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## *Unetanneh Tokef: Shrouding Hope in a Vision of Judgment*

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Few prayers inspire more feeling than *Unetanneh Tokef*, the opening of the Musaf *Kedusha* on the High Holidays. Its themes of fear, awe, judgment, and helplessness before an omniscient and eternal God cut through our pride and hubris, forcing us to realize that it is He who is truly in control and it is He who will decide, on this day, who will live and who will die.

The legend of its authorship, recorded in the Or Zarua, further emphasizes these themes. We see before us R' Amnon, mutilated for refusing to convert to Christianity, reciting this very prayer as his soul is about to depart. No one knows what the next year will bring; all is in the hands of God as the true judge.

The haunting melody of the cantor's recitation, the communal cry, "Repentance, prayer, and charity can mitigate the harsh decree," and the tears shed by Jews all over the world during its recitation - all of this serves to amplify the fear and helplessness we feel as we await the verdict of God.

And yet…

Perhaps, shrouded in the awe and terror in anticipation of the coming judgment described in the *Unetanneh Tokef* prayer, there is hope, and even comfort.

How? Where?

Let us look a little more carefully at each phrase of the opening paragraphs of this awesome prayer and perhaps pierce through the shroud.

**God's Throne**

*Unetanneh Tokef* starts by asserting the holiness of the day which is truly awesome and mighty. Why? What makes the holiness of this day unique?

> *For on that day Your kingdom will be exalted. Your throne, in kindness, will be established and You will sit upon it in truth.*

This picture should spark fear in all of humanity. Today is the day God will establish his throne and sit in judgment. He will not be swayed by bribes, He will not be fooled by elaborate fabrications, and He will not be taken in by eloquent lawyers. God judges in truth. Who could be courageous enough or confident enough to stand before Him and issue a plea of not guilty? Who would claim extenuating circumstances? Who can react in any way but to hang their heads in shame?

And so it seems from the phrase "Your kingdom shall be exalted." This phrase was appropriated from the blessing of the wicked Bilaam in his attempt to curse the Children of Israel. Referring to a future king of Israel, Bilaam declares, "And his king shall be higher than Agag and his kingdom shall be exalted" (Numbers 24:7). When shall the kingdom of Israel be exalted? When evil, represented by Agag, King of Amalek, is defeated. And so too on the High Holidays God's justice will prevail and evil, our evil, will be defeated.

Except there are two words which do not seem to fit this picture of justice, "in kindness." What are those words doing here? How can God establish his throne in kindness but sit upon it in truth? How can kindness have a place in justice? And besides, the sentence would read perfectly well without them.

Let us look a little further.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the future destruction of the nation of Moab. At that time those Moabites that have escaped the carnage will send a messenger to Zion begging for a place of refuge. The messenger will describe the kingdom in Jerusalem as, "A throne that was established in kindness, and he [the king of Zion] sat upon it in truthfulness in the tabernacle of David, judging and seeking judgment and quick to do justice (Isaiah 16:5)." Compare the first phrase of this verse to the second sentence quoted above, "Your throne, in kindness, will be established and You will sit upon it in truth." The *Unetanneh Tokef* prayer did not create the challenge of merging kindness and truth, but adopted this discordance from Isaiah. What does it mean?

Rashi answers simply. Isaiah's prophecy refers to the reign of Hezekiah who established his throne by performing acts of kindness and also was a judge who sought truth and justice. In this

reading, kindness and truth are separate actions. As a king Hezekiah performed acts of kindness, and during judgment he was guided by truth. The midrash (Midrash Tehillim 89:1), however, derives otherwise. Commenting on the verse, "For I have said the world is built with kindness, in the heavens You establish Your faithfulness in them" (Psalms 89:3), the midrash comments, "Not only the heavens, but even the throne can only stand on kindness," and then quotes the above verse from Isaiah. The midrash continues with the following parable. "A chair has four legs, but if one is too short the chair is wobbly. One can take a stone as support for the chair. So too with God's throne, as it were, which needed support from kindness."

Why must kindness support the Throne of God? There is no throne, no kingdom, without subjects. But no subjects can survive God's truth and justice. Thus, kindness is needed for God's kingdom to be established and proclaimed. The High Holidays are when we, God's Nation, coronate Him as our King and for judgment before Him. And the very throne upon which He sits in judgment is, just like the heavens in the words of the Psalmist, stabilized by kindness.

The temperance of truth with kindness appears in another midrash (Genesis Rabbah 8:5) in which God's kingdom is at stake:

> R' Simon said: at the time when God was prepared to create the first man, there was division amongst the heavenly hosts. Some said man should be created, while others said man should not be created. Kindness said, 'Create man for he will perform acts of kindness.' Truth said, 'Do not create man for he is full of falsehood.' Justice said, 'Create man for he will act in justice.' Peace said, 'Do not create man for he is fully argumentative.' What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Truth and threw him to the ground… The shocked ministering angels cried out, 'Master of the Universe, what are You doing to Your chief court ceremony?' Therefore, let truth grow from the ground (Psalms 85:12).

