

Mysteries of the Machzor with Liturgist Alden Solovy
The Power of the Day
Un'taneh Tokef Source Sheet

Language, Structure and Themes

1. Dr. Reuven Kimelman¹

The Un'taneh Tokef is to Rosh Hashanah what *L'khah Dodi* is to Shabbat... [it] graphically presents Rosh Hashanah as a day of divine coronation and judgment. The coronation theme derives from the creation of the world, the judgment theme from the creation of humanity. *Un'taneh Tokef* enhances its dramatic effect by simulating the opening of Job, where the scenes shift back and forth from heaven to earth.

2. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks²

It is structured in four movements. The first sets the scene... The second defines what is at stake... Then comes the great outburst of faith that defines Judaism... Finally, there is a moving reflection on the fragility of human life and the eternity of God.

3. Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashana 1:3

If the bet din says, "Today is Rosh Hashanah," the Holy One of Blessing, says to the angels: "Set up the stand, summon the prosecutors, summon the defenders — for my children have declared that today is Rosh Hashanah." If the court decides to declare a leap month and make Rosh Hashanah the next day, the Holy One of Blessing says to the angels: "Remove the stand, remove the prosecutors, remove the defenders, for my children have decided to put it off till tomorrow."

4. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD³

"Awe" after all, has a dual sense — it evokes both wonderment and dread. The High Holidays with just one or the other can only be "halfway" High Holidays... [On] the High Holy Days, we are to leave with the conviction that we are indeed mortal beings; that we do balance good and evil, sometimes giving in to the latter at the expense of the former; that there is indeed a divine presence before whom we stand; and that we can, with proper repentance and resolve, wipe the slate clean and begin anew with all the promise of a world recreated, a child reborn, a mind reformed, and a conscience reawakened.

5. The 'Vav' in the First Nine Lines of Un'taneh Tokef⁴

And let us acknowledge the power of this day's holiness / for it is full of awe and dread.
And 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
And prosecutor and litigant and witness / and author and sealer and recorder and recounter.
And you will remember everything that has been forgotten / and You will open the book of memories
And it will be read from / everyone's signature is in it
And a great shofar will be sounded / and a thin whisper of sound will be heard
And angels will recoil / and be gripped by shaking and trembling
And they will say, "This is the day of judgement," / for reviewing the hosts on high in judgement...

¹ Dr. Reuven Kimelman, "The Poetics of Prayer: How *Un'taneh Tokef* Means What it Means," from *Prayers of Awe: Who by Fire, Who by Water*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD (Jewish Lights, 2010), pp. 103-104.

² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor* (Koren, 2014), pp. 565-566.

³ Op cit., L Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "Prayers of Awe, Intuitions of Wonder," p. 11.

⁴ Ibid., Dr. Joel Hoffman, "*Un'taneh Tokef*: Translation," p. 29. Translation from this volume shown here to illustrate the poetic impact of the repetition.

6. Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman⁵

The verb *un'taneh*, from the root n.t.n., meaning “give,” is difficult to translate. The standard translation, “let us acknowledge,” is accurate but misses some of the deeper nuance. To acknowledge is an act of ego; this prayer is anything but the ego’s expression. It is more an act of submission, not as resignation, but as submitting ourselves to a spiritual awakening. A better understanding would be, “And let us give ourselves over to the power of this day’s holiness.”

7. Dr. Joel M. Hoffman⁶

The book of Job — the Bible’s only full-length treatise on human suffering — is a nearly total rejection of the idea that we are punished only in response to sin. Deuteronomy is wrong, says Job... The book of Job is more nuanced. For while it forces us to reject the doctrine of reward and punishment, it also acknowledges our natural tendency to rely upon it. We should be careful not to think that our suffering is our fault, says the book of Job, but equally we should always be cognizant that that outlook will be our default way of understanding misfortune... In that sense, we are all Job. We demand to know why we are suffering, and we are practically unable to accept our inability to understand the answer.

