



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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### **MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.**

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

Sub-series B: Sermons, 1950-1989, undated.

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Yom Kippur sermon, 1988.

YOM KIPPUR SERMON  
Daniel Jeremy Silver  
September 20, 1988

One of the most beautiful of the meditations which fill the Yom Kippur service is known as U-Natana Tokef, let us proclaim the sacred power of this day. If you are in your seats for the afternoon service early enough, then you will hear the very beautiful, majestic melody to which this meditation has been set. This evening I would like to use the U-Natana Tokef as a frame in which to talk over with you some of the basic themes of this Yom Kippur.



Essentially, the U-Natana-Tokef deals with God's judgment, not a judgment which at one time many believed would come at the end of time, but the private judgment which God passes on each of our lives. According to those who have done the research, U-Natana-Tokef is over a thousand years old and the basic meditation was shaped in the synagogues of Palestine during Gaonic times. It quickly became consecrated by familiarity and use, and also by martyrdom.



We are told that at the end of the 11th century, when those terrifying crusades were spreading throughout Europe, a fanatic bishop in the Alsace gave to the leading sage of a small Jewish community a bitter choice between baptism and death: The sage chose death, and the faithful insist that the lines of U-Natana-Tokef, of this meditation on God's judgment, were the last words which crossed his lips.



This Yom Kippur of ours has gone through a number of significant transformations. It began humbly, without any anticipation of the greatness it would achieve in Jewish life. In earliest times, during the age of the Israelites, Yom Kippur was nothing but a day of purification for the shrine. The priest would perform a sacrifice of expiation, and it was believed that through this sacrifice and other priestly acts, the shrine was purged of any dross and any contamination, and that any demons were exorcised, and the shrine was made fit as a place to carry out the ceremonies of God.



We owe the grandeur, the centrality of Yom Kippur, to the priests of the Second Temple, for they turned this day of purgation away from the cleanliness of the shrine to the purity of the human soul. During the days of the Second Temple, the great act of Yom Kippur was the confession of the High Priest. On that day, and on that day alone, he was dressed in the pure white of his office and he presented himself before the Devir, the Holy of Holies, and he entered the Holy of Holies, and he offered there a formula of confession to God for his sins and for the sins of the people.



He spoke of reconciliation between God and man and sought for himself and his people reconciliation with God. With the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 of this era, it was no longer possible for these sacred rites to take place in the shrine, and the rabbis brought the confessional into the synagogue and they began to conceive of it in a very special way. Over time, Yom Kippur became the day in which we searched our individual souls, seeking to judge ourselves by God's standards.



The familiar myth of God's judgment originates with the idea that on Yom Kippur God announces the decisions which He has come to, the sentence which He has passed on each of us. On Rosh Hashanah our case is heard, the evidence is set down, written down, and on Yom Kippur, the judgment is announced.

This myth <sup>WAS</sup> in a sense a reflex of a common political practice. In ancient and medieval times, when royalty was in the ascendant, the king would on his birthday or on the anniversary of his coronation announce promotions and honors, and he would declare



whether prisoners should be executed or pardoned. What was more natural but for generations who believed that God was the King of kings than to believe that on the holiest day, Yom Kippur, God would announce the sentence which had been determined for each of us. And it is this, of course, which explains the rather strange verbs which we use when we greet one another during the holiday season - La Shana Tova Tika Tivu - we say to each other on Rosh Hashana - may you be written for a good year.



What does this mean, to be written for a good year? May you be written down in the ledger of God's court for a good year. And the traditional greeting for Yom Kippur was La Shanah Tova Tika Tevu Tekah Temu - may you be written and sealed in the book of life for a good year: When the decision is finally confirmed, sealed, may the decision be a happy and auspicious one for you and for yours.




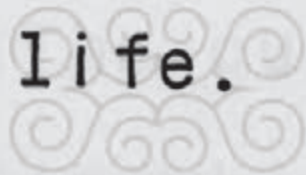

Now, obviously, for generations those who believed that this was truly the day in which God announced the sentence, the mood was one of anxious anticipation. The piyut, U-Natana\_Tokef, the great religious poem which I want to discuss with you, begins by affirming this mood - let us declare the sacred power of this day for it is a day of awe and of holy dread. And then the poem goes on to speak of God enthroned, God in His court, sitting in judgment, listening to the journal of our lives, and making his decision on the basis of our conduct.



All that is there to be read out is read out. Nothing is omitted, even ~~the~~ things that we have conveniently forgotten. And then God passes judgment-- who shall live and who shall die, who in the fullness of years and who with his life abbreviated --but God, the pyiut adds, does not want the death of the sinner but that he repent of the evil of his ways, and that he live.



And how can we avert an unwanted sentence? Repentance, prayer, and acts of compassion and of justice can avert an evil decree. We see God first enthroned in judgment, and at the end we see God merciful, slow to anger and full of mercy, willing to accept repentance, willing to accept a changed life.



has a day in which she announces honors and new titles, and there are some state governors who use the Christmas season to announce pardons and amnesties, but there is very little in our lives which could lead us to affirm the literal meaning of this rabbinic myth.



Now, obviously, this myth is no longer credible to us. We live in a democratic age. We don't think of God literally as the King of kings. We don't assume God as judge. There is very little in our experience which speaks to us of a day of sentencing. There are still vestiges of old ways of thought. The queen of England annually has a day in which she announces honors and new titles, and there are some state governors who use the Christmas season to announce pardons and amnesties, but there is very little in our lives which could lead us to affirm the literal meaning of this rabbinic myth.



Though the myth has lost credibility, it has not lost its imaginative force. It is good to imagine ourselves this day standing before God, standing before God and rendering account for our lives, for the conduct of our lives, for there is a judgment. Life is a gift of God and each of us must ultimately render account of the use or misuse which we make of God's gift.

we've managed our lives as we meant to do.



Now, I know that we are, for the most part, quite responsible people. And I know that there are times during every year that we take ourselves in hand and look clearly at ourselves in the mirror of our soul, and we ask ourselves if we are managing our lives well, if we are really carrying out the plans which we have undertaken, if we've developed our talents, if we've managed our lives as we meant to do.



But I also know that we ask these questions within the terms of conventional values. We tend to assume that the values affirmed by middle-class American society are somehow good and right and, of course, many of them are, but they are not necessarily God's values. It's good and it's worthwhile for each of us to examine ourselves not in terms of how we are living up to the standards of respectability and neighborliness and community service which are set for us by our neighbors, but how we're living up to our own talents and our own capacities and to our own opportunities, as God would in fact see them.



You know, I sometimes fancy myself in that court room of God. I like to think of myself as sitting alone in the back row, and I like to assume that a certain group of people are standing before God's judgment. And who are these people? These are the people, the men and women, who have been selected by our community for one or another of those great city-wide dinners that used to take place downtown. And I like to assume that these honorees begin their defense by reading the effusive, eulogistic citations which they receive; and then I like to assume that God reads out the unvarnished journal of their lives.



But, of course, Yom Kippur is not a day to take any kind of joy in the discomfiture of another. It is we who must be discomfited. It is we who are in the dock. It is we who must render account for our lives, we who are so full of excuses and rationalizations, we who can so easily and conveniently forget what it is convenient for us to forget, we who can always put into a good light the most mean and tawdry acts of which we are capable.



Imagine yourself in the dock. It says here in the journal that you did very little last year about the major problems of your community, about poverty, about race, about aging. How do you account for this?





"But I did have an appointment, I had "I gave money to various charities."  
But that's a pittance. Here was need  
and you didn't even see the need.

"But a man must take care of his own family, of his own self first, I didn't have the time." It says here that you wasted a good bit of time every day, and here it says that a friend of yours turned to you in need, needed to talk, and you were busy.

"But my life is full of responsibility." Whose life isn't?