This midrash also pits truth against kindness. Kindness recognizes that man will act kindly. Truth counters that man is full of falsehood. In fact, even man's kindness may be misplaced, because it is done either under false pretense or for the wrong reason. God therefore reinvented truth. Truth cannot be the black and white choice that inhabits only the heavenly spheres. It must be put into the murky context of earthly endeavors. The ultimate goal is that even "ground" truth should reach for heaven, but it is still rooted in the earthly context.

With all of this in mind, let us reanalyze this section of *Unetanneh Tokef*. Yes, the day is awesome and mighty. Yes, God will sit in

judgment. However, His judgment will not arise only from the black and white heavenly truth. It will be tempered by kindness, the type of kindness which makes man worthy of being created.

**The Book of Remembrances**

> *It is true, You are the One who judges, proves, knows, and bears witness. Who inscribes, seals, counts, and enumerates. Who remembers all that is forgotten and opens the Book of Remembrances. From itself it will read, and the signature of each person is there.*

Again, the picture painted here is fearsome and foreboding. The omniscient God does not forget, and does not ignore; everything is written. The description here echoes the statement in Ethics of our Fathers (2:1), "One who perceives three things will not come to sin - know what is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all of your actions are written in a book." But even more depressing, each individual will admit to everything he has done:

> At the time of each person's departure to his eternal home, all his deeds are enumerated before him. And they say to him: You did this action, in this place, on this day. And he says: Yes. And they say to him: Sign! and he signs, as it says (Job 37:7): "The hand of every man will sign" (Ta'anit 11a).

Is there any hope something will slip by? Or that maybe God will push something under the rug for us?

Well, perhaps there is one small possibility.

The Talmud (Berakhot 6a) teaches:

> How do we know that two people who sit and engage in Torah study, the Divine Presence is with them? For it says: "Then they who feared God spoke one with the other, and God listened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him…" (Malachi 3:16)... And how do we know that even one who sits and engages in Torah study, the Divine Presence is with him? For it says: "In every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you" (Exodus 20:21). Since it is so with one, was it necessary to say two? Two people, their words are written in the Book of Remembrance, the words of one are not written in a Book of Remembrance.

The Talmud implies that there are actions that are not written in the book of remembrances! After all, the words of two people are written, but those

of one are not. Could that be so? The Tosafists immediately strike down this possibility. All actions are written in the book of remembrances, even the words of one. The Talmud's statement is meant to elaborate beyond the simple recording of every individual's actions: when two (or more) people are studying Torah together their words are written together. As opposed to when one studies, his words are simply recorded on his own.

The Maharsha suggests an alternate interpretation. The back and forth of two learning together will, in all likelihood, bring them to truth such that their words are appropriate to be written in the Book of Remembrances. One, however, may have a mistaken understanding of the Torah's meaning and therefore his words are not appropriate to be recorded in the Book of Remembrances.

While certainly disappointing, note that the Maharsha cannot strike the individual's learning from the record. After all, the mishnah from Ethics of the Fathers quoted earlier states that *all* deeds will be written. Therefore the Book of Remembrances certainly records, as a presumed positive, that the person spent the time learning Torah. Only the words themselves are not quoted. Expanding this, failure to accomplish the goal of a good deed, such as reaching the true understanding of words of Torah, does not erase the fact that a positive action was performed. Every prayer that did not have full concentration, every giving of charity that was insufficient or given in a suboptimal way, every command we could have fulfilled in a truer form, is still recorded positively in the Book of Remembrances. Returning to *Unettaneh Tokef*: perhaps this section also provides a spark of hope. All of our deeds are recorded in the Book of Remembrances, even those that did not go the way we planned, or that were not our best efforts.

**A Still, Thin Voice**

*And the great shofar will be sounded and a still, thin voice will be heard. Angels will be frenzied, a trembling and terror will seize them — and they will say, 'Behold, it is the Day of Judgment, to muster the heavenly host for judgment!' — for even they are not guiltless in Your eyes in judgment.*

What is the still, thin voice emitted by the shofar? Why does it frighten the angels? How does it announce the Day of Judgment?

The still, thin voice appears twice in Tanach. The first is heard by Elijah the Prophet. Elijah, having apparently given up hope that the Jews of his day will ever repent, makes his way to Mount Sinai and enters a cave. God asks Elijah, why have you come to this place? Elijah recalls the sins of the Jews and requests that his life be taken from him. God commands Elijah to exit the cave and stand before Him on the mountain. Then, God causes to pass before Elijah a great wind capable of splitting mountains and shattering boulders, but God was not in the wind. Then came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the

earthquake came fire, but God was not in the fire. Finally, there came a still, thin voice (1 Kings 19:12).