8. Contrasts / juxtapositions found in or created by the poetry of *Un'taneh Tokef*

This day	Other days	Great shofar	Still small voice
Souls of the living	Angels	Sinai/Moses	Horeb/Elijah
Forgotten	Remembered	Judgement	Love
Judge	Author	Prosecutor	Witness
Certainty	Uncertainty	Shepard	Sheep
Live	Die	Born	Pass away
Timely death	Premature death	Fire	Water
War	Peace	Hunger/famine	Thirst/drought
Earthquake	Plague	Stoning	Strangling
Rest	Wander	Tranquil	Troubled
Calm	Tormented	Exalted	Humbled
Rich	Poor	Cast down	Raised up
Eternal	Ephemeral	Passing shadow	Everlasting G-d
Permanence	Impermanence	Limited	Limitless

9. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer⁸

The literary key to the prayer—the multiple use of the Hebrew verb *avar*. The prayer is easily divisible into distinct sections, each with its own discrete theme, and each containing a different form of *ayin vet resh*, the root letters for the word *avar*, which unites them. All in all, *avar* appears a total of seven times in *Un'taneh Tokef*, a significant number in any Jewish text... The derivative forms of *avar* are many and multivalent. Some (like “pass,” “remove,” and “cross”) are value neutral. Others (like “sin” and “anger”) have negative meaning. Others still (like “conceive” and “appease”) are positive.

⁵ Ibid., Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, “Evoking Fear, Prescribing Hope: From Suffering to Service,” pp. 191-192.

⁶ Ibid., Dr. Joel M. Hoffman, “How Was Your Flight?” p. 35.

⁷ List adapted by Alden Solovy from ibid., Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, “The Eternal and the Ephemeral: The Stark Contrasts of *Un'taneh Tokef*,” pp. 207-208.

⁸ Ibid., Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, “Passing before God: The literary theme of *Un'taneh Tokef*” pp. 98-100.

10. But Repentance, Prayer, and Charity...

Repentance תשובה צום Fasting⁹
Prayer תפלה קול Crying
Charity צדקה ממון Giving

Torah¹⁰
Avodah
G'milut Chasadim

"But repentance, prayer, and charity **temper judgment's severe decree.**"¹¹

"But through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can **transcend the harshness** of the decree."¹²

"But repentance, prayer, and righteousness **avert the severe decree.**"¹³

"But repentance, prayer, and deeds of kindness **remove the severity** of the decree."¹⁴

"But T'shuvah, T'fillah, and Tz'dakah have the power to **transform the harshness** of our *destiny*."¹⁵

"But repentance, prayer, and charity **remove the evil** of the decree."¹⁶

"But REPENTANCE, PRAYER and CHARITY **avert the evil** of the decree."¹⁷

"And repentance, prayer and charity **help the hardship** of the decree **pass.**"¹⁸

11. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer¹⁹

By the time we arrive at the core line "And repentance, prayer, and charity help the hardship of the decree pass [ma'avirin]," we know enough about the poet's usage to suspect that we cannot take this line on its surface level only (i.e., do good, and good will happen to you). The deliberate use of the verb ma'avirin complicates the simplistic conclusion that we need only act piously to effect a better future. Perhaps those acts will objectively lead to justice, as in the initial judging scene of the poem; perhaps randomness will prevail, as with the tithed sheep in Leviticus.

12. Dr. Rabbi Jeff Hoffman²⁰

One of the ways that some modern *machzorim* have dealt with the issue is to "translate" the problem away... The claim of these translations is that the prayer is not saying that repentance and other measures convince God to cancel a harsh decree of a painful death, but rather that these three pious actions simply mitigate the harshness of a painful death on the worshiper. In other words, the pious acts

⁹ "In many editions of the machzor, the words "repentance, prayer, and charity" are accompanied by three corresponding words: "fasting, crying, giving." The numerical value (gematria) of each Hebrew word being 136, these words indicate that the three modes of approaching G-d are equivalent (Minhagim of Rabbi Isaac Tirna, 15th century)." From *Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 844.

