

"U'T'shuva, U'T'fila U'T'zedaka..." - Do Repentance, Prayer and Charity Really Avert the Evil Decree?

The moment is considered a highlight in the traditional Yamim Noraim service. In synagogues with cantors and/or choirs, it is often the opportunity to show off cantorial wizardry. But I remember it during my Yeshiva years in Israel and Chicago as a moment of great power, intensity, feeling and gut participation by all present. The moment is during the well-known prayer, *Un'taneh Tokef*, recited during the repetition of Musaf on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. After acclaiming the sanctity of the day, we invoke the imagery of God's Divine Book of Records. We have each signed this book with our deeds.

Following this we recite a litany of our possible fates for the coming year, inscribed on Rosh Hashana and sealed on Yom Kippur:

"Who shall live, and who shall die.... who by fire ... and who by the sword... who will be at peace and who will be torn about... who shall grow poor and who shall become rich...who shall be lowered and who shall be raised." Some of our possible ends are downright terrifying. And then comes that moment when, as I recall the way it was done in my Yeshivot, the entire congregation literally screamed out, *"U'T'SHUVA, U'T'FILA U'TZEDAKA MA-AVIRIN ET "RO-A HAGEZERA!"* "But Repentance (or return) and Prayer and Charity remove the Evil Decree!"

While the translations of this three-fold formula vary slightly in the differing prayerbooks (among the older books, for example, the Birnbaum machzor has it, "But Repentance, Prayer and Charity cancel the stern decree"; the Conservative Silverman machzor reads "But Repentance, Prayer and Righteousness avert the severe decree.") they all seem to imply that if we return in penitence to God and the Torah's mitzvot, if we lift our hearts in prayer to the Almighty, and if we are generous in our righteous acts of charity, then we can truly change the course of our fate this coming year.

Now many of us would like to believe this in a literal sense. Certainly that belief colors the moment we recite these words. And perhaps Hashem, up in the heavenly spheres, will indeed cooperate with us if we change what is written in the Book and transform the severe and stern decree from death to life. But we have no way of knowing or guaranteeing this.

For most of us, our life experience is that majority of things we do cannot control the ultimate issues of life and death. Even those who do *tshuva*, returning to a meticulous observance of *mitzvot*, even those whose spirituality lifts them to heights of *tfila*, and even those who give *tzedaka* generously are not exempt from the decree. They die too. We all will eventually have to confront our Maker when we leave this world for *Olam Haba*, the World beyond this one. And all of us, pious as well as not-so-pious may experience evil or difficulty in this world. So how can we understand this significant passage from our davening?

I would like to suggest a translation and interpretation which, while differing from everything cited above, may answer our question and actually be closer to exact meaning of the Hebrew words. "*Ro-a Hagezera*" literally means "the evilness (or severity or sternness) of the decree." Thus, we may not be able to avert the decree altogether, for God's plan is not always the one that we prefer. But the three-fold formula cited in the prayer gives us a framework by which we can avert the evilness, the severity of life. In that sense, changing the deeds which have been written in God's book can help us deal with our fate and condition.

Tshuva, the inner change that accompanies a return to Jewish practice and life, gives us the basis and matrix by which we can face the difficulties of our lives. Kashrut, Shabbat, Taharat Hamishpaha and the other bases of Jewish life offer us a framework and structure through which we can face the world. Tefila, lifting our voices in prayer to Hashem both in shul and outside, offers us the inner strength through which we can face the more severe aspects of life. Tzedaka, righteous acts of generosity, connects us with others. Whether we use our own material blessings to support our shul, Jewish education, Israel or other Jewish causes, we know we can face the difficult aspects of life when we have reached out to others in need.

The older machzorim that were printed in Europe (as well as some more recent ones including Artscroll) had small words written above the three-fold formula. On top of the word *tshuva* was printed the word *tzom*, fasting; on top of *tfila* was the word *kol*, voice; and on top of *tzedaka* was written the word *mamon* or money. Possibly this was some printer's way of offering us easy illustrations on how to carry out the three-fold formula. But the gematria, the numerical equivalents of the Hebrew letters of these three words, point to our explanation as well. Each of the three words - *tzom*, *kol*, and *mamon* are equal to 136, or two times 68. Sixty-eight is the

numerical equal of *haim* or life. So perhaps when we fulfill the threefold formula of repentance, prayer and charity, we may attain two kinds of life - both physical and spiritual.

May the words of our machzor inspire you to attain the *brachot* of Repentance, Prayer and Charity, thus enabling you as well to face the grimmer aspects of life. And may those difficulties be few and far-between!

Ashira and our family join me in wishing that you and your families be blessed with a year filled with life, peace, joy, prosperity and Yiddishkeit.

L'shana Tova Tikateivu V' Teichateimu!

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