The message to Elijah is clear. Elijah attempted to coerce and even force the Jews to return to God. He brought hunger to the land, he brought down a heavenly fire to burn sacrifices to God, but the Jews did not find God. For the proper way to find God is through the thin, still voice; through teaching and guidance, patience and understanding. Ralbag explains that the thin, still voice was a hybrid between sound and silence representing subtle Divine Providence, in contrast to immediate, unambiguous punishment of sin. The subtle divine providence postulated by Ralbag applies to man, who has the capability to change, repent, and return to God. The same cannot be said of the angels who have no such capacity. The thin, still voice emanates from the shofar declaring God's judgment but announcing that such judgment will not immediately be meted out on man, but the angels tremble because the judgement for them is now.

Thus the thin, still voice, though a harsh message for Elijah, is for us a source of comfort. God does not punish immediately, He does not send lightning bolts upon us every time we sin. Rather, He patiently waits, providing us with time for repentance and return. On the High Holidays we stand before Him in judgment, we sound a shofar to announce His coming, but He comes not with great noise and threats of death and destruction, but with patience and hope, urging us to return to Him.[1]

There is a second place in Tanach where a similar phrase is found. Eliphaz, having come to visit and comfort Job upon the latter's terrible losses, relates a prophetic vision he received. "A form loomed before my eyes; I heard a murmur, a voice: *Can mortals be acquitted by God? Can man be cleared by his Maker? If He cannot trust His own servants, and casts reproach on His angels. How much less those who dwell in houses of clay, whose origin is dust, who are crushed like the moth*" (Job 4:17-19). In the vision of Eliphaz he hears a murmur, a thin voice asserting that no one, not even the angels, is innocent before God.

This verse, complete with reference to the angels, clearly underpins this section of *Unetanneh Tokef* and is meant to cause fear and trembling as we enter into judgment before God. No one will walk away innocent (not even Job). No one is blameless or sinless, and thus everyone is deserving of punishment. The angels themselves, who have no free will, cannot perfectly fulfill God's will, so how can those created from dust?

Can there be a path of hope through this message

[1] This theme is in line with the later assertion in *Unettaneh Tokef* , "For You do not desire the death of the condemned, rather, that they turn from their path and live…"

of despair?

Actually there is, because Eliphaz is wrong. At the end of the book of Job, God professes his anger at Eliphaz for speaking incorrectly. Eliphaz must bring sacrifices and ask Job to pray for him and his friends. Exactly what was wrong with the words of Eliphaz and his friends? The commentators (on Job 42:7) state that Eliphaz and his friends were wrong to doubt Job's righteousness and to assert that punishment is only a result of sin. Job was righteous when his afflictions struck, and remained righteous despite, perhaps, some of his post-affliction statements.

Does the realization that Eliphaz was incorrect require us to modify our perspective of his initial vision?

On the one hand, certainly not. God is the true judge, and, while Job can confidently declare his innocence before God, it is doubtful that there are many others who can. On the other hand, the correlation between punishment and sin is now broken, and perhaps also the assumption that righteousness is a prerequisite for reward.

In fact, we know from personal experience that the correlation between reward and righteousness is inaccurate. We ourselves experience life, health, and happiness despite being sinners. We rely on this disassociation every year on Rosh HaShanah when we beg God to continue to grant us these blessings, promising, once again, that we will be righteous. As if that were not all, we ask God to break another correlation, that between sin and punishment. Eliphaz was wrong to assume that punishment is a direct outgrowth of sin, but sin may still automatically lead to punishment. However, following in the spirit of Ralbag, God sounds the thin, still voice, assuring us that He will not punish us immediately for our sins and providing us with the opportunity to repent.

***Kivnai Maron***

*All mankind will pass before You kivnai maron.*

In the usual translation of *kivnai maron* as "like a flock of sheep," this sentence builds off the previous section as follows. The Day of Judgment has arrived, the angels themselves tremble with fear and how much moreso mere mortals. For each individual will be judged. There is no escape, there is no hiding in the crowd. Each person's fate shall be determined and the verdict will be final. Once again the prayer paints an intimidating picture, but is there any hope?

Again, let us look at the sources and reanalyze in their light.

This sentence comes from the mishnah in Rosh HaShanah (1:2), "On Rosh HaShanah all who have come into the world pass before Him *kivnai maron*." The Talmud (18a) offers three interpretations of *kivnai maron*: (1) *kivnai imarna*, (2) like the incline of Beit Maron, (3) like the soldiers of the House of David. Let us analyze each

of these answers individually.

