

A prayer for the Days of Awe: Unetaneh Tokef

This prayer is recited in synagogues at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is a serious reminder of human dependence upon God's mercy. 'Unetaneh tokef' means 'Let us speak of the awesomeness'.

"Let us now tell of the awesomeness of this day's holiness, for it is tremendous and awe filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted, your throne will be established in loving-kindness, and you will sit on that throne in truth.

It is true that you are the one who judges, and reproves, who knows all, and bears witness, who inscribes, and seals, who reckons [calculates] and enumerates [counts]. You remember all that is forgotten. You open the book of records, and from it, all shall be read. In it lies each person's insignia [signature].

And with a great shofar it is sounded, and a thin silent voice shall be heard. And the angels shall be alarmed, and dread and fear shall seize them as they proclaim: behold! the Day of Judgment on which the hosts of heaven shall be judged, for they too shall not be judged blameless by you, and all creatures shall parade before you as a herd of sheep. As a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do you shall pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each person's days, and inscribe their final judgment.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed – how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by [strangling] and who by [stoning], who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be [degraded], and who exalted. But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

For your praise is just as your name. You are slow to anger and quick to be appeased. For you do not desire the death of the condemned, rather, that they turn from their path and live and you wait for them until the day of their death, and if they repent, you receive them immediately. (It is true -) [For] you are their Creator and You understand their inclination, for they are but flesh and blood. We come from dust, and return to dust. We labour by our lives for bread, we are like broken shards, like dry grass, and like a withered flower; like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that passes, like dust that scatters, like a fleeting dream. But You are the king who lives for all eternity."

["There is no set span to your years and there is no end to the length of your days. It is impossible to estimate the angelic chariots of your glory and it is forbidden to pronounce your Name. Your Name is worthy of you and you are worthy of your Name, and you have included your Name in our name."]

Text from www.sefaria.org/Unetaneh_Tokef?lang=bi (Sefaria Community Translation)

Final three lines: translation from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unetaneh_Tokef available under CC BY-SA <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

To get you thinking:

- a. Explore the ideas and imagery of the text. What does it mean, and what effect might it have on a Jewish congregation reciting it, or on an individual Jew?
- b. Note that the text says that three things 'avert the severity of the decree': prayer, repentance and righteousness/charity. What is the significance of this in the context of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer?