exchange? I mean, the earth has given to me, so is it in exchange that I give back to the earth? My society has given to me; what do I owe society in return? I am a beneficiary of my ancestors' spiritual resources and generational wealth. What am supposed to do? Pay back or pay forward?

And hey! I have dedicated my energy and my resources, what am I owed in return?

And so I wondered: If and when the mutuality is all played out, and we see what was exchanged one direction and then the other direction – does it all come out even. Should it all even-out? Is it a zero-sum game. For it to be reciprocal, must what I give out equal to what I get back?

Then I remembered a weird piece from Pirkey Avot, a part of the Mishnah in the Talmud. A bunch of rabbis are sitting around playing games with numbers. They schmooze about all the things in the tradition that relate to the number ten. You know, 10 commandments, 10 plagues. Then they play with sevens. It's almost a game of trivia. Then they jump down to fours, and here the discussion seemed to get more serious. They consider the possibility that there are four types of human beings in regards to ownership. [Pirkey Avot 5:13] They make comments on each, but first I want to read it to you without their comments

One personality type says: "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours"

Another says: "What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine"

Another says: "What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours"

And fourth says "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is mine"

Here are the rabbis' comments:

About the one that says "mine is yours and yours is mine" they say, this person has no idea what they're talking about. But I thought, well maybe that is reciprocity.

About the one that says "mine is mine, and yours is mine" they say this is a criminal who thinks they can steal what belongs to you.

About the one that says "mine is yours is yours is yours" they say that this is a person of lovingkindness. And I thought, perhaps, maybe a little too generous. But I had not thought this could possibly be reciprocity or mutuality.

But the comment of the rabbis that puzzled me the most was this. About the first person, the one who said "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours." One rabbi says that this a moderate position. It seems only fair. I should not take what is yours and you should not take what is mine. Seems reasonable.

But another rabbi objects and he says "This is the character type of the people of Sodom." Now Sodom is the city in the book of Genesis that God destroys for some grave sin that is not specified. [Gen. 19:1-25] In traditional Christian interpretations, the sin of Sodom was gay sex. But in most Jewish commentaries, the sin of the city was that they did not take care of strangers, that they did not provide hospitality to foreigners, they did not take care of the poor for fear that the poor would become entitled. I mean does this sound familiar?

Still, it does seem pretty excessive to say that such a person should be punished like the people of Sodom if they believe that “mine is mine, and yours is yours.”

In the story of Sodom, God destroys the city and saves Abraham’s nephew Lot and his two daughters.

Here is how the Talmud explains the sin of the people of that city

“The people of Sodom have no share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated [in Genesis 13:13]: ‘And the people of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly’ [Sanhedrin 109A]

The rabbis continue:

“...[This] is referring to sins they committed with their money, as it is written [in Deuteronomy 15:9] ‘If you are mean and give nothing to your needy kin—they will cry out to YHVH against you, and you will be judged guilty of a sin.’” The rabbis imagine that the leaders of Sodom thought in the following way: “Since we live in a land from which bread comes and has gold dust, we have everything that we need. Why do we need outsiders, as they come only to take our property from us?” [Sanhedrin 109A]

So to illustrate their point the rabbis retell a legend about Sodom that does not appear in the Torah. In this legend, Lot originally had three daughters, not two; they name one of them they call “Pleytit”

This is how the story is told in the text of the writings of Rabbi Eliezer, another Talmud era rabbi.

The Sodomites made a proclamation: “Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor or the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt by fire.”

Pleytit, daughter of Lot, was wedded to one of the magnates of Sodom. She saw a certain very poor man in the street of the city, and her soul was grieved on his account. What did she do? Every day when she went out to draw water, she filled her bucket with all sorts of provisions from her home, and she fed the man.

The men of Sodom said: How does this poor man manage to stay alive? When they figured it out, they brought Pleytit forward to be burnt at the stake. She called out: “Sovereign of all worlds! Defend my case and my cause...” And her cry ascended before the Throne of Glory. In that hour the Holy One, of blessed name, said: “I will now go down, and I will see” [Gen. 18:21] whether the cry of this young woman says the truth about what the men of Sodom have done, [and if so] I will turn the city upside down.”

