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Kavana on Yom Kippur Shacharit
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Yom Kippur, and the days leading up to it, is when we do some of our hardest work. We reckon with pain in our individual and collective bodies, the harm we've caused, and the eternally present reality of death. We stand here with our mahzorim open to *unetaneh tokef*, a prayer that demands us to reckon with two key and highly political questions: *Who will we lose this year?* and *How will they be lost?* *Unetaneh tokef* asks us to reach for their faces, for their names, that we see them in their moment of loss.

How do we hold those questions now? When ICE is tearing down our neighbors' doors? Who by rising sea levels? Who by hurricane? Who by famine when no crops grow? How on Yom Kippur can we possibly stare into the deep trench of our losses and continue down the essential paths of love, resistance, compassion, resilience, and courage? The doorway to despair is so wide right now, and the possibility of being immobilized feels so intense.

Faced with the enormity of this passage I propose that we disregard our well intentioned call to linear reading and approach the text backwards starting with *utshuvah*, *utfilah*, *utzdakah / maavirin et roa hag'zeirah* | but through return to the path, through prayer, and giving justice, we can transcend the harshness of the decree. We cannot stomach the amount of devastation implied by *unetaneh tokef* without using its attached toolbox. Let's start with *tfilah*.

Tfilah, prayer, allows us to do something magical: to move from our daily linear sense of time, to a broader one. When in prayer, whether it's a moment of mindfulness amidst a difficult conversation or spending an entire day in shul, we forge a sacred connection to a much older sense of time and space. We're not bound by the difficulty of the moment, but allowed to open to all the wisdom behind us. We have full access, even if for the briefest moment, to the lines that stretch from each of us to the earliest moments of creation. Somewhere, in all of our lines, whether far back or nearby, we have ancestors who died in the midst of a fate described in *unetaneh tokef*, lost to war or famine, genocide or poverty, stoning or burning. I imagine tendrils of familial lines that I can't name, can't track down, in Belarus and Poland, distant relatives who died afraid that they would be the last of our people.

During the past year I've been working with the prayer practice of inviting these ancestors back into my life and body. Today when I wrap my tallit I'm asking them to nurture my resilience, to help me hold the possibility that we will lose loved ones to state violence, to a lack of healthcare, to militarized borders, to transphobia. That I, too, could be lost. My prayers reach towards our collective ancestors who fought thousands of unwinnable fights; to the ancestors who died in the Warsaw ghetto without knowing freedom again, unsure of their descendants' fates. In the face of a deep trench of despair they fought, and all these years later I invite their fortitude into my body to ease the harshness of the decree, to make painful truths easier to carry.

On Tisha B'av we practice holding each other in grief, and allowing grief to be held collectively. We cannot pretend to have spaces in our bodies for everything that's happening in this world. It is too big, too wide, too vast. Our bodies are too small, too fleshy and too delicate. We recite the *unetaneh tokef* together, not alone. We are not a solitary people, and it makes sense that our understanding of repair hinges on our capacity to be together. *Tshuvah* encompasses so much, but at its core, its root, it means return. Whatever it takes: fasting, calling out, singing, davening, is worthwhile if for no other reason than it assists in the difficult journey back to each other. Both to the people in this room, and those who have filled rooms and rooms before our time. We must return to each other again and again throughout

the year as we're called to ask *Who? When? How? Could I have stopped this?* And, I hurt to tell you what you already know, the answer to those questions will not magically get easier. And, we can hold each other through them.

I invite this prayer to be an act of opening, of connection. I pray we allow ourselves to reach towards every person who will be lost this year; allow ourselves to sit with our ancestors, lost to records. To stay in community with each other; even when we feel so afraid. Everyone in this room is here to hold you, and everyone throughout your line stands behind you, hands pressed softly against your back. Amidst a world that feels so far out of our control, we have more wisdom than we know. We have more capacity than we can see. No matter how far into darkness we walk, we practice *teshuvah*, we practice return. We practice *tefillah*, our voices resonating timelessly in prayer. We practice the necessity of using *tefillah* and *tshuvah* to help one another walk steadfastly towards justice, towards the call to *tzadakah*. Just as our ancestors have always done. Just as we must do now.