Rashi explains the first answer, "Like sheep who are counted in order to be tithed. Each exits from a narrow door that does not allow more than one through at a time." This is the usual translation, as noted above. Jastrow provides an alternate translation: not as sheep, but as rebels (from *meri*). Each individual walks before God knowing they have spent the year rebelling against Him, ignoring his statutes and transgressing His laws. Now there is no escape and the time for judgment has arrived. Neither of these suggestions seems especially comforting.

The second answer of the Talmud is that *kivnai maron* means like the incline of Beit Maron. Rashi explains that this incline is a very narrow path, on which two people cannot walk next to each other, with deep valleys on both sides. Returning to *Unetanneh Tokef*, this would mean that each person walks the path alone, in fear, for it is eminently clear that no one will escape judgment and no one will get lost in the crowd. Each person passes before God individually to be judged.

In interpreting *Unetanneh Tokef*, I prefer the third answer, "like the soldiers of the House of David." This approach presents a different perspective. Certainly the theme of solitariness is very much present, as a general must individually inspect each and every soldier, to make sure he is standing at attention with uniform and arms in proper order. However, soldiers are not sheep. Both follow the command of their officer, and both require strong leadership. But soldiers understand and adhere to concepts of unity, honor, and loyalty, and follow their leader out of a sense of duty. While sheep are just sheep. A shepherd has to protect his flock and guard it. In contrast, a general has to respect his soldiers and win their adherence. If we are sheep walking before God, we do nothing but hope for His mercy. But as soldiers we can be more confident of His mercy because He perceives that we are loyal despite our sins.

This third interpretation redirects our understanding of this section of *Unetanneh Tokef*. Everyone passes before God in the role of General and all are examined individually. However, we need not be strangers before Him. We are His soldiers; His name is upon us, imperfect as we are, but hopefully loyal to Him nonetheless.

The mishnah in Rosh HaShanah quotes a prooftext to its assertion that on Rosh HaShanah all who have come into the world pass before Him *kivnai maron.* "As it says, 'Who fashions their hearts together, Who comprehends all their deeds'" (Psalms 33:15). How is it that this text functions as a proof? The mishna's initial statement highlights solitude while the prooftext speaks of togetherness.

Let us look at the Talmud's reading of the mishnah. After interpreting the phrase *kivnai maron,* the Talmud quotes a statement of Rabbah bar Bar Chana in the name of R' Yochanan: "They are all reviewed in a single scan." R' Nachman bar Yitzchak comments that this statement of R' Yochanan is in line with the prooftext brought by

the mishnah. The Creator sees all of their hearts together and understands all of their deeds. The Maharsha explains this as follows. The prooftext brought by the mishnah comes in the context of the Psalmist praising God who oversees all who dwell upon earth. Alone, that assertion might be taken to imply that God oversees His creatures only generally. Hence, the prooftext verse states that "He (the Creator) sees their hearts together," as if they are walking one after the other, which enables God to see all at once. "He understands all of their deeds," meaning the details of each one's deeds.

There is, however, an alternate reading of the mishnah. When analyzing the mishnah's statement that all who have come into the world pass before God *kivnai maron*, the Tiferet Yisrael inserts a parenthetical comment which reinterprets the parable, transforming it into a testimony of hope. Tiferet Yisrael notes that when sheep are in a corral with a narrow opening, they can only get out by the will of the shepherd. So too, on the Day of Judgment, no one can emerge innocent except through a narrow path aided and supported by the kindness of God, the great Shepherd. In his next comment on the mishnah, Tiferet Yisrael applies his reading of the parable to the prooftext. God sees that our hearts and our desire is to follow His will and unify with Him. And though He sees all of our deeds, and that it would be impossible for us to withstand judgment, He knows that our errors are due to the evil inclination that has seized us and forced us to violate His will.

**Like a Shepherd**

*Kivakarat ro'eh edro: Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the destinies of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict.*

While in many congregations the cantor recites the entire *Unettaneh Tokef* prayer out loud, with great feeling and emotion, in those that do not the cantor starts the recitation with this line. *A priori* this is understandable. God's judgment and the awesomeness of it are described here most poignantly. But a closer look suggests otherwise. This is not the strongest statement of judgment, but the greatest source of comfort.

The text of this line comes from Ezekiel 34. The prophet there excoriates the leaders of Judea, the shepherds, for their treatment of the flock of Israel. Listen to prophets's description of Israel's state (verses 5 - 6):

> They have been scattered for want of anyone to tend them; scattered, they have become prey for every wild beast. My sheep stray through all the mountains and over every lofty hill; My flock is scattered all over the face of the earth, with

> none to take thought of them and none to seek them…

But God will save His sheep and punish the shepherds (verses 11-12):

> For thus said the Sovereign God: Here am I! I am going to take thought for My flock and I will seek them out. *Kivakarat ro'eh edro*: Like a shepherd seeks out his flock when some [animals] in their flock have gotten separated, so I will seek out My flock, I will rescue them from all the places to which they were scattered on a day of cloud and gloom.