"But I did have an appointment, I had to go." There was a telephone, you could have excused yourself, isn't it really true that in your soul you didn't want to get involved? Or again, it says here that you did a good bit of complaining last year about your life, you're not satisfied with it, you wanted to be more, to do more, to do more exciting things, you were burdened by children, you were burdened by elderly parents, there was a great deal of self-pity here.

"But my life is full of responsibility." Whose life isn't?



"I didn't have the time to really do something about it." Is it that you didn't have the time or that you didn't have the will?

It's good to take ourselves in hand and to look at our lives as God might see them, and that is, of course, the image that the old myth projects for us on this Yom Kippur day.

With all of my religion classes at the university I would go over the basic meditations and parts of the Yom Kippur service. When I read this U-Natana Tokef to them, one student would always object and would say to me:



"I can see the value, the sensitizing value, of the idea of judgment. It's effective role playing. But I really do not see the value of the sentencing, the fear that is transmitted, who shall live and who shall die, who in the fullness of age and who in a foreshortened span of years, because it simply is not true. It's not true that there is any direct relationship between the quality of life and success, or between the worth of a life and longevity."



Now, despite the seeming truth of that observation, I was not willing to grant it immediately, for isn't it true that those who drink too much or smoke too much or abuse their bodies with drugs, isn't it true that these people in fact sentence themselves? Foreshorten their lives? And isn't it true that someone who tries to burn the candle at both ends has a shorter candle, a shorter life?



I am convinced that the anonymous author of U-Natana-Tokef had read Job, and I know that he was quite aware that in our tradition there is no assumption of a direct relationship between character and worth, and longevity or success. There are a lot of sinners who are successful and there are a lot of good people who never enjoy status or fame or security.



As a man who obviously knew the dimensions of Judaism, the author of Job knew our tradition, S'har\_mitzvah\_mitzvah, the reward of the good deed is the good deed itself, we do the good simply because it should be done.

And I hope that he knew the other interpretation of this simple text, that the reward of a good deed is another good deed, that in measure as we discipline our lives, train ourselves to be sensitive, so we develop a sensitive soul. In measure as we train our mind to be useful, to be aware of the whole range of the possibilities of life, we bring our mind to the fullness of its possibilities.



Every act of good manners helps us to become a gentle woman or a gentle man. Every conscious discipline is one which increases our capacity to develop the good habits which give us the freedom to stand above and control our impulses and our lusts and those things which coarsen our lives and drag them down. The reward of a good deed is another good deed and, ultimately, the reward of many good deeds is a life which is satisfying and a life which is fulfilling. The reward of sin is that sin leads to other sins and ultimately we lead a life which lacks virtue and value.



So, I was not ready to concede to any student that, in fact, there is no sentence. There is a judgment and there is a sentence. The sentence is not just a word. It is a way of life. They had to work at it. They worked at it by years of indulgence, years of moral laziness, years of bad manners, years of careless living. The consequence of one sin is another sin. The consequence of many sins is a life which is mean. The reward of one good deed is ultimately others and then a life of quality. The reward of sin is that sin leads to other sins and ultimately we lead a life which lacks virtue and value.



So, I was not ready to concede to any student that, in fact, there is no sentence. There is a judgment and there is a sentence. The sentence is not passed just on this day. It is implicit in life itself. It is implicit in God's creation. We are accountable. We are what we have allowed ourselves to become, but we need not remain only that which we are now. God does not desire the death of a sinner, the hollow life, the empty life, the vulgar life, but that he repent of the evil of his ways, he repent of his laziness, his indifference, his indulgence, his carelessness, and live, truly live.



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"Rabbi, I've worked hard, I've had a measure of success, I've met all of my responsibilities, I should be at the stage where life is giving me a good bit of pleasure, but my children are gone and I hardly know them. My wife is involved in her own work and for me it's a round of the same old games, the same people, the same talk, the same issues stand out above all others. The first deals with grief, death, dying; the second deals with what can only be called the quality of life. But we have to make it so and we can't accomplish this impulsively at a service, even a Yom Kippur service.