[Pirkey De-Rabbi Eliezer 25:8]

So the basic attitude of Sodom according to these legends is “What is mine is mine and what is yours, is yours.” On its surface, it has some aspect of mutuality. Each one will keep what they have and not take anything from anyone else. But this the rabbis considered an enormous transgression. It seems that the rabbis consider this worse than the criminal who says, “What is mine is mine and what's yours is mine.”

Maybe, it’s worse because stealing by a criminal is obvious, while the moderate position of each person for themselves is actually hiding a great evil that can overturn society itself.

Pleytit, on the other hand, has the position: “What is your is yours, and what is mine is yours.” She extended help and resources to someone without any expectation of a reciprocation. Her approach does not appear to be one of mutuality at all.

And still, it is what the rabbis call the attitude of lovingkindness.

But Pleytit's approach is unbalanced. She acts as if she owes the other more than the other one owes to her. Can that be right?

Immanuel Levinas would say that she is indeed correct.

Levinas, was a 20th century Jewish philosopher. To him, the foundation of all philosophy is when one is inside the ethical moment – that is the moment when I become aware of the Other. In that moment, an ethical responsibility descends upon me. I must be available to regard you as a human being, to understand that you have needs; that you need not to be harmed. I am to act to maximize for you any benefit that I am able to extend.

Okay, but Levinas does not stop there. He says that my responsibility to you *exceeds* your responsibility to me.

It sounds like a variation on what is mine is yours.

It seems unfair. Why should I owe you more than you owe me? In the spirit of reciprocity, shouldn't our responsibilities be equal?

What's more, if he's right, then *you*, in *your* capacity, you owe me more than I owe you. So it doesn't seem to make sense.

And yet, for Levinas all ethics and all philosophy hinge on this moment.

What it comes down to is that *my* responsibility to you – that is *my* business; I owe you more than you owe me – it is my responsibility regardless. As for *your* responsibility to me – that is your business, not mine. I cannot condition how I respond to you on whether or not you respect your excess responsibility to me.

Person A says: I'll be nice to you, if you'll be nice to me.

Person B: No, I'll be nice to you only if I can be sure in advance that you'll be nice to me.

Person A: You first.

Person B: No – you go first.

And so on and so on, until no one would ever take the first step.

A relationship of reciprocity cannot start at all *if it is conditional*. If it is conditional, then it is not true reciprocity, it is quid pro quo, tit for tat. I'll do this, if you do that. That is not *reciprocity*, that is *transactionality*. If anyone is to take the first step, they cannot do so expecting or assuming that they will be reciprocated.

So, if you get nothing more from me this afternoon, get this:

Reciprocity cannot depend on a reciprocal reciprocity.

Reciprocity cannot depend on a reciprocal reciprocity.

I am taking care of this infant without the expectation that they will necessarily take care of me when they grow up.

I will give tzedaka, even if I get nothing material back for it.  
I will bury the dead with respect even though the dead can do nothing more for me.

The difference between transactionality and reciprocity is the difference between a contract and a covenant. In a contract, I am absolved of all responsibility if you do not live up to your end of the bargain. But in a covenant, all parties remain responsible whether or not the other lives up to their promise.

I will continue to be bound up in the covenant to do good in this world, even if the world has not been so good to me. I will continue to be part of the struggle for climate justice, even if I cannot be guaranteed that the oceans will not rise.

Is this really altruism where I do good only for its own sake without any benefit to me?

Many years ago I heard this about the Inuit indigenous people of the arctic. I cannot remember where I heard it. But the story goes that if the people of one igloo lose their sled under the ice and another igloo has two sleds, they pass the extra sled unconditionally to those who lost theirs. They do not regard this as charity. When asked why they did it, they explained that if they did not do this, they would *all die*. They are not expecting God to punish them. They simply feel that if their people stopped acting this way, that the natural consequence would be that eventually they would all die.

