

Images of God: From Judge to Life Source
Meditation before *U'n'taneh Tokef*
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5776
September 14, 2015

So we reach, now, the single scariest prayer, the most terrifying words of the Days of Awe. "*U'n'taneh Tokef, Kedushat Hayom*. Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; it is awe-ful, and filled with dread." Here, the image of God as judge comes most sharply into focus: we pass before God and are known by name, evaluated... and sentenced. Our fate is considered, and sealed. The relationship with God is overwhelming...and completely hierarchical.

To the extent that these words shock us into looking inward, trying harder, doing better, they are, for many of us, powerful. They have their place in the liturgy, and Reform congregations that have omitted this prayer have often found themselves putting it back a few years later.

And yet this is, too, the most difficult imagery of the season. The blue study texts on the pages ahead, and the grey alternative readings, all wrestle with a reframe, with trying to make modern sense of these ancient words. Indeed, in the *Machzor* for Yom Kippur, one of the alternative readings is the song, by Leonard Cohen, *Who By Fire*, in which he daringly asks "And who shall we say is calling?"

But God as judge and jury alike... is only one possible metaphor we may use this High Holy Day season... through which to imagine our relationship with God. I learned one other, recently, from the former Israeli member of Knesset Ruth Calderon. She points to a verse in Jeremiah, which says "*Mikveh Yisrael, Adonai...* God is the hope of Israel..." (Jeremiah 17:13)... *Mikveh* meaning hope, as in, *HaTikvah*. She points out, however, the transformation of this verse in the Mishnah, the first part of the Talmud. There, in tractate Yoma, dealing with Yom Kippur, we are told, basically: "Do not read *Mikveh*, hope... but *Mikvah*...ritual bath." The place of purification, of renewal, of natural water.

God as the *Mikvah* of Israel! What an amazing alternative metaphor. For here, purification and renewal would come not from judgement, pronounced from above. No, God is around us, is in us, surrounds us.. we step into Divinity, we embrace and are embraced, and are, in a state of pure nature, thereby transformed.

Perhaps we need both: God the Judge, and God as a Source of Cleansing and Support. As we step into traditional imagery, as we feel the power of *Unetaneh Tokef*, though, remember...be struck by its power, but do not get stuck by its distance from us. This is... one tool of an image, which may help us, in our relationship with God, and with each other. It is... one, powerful image. It is...not the only one.

Page 175, and then, after that, back, to the middle of Page 174.