"Rabbi, I've worked hard, I've had a measure of success, I've met all of my responsibilities, I should be at the stage where life is giving me a good bit of pleasure, but my children are gone and I hardly know them. My wife is involved in her own work and for me it's a round of the same problems, the same people, the same small talk, the same games. Surely, rabbi, there's more to life than that."

And, of course, there is. But we have to make it so and we can't accomplish this impulsively at a service, even a Yom Kippur service.



There is no sadder experience for me as a rabbi than to stand at the bedside of someone who has been told that if he does not want another attack that may be fatal, he had better take his life in hand and develop new disciplines. I recognize the difficulty of changing life patterns, but there are times when they must be changed. I know the sorrow of recognizing that talents you had when you were a child, interests you had as an adolescent, capacities you had when you were a young man or a young woman, have somehow been allowed to rust, to atrophy, and I know the difficulties of bringing them back as central elements of your life.



You can't allow your talents to atrophy from childhood and assume that suddenly at some point in your life you're going to be able to call up again the musical talent in which you never trained yourself, the mind which was interested in art or in history or in world politics, in a body which has turned its attention, its eyes, only to the sports page or to the financial page or to the society page.



Just as a youngster <sup>who</sup> ~~can~~ ignores his school work and then obviously <sup>can</sup> not be prepared to present himself as a qualified candidate at some graduate or professional school, so none of us can spend the first 20 or 30 or 40 years of our adult life totally involved in worldly things and assume that suddenly we can summon up other capacities and other strengths. We are what we have allowed ourselves to become. How then do we begin to turn our lives around, to give our lives a broader focus? Repentance, prayer, and charity can avert the evil decree.



What is repentance? Repentance, Ieshuvah, is not simply reading the litany of confession in the prayer book. Repentance is not a superficial resolution about the favorite sin of our lives. You know, we all have some sin that we like to talk about. We smoke too much. We talk too much. We eat too much. And we talk about that sin all the time.

Repentance has to do with turning our whole life back to God, turning our whole life back to the talents and capacities, the sensitivities which were once there.



When do we know that we are contrite and have made repentance? When we see ourselves as full of self-pity, burdened by family responsibilities which we know really ought not to be a burden, determined to live our own lives, to find our own happiness, do our own thing, not to be caught in what we call the trap of family responsibility, and then we think of the child who wanted only to please her parents, and the tear comes to our cheek.



When have we made Teshuvah? We've made Teshuvah when a tear comes to our worldly cheek, we who are so proud of being worldly and wise and realistic, we who are self-confident, who prate that it's a dog-eat-dog world and no one's going to eat me, when we remember that the full truth is not an answer to the question, "what's in it for me," and remember instead the child who brought his favorite toy to school for the poor children.



Teshuvah begins when we can crack the shell, the shell of self-involvement, the materialistic shell, the worldly shell, that most of us, all of us, build up about our lives every day. It's not good to be too soft-hearted, but when you build that shell so tight that your soul has no capacity to expand, to be generous, to be impulsive, to be spontaneous, when you are emotionally corseted, surely your life is not satisfying to God and certainly it's not fully satisfying to you. We are more than machines put on earth to get, to acquire, to succeed.



How do we begin to change the sentence? By learning to shed the tear. Once the tear has been shed, once the shell has begun to break, then we've got to be disciplined, then we've got to seriously take our lives in hand and do something that is disciplined, a regimen, faithfully, and that's why the second requirement of the Piyut is worship, congregation, the coming together. Here, every week, we are reminded that we are under God. Here, every week, we are with the like-minded, the concerned, rather than with those who do not care. We come to share values and share compassions and share concerns.



It's fascinating to me how much a secular world has picked up this psychological truth, for I notice springing up here and there little groups of people who have come together to encourage one another, to reinforce the new discipline that they have adopted.