Another example comes from one of my favorite movies, *Dersu Uzala*, by Akira Kurosawa based on a true story set in the far east of Russia in 1902 near the Siberian lake of Khanka. A Russian expedition is sent to the area to survey the land. Their captain, Vladimir Arsenev quickly realizes that they need help in exploring and surviving in this wild zone. He befriends and then hires Dersu Uzala who is an indigenous man of the Goldi/Nanai tribe who hunts and survives in the deep forests of Siberia. He becomes the expedition's guide and tracker.

Once, as a stormy rain approaches, Dersu tracks down a hut where they take shelter. When the rain finally passes on, the men of the expedition start to move out but Dersu stops them. "Capitan," he says, "leave rice, salt and matches." Arsenev asks, "What for? Do you intend to come back?" Dersu responds, "Others will come this way. They will find dry wood here, food to eat. People won't die.

Arsenev writes in his diary about Dersu that "He considered the needs of a person he did not know and would likely never meet."

I was recently reading about the late Edward Said, the Palestinian-American activist. In Said's book *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, he decries the so-called peace negotiations conducted in an unequal power dynamic and steeped in a lopsided transactionality. I was reminded about Levinas' claim that the moment where ethics and philosophy begins is when we acknowledge the immediate presence of the Other. As Said defends his vision of a bi-national state in Israel/Palestine, He writes:

The essence of that vision is coexistence and sharing in ways that require an innovative, daring, and theoretical willingness to get beyond the arid stalemate of assertion, exclusivism and rejection. Once the initial acknowledgment of the Other is made, I believe the way forward becomes not only possible but attractive.

[Edward W. Said, *End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, London: Granta Books. 2000, p. 319]

So, if we are going to survive, as a species, as a society, even as a synagogue, we cannot do it on a transactional basis. We cannot do it like a contract, where I expect to get out exactly what I put in.

The Torah has rules for Israelites and Judeans about the year of Shmittah and the Jubilee year. If we followed those rules today, our financial ledgers could never be evenly balanced. You see, all creditors have to forgive their outstanding loans when the shmittah year arrives. If you acquired any property from a family who had to sell it, on the Jubilee year, they must have their property restored to them. How much better would all of us be if the accumulation of college tuition debt were written off. As a society we must sometimes act on the assumption that what is yours is yours and some of what is mine is yours too.

That said, there are some outstanding debts that we should not cancel, such as debts of restitution for enslavement and genocide. Reconciliation will depend on truthfully facing up to our history, admitting our debts and determining how we can better pay up.

Spiritually, each year as we evaluate the state of our souls on the High Holy Days, we can always find where we have fallen short – a spiritual indebtedness. If we kept advancing and accumulating that from year to year, we would fall very far behind. But on Kol Nidre night and on Yom Kippur, we examine where we missed the mark, and as we approach Neila at the end of the day, we resolve to do better even as we forgive and annul some of the accumulation of that spiritual indebtedness.

Jesus, in his capacity as a first century rabbi is reported to have offered up a piece of liturgy often called the Lord's prayer. In one verse it beseeches that we be forgiven our debts and we forgive those who are indebted to us. [Matthew 9:12] It is a release of what we own.

Justice, tzedek, demands that when we are empowered, righteousness demands that we act with lovingkindness in recognition that much of what is mine must be yours. Shalom, peace depends on it.

On p. 113, song number 15: TzedekTzedek Tirdof

Justice justice shall you pursue. [Deut. 16:20] Demand peace and pursue it. [Psalms 34:15]

Shanah Tovah!

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\* Before I began this teaching, I introduced it as follows:

“Good afternoon and welcome to Kehilla Yom Kippur afternoon's assortment of offerings as we advance to Neila and close this Day of Atonement. I am dedicating this teaching today to the memory of Marilyn Golden, my beloved companion for 25 years. It's a bit poignant for me today because Yom Kippur last year was Marilyn's last day with full consciousness. The next day her final crisis began and she died four days later on the first day of Sukkot.

“Her last experience of Kehilla was my teaching last year. I gave that talk from my living room, and she and her childhood friend, Mimi Jefferson, watched from her bedroom. So I am right now experiencing both her absence and her presence.”