God seeks out every last one of His sheep from wherever they have wandered and saves them from the hands of whatever enemies may have captured them. He rescues each one from wherever they may have wandered to show His loving kindness for each individual sheep.

Let us now reread this section of *Unettaneh Tokef*. Like a shepherd seeking His flock, God looks for every Jew, no matter how far they have wandered. Whether they are in synagogue or not, whether they have thought about Him or not. He gathers them together in a pasture green with grass, and carefully, lovingly counts each one to ensure that every one has returned. He judges each one, accounting for where they have been and rejoicing at their return to Him.

**Conclusion**

All are judged by God on Rosh HaShanah. There is no escape, there is no hiding in the crowds, and there is no hope that justice will result in a verdict of innocence. The great shofar sounds, causing even the angels to tremble and, one by one, each individual must approach God sitting upon His heavenly throne. This is the scene described in the awe-inspiring *Unettaneh Tokef* prayer.

But below the surface of this daunting picture, out of sight perhaps even for the angels, another scene unfolds. On Rosh HaShanah God seeks out His people, bringing each one to Him from wherever they may have wandered. Each is lovingly embraced and set in line. One by one they file before God, sitting on His throne supported by kindness, and counted, so God can be reassured that He has returned every single one. God opens the Book of Remembrance and reads their inner heart, of their desire for Him, and of their struggles to walk in His ways. He knows of their loyalty, and He sets them on the path of innocence no matter how narrow it may be.

What is Man? A broken shard, a wilted flower? Or His faithful sheep, His loyal army?

On Rosh HaShanah we will be inscribed, and on Yom Kippur we will be sealed.

## *Jonah Never Repents: That Is the Point The Bible's Radical Case for Human Agency*

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The Book of Jonah, read on Yom Kippur, Judaism's Day of Atonement, is treated as the quintessential tale of repentance. But there is only one problem: Jonah himself never repents. Not really.

God tries everything. He summons Jonah, sends a tempest after him, and has a great fish swallow him. Jonah is affected, he is afflicted, and he ultimately complies. But that is only on the superficial level. Though he carries out his mission, his convictions, and his *heart,* do not ultimately change. By the end, Jonah remains bitter as before and continues to wish for death. His final words remain defiant: "I am right to be angry, even unto death" (Jonah 4:9).

But this is precisely the point. The reason we read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur is far more compelling than it would be if the book were a simple morality tale of repentance after punishment. We read it because it is precisely Jonah's lack of repentance that reveals the power of human free choice. Theologically, the book shows that although God has power over all of nature, He refuses to wield that power over the human heart, making a radical case for human freedom.

### A Conscientious Objection to Free Will

In the Midrash, Jonah is sometimes portrayed as a narrow nationalist who resents Nineveh because it is Israel's political enemy and wishes to deny its inhabitants the possibility of repentance. Yet the book itself offers little evidence that Jonah harbors any personal or national animosity toward the city. His problem runs much deeper. What troubles Jonah is the way God governs the world.

Jonah finds the entire drama of human agency somewhat absurd: Since the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God Himself seems to have granted human beings the capacity to transgress His will; yet, at the same time, He wants to hold them accountable for it!

And if that is not perplexing enough, when human beings do transgress, God does not always seem eager to punish them. Instead, He sends prophets like Jonah to call them to repentance, and when they repent, He relents. But what is the sense in all this?

Why create free beings only to plead with them to use their freedom well? Why threaten judgment only to withdraw it later? The entire enterprise strikes Jonah as a farcical and terrifying cosmic game, and he wants no part in it.

And so, like Adam and Eve, Jonah tries to hide from God's presence. Rather than travel to Nineveh, he boards a ship bound for Tarshish. When he discerns that he has not successfully avoided his

assignment, and that God is endangering the whole ship as a result, he asks its sailors to cast him into the sea.

Jonah's recurring death wish suggests a deep-seated exhaustion with life's burden of freedom. Death, to him, represents an escape from its risks and uncertainties. And so he begs God repeatedly: "Take, I beseech You, my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:3; repeated in 4:8).

But what does Jonah *really* want?

Perhaps it might comfort him to rest, undisturbed, beneath the shade of his plant; to live in a quiet and beautiful world in which we are all robots.

Machines who do not have to make choices and fail.

Machines whose actions do not lead to the moral demise of an entire city.

Machines for whose sins God need not send a prophet to chastise them, and so inefficiently at that.