Here and there, there are groups of those who were once alcoholic who come together to share their need to be reinforced in this new discipline of withdrawal and self-denial; and here and there, there are groups <sup>of those</sup> who are divorced and find themselves a single parent, who come to share experiences, but

compassion, of generosity, acts of social concern, the acts in which we give of our time and give of ourselves,



essentially reinforce one another so that they can meet the demands, the unusual demands, which are now being placed upon them.

The difference between those groups and Iefillah, those groups and the groups of worship, is simply this. Here, as there, there is congregation, there is a community. But here there's also the overwhelming, overarching sense of being under God. It's not enough just to cope. What we have to learn is to lead the consecrated life. The tear, the discipline, and ultimately acts of compassion, of generosity, acts of social concern, the acts in which we give of our time and give of ourselves,



these help to avert the evil decree. We've got to take resolution and make it active, and the resolutions cannot simply be to have more for ourselves but to give ourselves more largely to others. It's here that we recognize that we have been sinners.

Once, after a Yom Kippur service, a gentle soul came up to me to complain about the language of the prayer book. "Rabbi," she said, "the language of the prayer book is too harsh. The words are like hammers. I know I'm not perfect. I know I have my weaknesses, but I am not a sinner and I'm not perverse."



Well, in a sense, self-righteousness is a perversity, but I do find the label "sinner" is one of the labels that I bear most comfortably. What is sin? Sin is the measure of the distance between that which I am able to do and that which I, in fact, do. You cannot sin when you cannot achieve the act. That I am a sinner means that there is more that I can be than I am now.

~~able to do that which in fact do.~~

~~are now.~~ That I am a sinner reminds me constantly of how much higher I can climb, how much more I can make of myself, my soul, my spirit, than I have up till now.



We live in a self-indulgent age, you and I. We don't like to call acts what they are so we have developed all kinds of euphemisms. There are no sinners out there, <sup>they</sup> ~~they~~ are neurotic people, they're compulsive people, they're people who have some psychological problem, but there are no sinners. And the problem with all of these euphemistic labels is that they assume we've got to remain essentially what we are now. That I am a sinner reminds me constantly of how much higher I can climb, how much more I can make of myself, my soul, my spirit, than I have up till now.



You know, I've discovered a strange thing over the years, that the people I know to be the kindest and the most humane are precisely those who know themselves to be sinners, and it's the self-righteous, the self-confident, the self-assured, the worldly, who are confident that they're not sinners. The compassionate soul knows how far he or she has come and how far there is yet to go. The smug person, the self-confident person, the person who sees only their own success does not see how much further that he or she might go. turn it more to a focus on sharing and loving and caring and giving.



Yom Kippur is a great moment of possibility. Here I am, sinner. Here I am, here is a list, unvarnished of the journal, of all the compromises, all the cowardices, all of the manipulative and callous acts that I've performed. I'll never be perfect. I'll make my share of new sins in the new year, but I can certainly improve on what I've done. I certainly can discipline my life. I certainly can recognize that I need to turn my life around, to turn it from its focus on self and focus it more on God, to turn it from its focus on acquiring, turn it more to a focus on sharing and loving and caring and giving.

selfishness, the self-pitying quality



I'm not one who believes in the angelic quality of children, but I do know that before life takes hold of the child and the need to succeed, the drives to achieve, the drives to make a way for themselves become dominant, there are many talents and there are many impulses and there are many loves that that child has and could freely express -- you remember them, don't you -- and that you have suppressed through the years. Find again the child in you, and by discipline, and by hard work, and by determination begin to enlarge your life by enlarging your soul. God desires not the death of a sinner, but that a sinner repent of the selfishness, the self-pitying quality



of his ways, and the evil of his ways,  
and live. Live as you were meant to  
live, a life capable of love, of  
generosity, of feeling, a life in which  
you become aware of all of the  
possibilities of civilization, a life  
which will blast you out of the meanness  
of some of your habits, and allow you  
to stand modestly before God in  
judgment, knowing that you have not only  
succeeded in the ordinary terms of that  
word, but you have succeeded in a way  
which will be truly pleasing to God.