

“Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die: Really?” | Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

Yom Kippur 5783 | Congregation Emanu-El of The City of New York

1. *Un'taneh Tokef*

Let us acknowledge the power of this day's holiness for it is full of awe and dread. On it your kingdom will be exalted and your throne will be established in love. And you will reign from it in truth. Truly you are judge, prosecutor, litigant, and witness; writer [of the verdict] and [its] sealer, recorder and recounter. You remember everything that has been forgotten. You open the book of memories; it will be read; everyone's signature is in it.

A great shofar will be sounded and a thin whisper of sound will be heard. Angels will recoil and be gripped with shaking and trembling. "This is the day in court," they will say, "for passing judgement on the hosts on high." They will not pass muster as innocent, when You judge them. All who enter the world must pass before you like "sheep" [or like "soldiers on review"]

As a shepherd searches for his flock and has his sheep pass under his staff, so too will you record and recount and review all living beings as you have them pass by. And you will decide the end of all creatures, writing down their sentence.

On Rosh Hashanah it will be written, and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed: How many will pass on and how many will be created, who will live and who will die, who at their proper end and who not; who by water and who by fire; who by warfare and who by wildlife, who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who by strangling and who by stoning; who will rest and who will wander, who will be tranquil and who will be troubled; who will be calm, and who will be tormented; who will be exalted, and who will be humbled; who will be rich and who will be poor.

But repentance, prayer, and charity help the hardship of the decree pass.

Your glory is like Your name, slow to anger, quick to forgive. You do not want the dead to die, but for them to turn from their path and live. You wait until the day they die, accepting them immediately if they return.

Truly you are their creator and you know their nature. For they are flesh and blood. Their origin is dust and their end is dust. At great peril, they gather food; they are like shattered pottery, like withered grass, like a faded blossom, like a passing shadow, like a vanishing cloud, like blowing wind, like blowing dust, like a dream that will fly away.

But You are King, the living everlasting God. Your years are boundless and the length of your days endless. Your glorious chariots are priceless and the eternity of your name is limitless. Your name suits you and you suit your name. You have bestowed your name on us.

Act for the sake of your name and sanctify your name through those who declare the sanctity of your name, for the glory of your honored and sanctified name.

Like the utterances of the assembly of holy Seraphim, inhabitants on high and inhabitants down below thrice call out the trio of holiness with "holy" ["Holy holy holy..."].

2. *The Legend of Rabbi Amnon (from Sefer Or Zaru'a, Rabbi Isaac of Vienna (c.1200 – c.1270); a story attributed to Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn (1132-1196)*

The story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz: great in his generation, wealthy, of fine lineage, handsome and good looking. The nobles and bishop began to asking him to apostacize to their mistaken way, and he refused to listen to them. But it happened that while they were talking to him one day, and he was refusing to listen, the noble badgered him... until he replied, "I want to think the matter through for three days" (he said this just to put them off). But the minute he took leave of the noble, what he had said sunk in – how an expression of doubt had left his lips, as if there were any possibility that any sort of advice or thought process would lead him to deny the living God. He went home unable to eat or drink. His relatives and friends came to console him, but he refused consolation, saying, "Because of what I said, I will go to my grave in grief."

On the third day, still pained and anxious, the noble sent for him, and he replied: "I won't go." When the evil one sent princes, more numerous and honored than at first, he still refused to go. So the noble ordered that Amnon be quickly brought against his will, and they speedily brought him.

He asked, "What's this, Amnon, why didn't you come to me as you stipulated. Having thought it over, why didn't you return word to me as I expected you to?"

Amnon replied, "Let me adjudicate my own case. The tongue that lied to you deserves to be cut off (Amnon wanted to sanctify the name of God because he had spoken as he did).

"No," the bishop responded, "Not your tongue will I cut off – it spoke well – but your feet that that did not come when you promised, and I will torture the rest of your body."

Thus did the evil one command, and they hacked off his fingers and toes, bit by bit. At each joint, they would ask him, "Amnon, now do you want to convert to our faith?" and he would say, "No!"

When they finished hacking, the evil one commanded that Rabbi Amnon be laid on a shield with the pieces of his extremities beside him, and be sent home. That is why his name is *Amnon* – because *he'emin* – he had faith in the living God and suffered horrendous torture out of love, just on account of something he had said.

Some time later, the time rolled around for Rosh Hashanah to arrive and he asked his relatives to take him to the synagogue (along with all the finger and toe joints, which had been salted) and to lay him next to the prayer leader. They did so, and when the prayer leader got to [a particular *piyyut* in] the *k'dushah*, Rabbi Amnon said, "Wait a minute, while I sanctify the name of God." In a loud voice, he then responded, "Therefore, let holiness rise up to you" as if to say, "I have sanctified Your name, with regard to Your sovereignty and Your unity." Then he recited *Un'taneh tokef k'dushat hayom*, and said "Truly, You are Judge and Prosecutor," in order to accept the verdict of

his fingers and toes being removed, and so on and so on. Then he mentioned, “Everyone’s signature is in it,” since that was the fate determined for him on Rosh Hashanah. When he had completed the *siluk* [the name for the type of poem he was speaking] he was taken up (*nistalek*) and in the sight of all present, he disappeared from the world, and was no more. Of him it is said, “How much goodness You have stored up for those who love You” (Psalm 31:20).

Because of the truthful words that Amnon had offered up, he was invited into the Yeshivah on high. On the third day after he was ritually washed and purified, he appeared in a night vision to Our Rabbi Kalonymos, son of Rabbi M’shulam, son of Rabbi Kalonymos, son of Rabbi Moshe, son of Rabbi Kalonymos, and taught him that very poem : *Un’taneh Tokef*; and bade him distribute it throughout the far reaches of the Exile, that it might be a witness and memorial to him – and the Gaon did so.

3. Characters and Context

Characters

4 th -5 th centuries	Yannai, synagogue poet in Eretz Yisra’el;
5 th -6 th centuries:	Romanos, 5 th century church poet
1132-1196	Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn
c.1200-c.1270	Rabbi Isaac Or Zaru’a of Vienna

Context

1095	First Crusade, decimation of Rhineland Jewry, including city of Mainz; “For the sanctification of God’s name”
1099	Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem established
1144	Muslim counter offensive in Asia Minor
1145	Second Crusade proclaimed
1146	Second Crusade, again carnage in Rhineland Jewry, including Mainz
1177	Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn writes “Book of memory,” memorializing Rhineland Jews in tales of martyrdom (The slaughter was so great, he says “that the day after, the bishop ordered the remains of all the slaughtered saints to be loaded onto wagons” along with “all their severed limbs, hips, shoulders, fingers and toes” so they could be buried.
1187	Saladin the Great destroys Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem
1260	Isaac ben Moses of Vienna writes Or Zaru’a, attributing story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz to Ephraim of Bonn