Above all, Jonah wants to escape the burden of being responsible for what becomes of himself and others. And we, modern readers, can sympathize with him, for the burdens of our personal and collective responsibility are terrifying indeed. Our lives and the world depend on it.

But what, then, does God want?

He wants Nineveh's repentance, and that is no doubt the success story of this book. But God also wants Jonah's. God wants Jonah to recognize the value of the human capacity for free choice. Yet He cannot compel Jonah to do so, for that would contradict the very freedom He wishes him to embrace.

And so, instead of granting Jonah's wish for death, God subjects him to unrelenting irony.

It is only under great physical duress in the belly of the big fish that Jonah turns poet and offers one of the greatest expressions of prayer humanity has ever seen. Poetry is beautiful and moving, but it does not last. As soon as the crisis passes, he returns to his earlier conviction. Jonah remains untransformed in his distaste for the implications of freedom.

God then eases Jonah's task. A journey that should have taken three days takes Jonah one day. Unlike Jeremiah and many of the other prophets, who endured humiliation, imprisonment, rejection, and danger, Jonah remains safe and respected. He utters only one short sentence: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4) and, in an almost surreal fashion, the entire city springs to its feet. The inhabitants of Nineveh put on sackcloth, fast, and become new people almost overnight.

The literary quality of the narrative is undeniable. The pathetic fallacy of the storm, the summoning of the great fish and the anthropomorphization of the animals of Nineveh, who, like the humans,

must fast, wear sackcloth, and cry out to God, and the use of symbolic numbers, such as the warning that in forty days the city will be overturnees ( echoing the forty days of Noah's Flood), all suggest that the story is not a historic account but a parable about the human heart. Yet, ironically again, the lesson that we readers see is one that Jonah, its protagonist, does not wish to learn.

Witnessing Nineveh's transformation, Jonah's reaction seems to mirror the behavior of Cain in the language used to describe his anger. Cain "was greatly angered, and his face fell,"*va-yichar le-Kayin me'od* (Genesis 4:5); Jonah likewise falls into "great displeasure:" *va-yichar lo* (Jonah 4:1). God reinforces the parallel by asking both why they are angry (Genesis 4:6; Jonah 4:4) in an attempt to reach their inner world. The text never tells us precisely what passes through Jonah's mind, but if we follow the logic of his protest, we can imagine it unfolding something like this:

If repentance is real, then agency must be real. If agency is real, responsibility is real. And if responsibility is real, then God will hold us accountable. But we human beings are too frail for such a calling. If even the greatest among us cannot sustain a life of perfect virtue, then the effort is futile. Life itself is futile. Death seems preferable to life because in death there is no responsibility.

We see here that Jonah is not a determinist; he is a conscientious objector to free will.

God enacts the final irony through the withering of Jonah's plant, beneath whose shade Jonah had sought refuge from the blazing sun, a fitting symbol of God's existential demands upon him and upon humanity at large. Bereft of its shelter, Jonah prays for death with even greater force. Yet God responds with a final revelation:

> Then the Lord said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight.
>
> "And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city? - in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!" (Jonah 4:10–11)

In trying to reach Jonah's inner world one last time, God lays His own inner world bare before him. He shares with Jonah His pity, His compassion, and even something of His tenderness. Compared to Jonah's attachment to the plant, God's investment in humanity is infinitely greater in both magnitude and meaning. God empathizes with humanity's fallen condition and moral confusion. Yet despite these shortcomings, He remains willing to risk disappointment and failure for the possibility of the voluntary devotion of human beings.

The final irony is that the narrative ends without a resolution. We are never told whether Jonah accepts God's lesson; Jonah does not get to record a response. The book offers no assurance that knowledge, suffering, or even a powerful spiritual experience will transform a person unless they want to change.

And that is what makes the Book of Jonah so compelling. God's apparent failure to transform Jonah serves, for the readers, as the greatest endorsement of the reality and value of human agency: our power to transform ourselves, or to refuse transformation. Faith in that power is the prerequisite of repentance. And that is what we need to remember most on Yom Kippur.

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## *Egypt Remains Egypt: What Zechariah 14 Teaches About Unity Without Sameness*

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We usually imagine unity as requiring less difference. If people are to become one, distinctions must soften; if humanity is to become one, inherited boundaries must eventually recede. The intuition is so familiar that it can feel self-evident. Difference divides. Unity heals.

Zechariah 14 offers a startlingly different picture. The chapter culminates in one of the most universal declarations in Tanakh: "The Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name One" (Zechariah 14:9). If any biblical verse seems to point toward the dissolution of particularity, this should be it. God is not merely King of Israel. He is King over all the earth. His unity is no longer merely professed by one people. It is recognized universally.

