

# Unesaneh Tokef



Daniel Greenberg

*Daniel Greenberg is a lawyer specialising in legislation and the legislative process. He has 30 years experience in the private and public sectors dealing with legislation. He was a Parliamentary Counsel for 20 years; he is now an officer in the House of Commons, and a writer, trainer and adviser.*

If a person is told by the doctors in Ellul that he or she has three months to live, what should they pray for on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

As they stand in shul surrounded by the congregation singing the constant refrain of "remember us for life, King who loves life, for your sake the God of life" do they sing along with everybody else, or do they stand there in stunned silence with the feeling of someone who has already been condemned to a year in which their prayers for life are doomed to be rejected?

One answer might, perhaps, be that one should never give up hope of life, and that the doctors don't always know best. Perhaps they should be saying to themselves that if they only pray hard enough God may reverse the decree and grant then another year of life?

The problem with that is twofold. First it ignores reality in a way that any helpful kind of religion does not. As Father Brown says in GK Chesterton's *The Blue Cross*, attacking reason is bad theology. It is true that God is all powerful and if God decrees that the ravages of a final stage terminal cancer are simply to disappear from a person's body then that is what they will do. But that is a miracle, a departure from the rules of the automated miracle that we call nature, and in rabbinic tradition we do not rely on miracles, nor is it generally helpful to make them the focus of our prayers. Religion should

be about confronting reality, not attempting to escape it.

The second problem with saying "remember us for life" as a prayer for the doctors to be wrong is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of praying for life on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The true intention behind this prayer is perhaps best understood by reference to the electrically dramatic liturgical centrepiece of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Unesaneh tokef prayer. In this passage we imagine the angels in heaven trembling with fear as they see us approaching the moment of annual judgement like a large flock of sheep being counted and inspected by the shepherd. They tremble because they know not one of us deserves to survive divine judgement, and we tremble as, crowded together like a flock of sheep, we approach that moment of judgement when the flock is forced through a small gap in the fence and for one brief moment the shepherd's piercing eye glances at and evaluate each individual sheep as it clambers through the gap. There is no more escaping in the comfort of the herd, as for that one moment God and I confront each other with an individual intensity unsurpassed by any other moment of the year.

The rest of the year we take shelter in the herd immunity of our religious community and ask to be allowed to share in the merits of the community, pooling our strengths and weaknesses and supporting each other in spiritual life as we do in material matters; but for that one split second we feel the eye of God on us with an unshakeable determination to scan the innermost realities of our mind, to record our achievements and failures, to evaluate our hopes and objectives, and to record a divine appraisal of each of us as a unique individual with a place in the flock that cannot be

substituted by any other, and whose potential for success and failure cannot be moderated by reference to any other member's contribution.

And as we crawl through the gap and, full of relief at our immediate survival, go scampering off to join the rest of the flock on the safe side of the fence, we say together a phrase that is sometimes mistranslated as "repentance, prayer and charity can avert the evil decree". This is sometimes associated with the idea that God's annual decree begins on Rosh Hashanah but is not finalised until Yom Kippur and therefore there is time to avert it through repentance, prayer and charity. That is wrong on two counts.

First, if it were the intention, we would not repeat it on Yom Kippur itself but say it only on Rosh Hashanah. More importantly, however, it rests on the same common mistranslation of the phrase. Translated properly this phrase does not refer to averting the evil decree, but to averting "the evil of the decree".

There is not one of us who is not going to face challenges this coming year. From the most cataclysmic trauma of being diagnosed with a terminal illness, to the relatively trivial things which we will find more annoying than we know they really deserve when compared to the troubles faced by others, but which are real and disturbing for us none the less. And as we stand on Rosh Hashanah there will be some of these

challenges that are already inevitable, barring the kind of miracles on which we do not rely and for which it is not helpful to pray.

But the only thing that is decreed is what will happen to us, not how we will react to it. Even death is not evil if I approach it in the right way: as the Psalmist puts it, "even as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil if You are by my side". Introspection and consequent repair of our habits (teshuvah), meditation on how to approach the world as a servant of God (tefilla) and determination to seize every opportunity while breath lasts in our bodies to be a useful member of the flock, taking the opportunities of this world to do those tiny kindnesses to others that make the difference between Heaven and Hell (tzedoko) will enable us to confront whatever decrees God has made for each of us this coming year, knowing that so far as we are able to we have identified the negative and turned it into a positive.

I do not wish my fellow members of the Magen Avot flock a year of only good things, because that would be childish. I wish us a year in which we are granted the strength and perception to confront whatever bad things come along, and to find as much potential for good in them as possible.

**L'shono tovo u'mesuko - to a year where we relish the good and find sweetness in the bad.**