And yet Zechariah does not end by making the nations disappear.

Only a few verses later, the prophet speaks of "all who survive of all those nations" going up year after year to Jerusalem for Sukkot (14:16). He continues to speak of "the families of the earth" (14:17). Most strikingly, he names Egypt as Egypt (14:18–19). The world has come under the sovereignty of the One God, but Egypt has not become Israel. Universal divine kingship has not produced human sameness.

That small textual fact contains a large theological claim: the many remain many because the One is truly One.

### The temptation of finite unity

Human beings have repeatedly attempted to create unity by taking something finite and asking it to occupy the place of the whole. Empire says: one political order must absorb the rest. Ideology says: one system must explain every human problem. Nationalism can say: one people's destiny is ultimate. Universalism can say: one humanity requires inherited distinctions to become morally secondary or disappear. Religious triumphalism can say: universal truth requires everyone to become us.

The forms differ, but the structure is similar. A finite good becomes absolute. Once that happens, whatever remains outside it becomes an obstacle to unity.

Biblical monotheism can be read as a radical refusal of that move. God alone is the Whole. No nation is the Whole. No ideology is the Whole. No culture, civilization, moral program, political arrangement, or religious community is the Whole. Even humanity is not God.

Paradoxically, that theological hierarchy makes difference safer. If God alone is absolute, Israel does not need to become the whole of humanity in order to possess meaning. Egypt does not need to become Israel in order to stand beneath divine sovereignty. The nations do not have to conquer one another in order to justify their existence. Finite things can remain finite because none is required to carry the burden of ultimacy.

Zechariah's vision therefore does not move from plurality to uniformity. It moves from rivalry among finite claims toward their right ordering beneath the transcendent One.

### Abraham was not told to erase the bearer

The same architecture is already visible at the beginning of the Abrahamic story. Genesis 12 binds together two promises that are often pulled apart: "I will make of you a great nation" and "by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2–3).

The first promise is intensely particular: a family, a people, a historical lineage. The second is radically universal: the families of the earth. But the Torah does not present the particular as an unfortunate preliminary to the universal. Abraham is not told to become less particular in order to become a blessing. He is told to become a people—and through that differentiated vocation, blessing will radiate outward.

The biblical proposition is not: the nation of Israel becomes humanity. It is: Israel remains Israel, and through Israel humanity is blessed.

That distinction matters because it challenges two opposite errors. One error treats chosenness as an end in itself: our difference is ultimate, therefore those outside it are spiritually peripheral. The other treats difference as morally embarrassing: if the blessing is universal, why preserve the particular bearer at all? Genesis resists both. The bearer is not the whole, but neither is the bearer dispensable.

Particularity here is vocational. It carries something beyond itself precisely by remaining sufficiently itself to carry it.

### Maimonides and messianism without domination

Maimonides makes the same point in a different register. In Hilkhot Melakhim 12:4, he insists that the sages and prophets did not long for the messianic age so that Israel could "have dominion over the entire world" or "rule over the gentiles." Their aspiration was a world in which Torah and wisdom could be pursued without oppression or disturbance.

The passage is remarkable because Jewish redemption is explicitly separated from Jewish domination. The messianic horizon does not place Israel where God belongs.

At the end of Hilkhot Melakhim 11:4, Maimonides describes the Messiah as one who will order the world toward the service of God together, invoking Zephaniah 3:9; the peoples will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose. The universal horizon is unmistakable. But this universalism does not require the disappearance of Israel or of the nations. Maimonides can imagine a world increasingly ordered toward one God while still speaking in differentiated categories.

This is messianism without inversion. Israel is redeemed, but Israel does not become the Absolute. Humanity turns toward God; but it does not become Israel. The final unity belongs to God rather than to one created collective.

### Two inversions

We can now state the danger on both sides more precisely.

Universalism inverted says: there must be one humanity, therefore distinctions must disappear.

Particularism inverted says: our distinction is ultimate, therefore everyone outside it is secondary, dispensable, or must become us.

The biblical answer is neither. God alone is the Whole. Israel is particular. The nations are particular. Humanity is universal. Moral obligation is universal. None of these is the Absolute.

This is why a theological commitment to difference need not amount to relativism. Saying that Egypt remains Egypt does not mean that every Egyptian practice is morally equal to every Israelite practice, or that covenant makes no claims about the world beyond Israel. Zechariah's nations are not autonomous absolutes. They come before the King. Difference remains, but it remains within a universal moral and theological horizon.

And this is why a theological commitment to universality need not amount to homogenization. Shared moral worth does not logically require identical vocation. Universal accountability to God does not require one national culture, one historical memory, or one covenantal form.

### Korah and the mistake of confusing equality with sameness

The Torah dramatizes a related mistake in the rebellion of Korah. His challenge begins with a proposition the Torah itself does not simply deny: "All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them" (Numbers 16:3). The problem lies in the inference. If all are holy, Korah asks, why should Moses and Aaron occupy special, differentiated roles?

The answer is not that only an elite is holy. Sinai addresses Israel collectively as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), yet the Torah simultaneously assigns differentiated forms of service; Numbers 18:7, for example, describes the priesthood as a particular charge entrusted to Aaron and his sons. Korah's error is therefore not his affirmation of common holiness but the

inference that common holiness makes differentiated vocation illegitimate.

Equal dignity does not imply identical vocation.

The Torah itself had already established both propositions simultaneously. Israel as a whole is addressed as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,”, while within that holy people distinct obligations and offices remain. Korah therefore does not err in affirming the holiness of the congregation. He errs in assuming that common holiness makes differentiated vocation illegitimate. The biblical structure holds the two together: holiness may be shared without every role becoming interchangeable.

This does not mean that Korah was wrong to ask whether authority had become self-serving. Biblical authority is not insulated from moral scrutiny simply because it is differentiated. Moses himself repeatedly submits his leadership to judgment, protest, and divine correction. The problem is narrower: Korah treats the existence of differentiation as evidence of injustice. His challenge moves too quickly from “all are holy” to the conclusion that distinct offices therefore lack legitimacy.

That distinction is morally dangerous when misused. Hierarchies can be oppressive; inherited roles can become vehicles for domination; boundaries can protect privilege rather than purpose. But the existence of abusive distinctions does not prove that all distinctions are abusive. A society does not become just merely by becoming flatter, nor does a religious community become more universal merely by dissolving every differentiated obligation.

The ethical question is not whether difference exists. It is what the difference is for, what limits it, whom it serves, and what higher good judges it.

### What makes a boundary holy?

This question matters especially for Jewish particularity. Jewish life is built from boundaries: Shabbat and weekday, holy and ordinary, permitted and forbidden, Israel and the nations, Kohen and Israelite, land and exile, sacred time and ordinary time. A Judaism stripped of differentiation would not simply become a more universal Judaism. At some point it would cease to be Judaism.

Yet boundaries are not holy merely because exclusion is holy. A boundary becomes holy when it preserves a form ordered toward service, responsibility, memory, and blessing. Separation without vocation can become idolatry. Openness without a sufficiently coherent identity can become dissolution—the loss of the form through which memory, obligation, and vocation are carried.

The prophetic vision refuses both pathologies. Zechariah does not imagine Israel disappearing into humanity. Nor does he imagine Israel replacing humanity. Jerusalem remains Jerusalem; Egypt remains Egypt; the families of the earth remain families of the earth. What changes is the axis around which they are ordered.

The One is finally recognized as One.

## Unity without sameness

Modern moral language often oscillates between two fears. One is the fear that strong particular identities will become tribal, chauvinistic, or violent. The other is the fear that universal systems will flatten inherited differences and dissolve the communities through which human beings actually learn loyalty, memory, obligation, and love.

Both fears are justified because both pathologies are real. Particularism can absolutize itself. Universalism can absolutize itself. Each becomes dangerous when it claims the place that belongs only to God.

Zechariah offers another possibility. Unity need not be created by reducing the number of differences in the world. It can arise through the right relationship among differences under a sovereignty none of them owns.

That is not a political program and certainly not an algorithm for resolving every conflict. There are moments when boundaries must be defended and moments when they must be opened. There are distinctions that deserve preservation and distinctions that deserve abolition. There are communal claims that genuinely collide with obligations to outsiders. Scripture does not eliminate the need for judgment.

What it gives us is a grammar: do not ask a finite thing to become the Whole.

When a nation becomes the Whole, nationalism becomes idolatry. When humanity becomes the Whole, universalism can become imperial. When equality becomes the Whole, every difference begins to look like injustice. When difference becomes the Whole, outsiders become morally expendable. The theological discipline of monotheism is the refusal to let any created good occupy the throne.

## Egypt remains Egypt

This is why the small detail at the end of Zechariah 14 matters so much. The prophet has already declared the most universal sovereignty imaginable: God is King over all the earth; God is One; God's name is One. Yet Egypt is still Egypt.

It is difficult to imagine a cleaner biblical rejection of the assumption that unity requires sameness.

The eschaton, on this reading, is not the victory of one created particular over all the others. It is the restoration of the correct hierarchy. Every finite thing relinquishes its claim to be absolute. Israel remains Israel. The nations remain nations. Humanity remains humanity. Moral obligation remains universal. And the unity toward which all of them are ordered belongs finally not to any of them, but to God.

The many remain many because the One is truly One.

## Sources

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Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim u-Milhamoteihem 11:4; 12:4–5.

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