¹⁰ "By placing the word *t'shuva* first and keeping the number to three, it evokes the famous triad of *Pirke Avot* 1:2: "The world stands on three things, Torah, *avodah* [service], and *g'milut chasadim* [acts of kindness]," as if to say the outcome of judgement stands on three things: *t'fillah*, *tz'dukkah*, and *t'shuva*." From op cit., L. Hoffman, Kimelman, "The Poetics of Prayer: How *Un'taneh Tokef* Means What it Means," p.106.

¹¹ *Gates of Repentance* (Reform, 1978)

¹² *Mishkan Hanefesh* (Reform, 2015)

¹³ *High Holiday Prayer Book* (Conservative, 1951)

¹⁴ *Mahzor Hadash* (Conservative, 1977, 2001)

¹⁵ *Mahzor Lev Shalem* (Conservative, 2010)

¹⁶ *Artscroll Mahzor* (Orthodox, 1985)

¹⁷ *Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor* (Orthodox, 2014)

¹⁸ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Dr. Joel Hoffman, "*Un'taneh Tokef*: Translation," pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ Ibid., Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, "Passing before God: The literary theme of *Un'taneh Tokef*" pp. 98-100.

²⁰ "A Linguistic Analysis of the Phrase *Ma'avirin et Ro'a HaGezeirah*," Dr. Rabbi Jeff Hoffman, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/linguistic-analysis-of-maavirin-et-roa-hagezeirah>

won't actually cancel the terminality of a disease, but rather they will make it possible for the stricken person to cope more easily with the agony and discomfort of the disease. Such a message accords more closely with the life experience of many people and is therefore, more believable, and less discomfiting... The message of the above translations, that God will soften the blow without changing the reality, seems filtered through a modern approach to life that we rarely find in pre-modern teachings.

The Back Story

13. Rabbi Amnon of Mainz

"Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, who was one of the great men of his generation..."²¹ "...who died a martyr's death after refusing to convert to Christianity..."²² "...uttered it in his last moments as he lay dying..."²³ "...he chose to die that his faith might live..."²⁴ "He appeared to Rabbi Kalonymos...in a dream at night, and taught him the liturgical poem..."²⁵ and "Amnon orders the leading family of Ashkenazi Jewry to include his poem forever."²⁶

14. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD²⁷

Rabbi Amnon of Mainz is an invention, as is the story that surrounds him. That story, as we have it, is indeed a pious tale about martyrdom, the stuff of legend, rooted in the catastrophic era of the First and Second Crusades... For some, the poem is of such sublime poetic beauty that it would be criminal to expunge it. Others cringe at its message and would gladly do away with at least some of it as a piece of liturgy... Yet others find the Amnon story compelling, if not as a historical set of facts, then as a witness to Jews who truly did die *al kiddush hashem*; still others would prefer jettisoning the poem because of its association with martyrdom and a theology of martyrdom that we have difficulty maintaining today.

15. Rabbi Marc Saperstein, PhD²⁸

The Amnon story totally transforms the meaning of the magnificent poem. A passage that repeatedly insists on the common experience of all human beings and shares central literary motifs with contemporary Christian liturgy is transformed into an expression of martyrdom, the exemplification of an unbridgeable gap between the two religions.

Commentaries

16. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks²⁹

No prayer more powerfully defines the image of the Days of Awe than does *Un'taneh Tokef*. It is the equivalent in words to one of the great religious paintings by Michelangelo or Rembrandt. The language is simple, the imagery strong, the rhythm, insistent, and the drama intense.

²¹ S.Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe* (Schocken Books, 1948), p. 83; the volume includes a complete rendition of the legend.

²² *Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 845.

²³ Rabbi Morris Silverman, *High Holiday Prayer Book* (The Prayer Book Press, 1951), p. 145.

²⁴ *Gates of Repentance* (CCAR Press, 1978), pp. 175-176.

²⁵ Op cit., Agnon, p. 85.

²⁶ Op cit., L Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "*Un'taneh Tokef* as Poetry and Legend," p. 20.

²⁷ Ibid., Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "*Un'taneh Tokef* as Poetry and Legend," pp. 20, 24.

²⁸ Ibid., Rabbi Marc Saperstein, PhD "Universalism vs. Martyrdom: *Un'taneh Tokef* and its Frame Narrative," p. 72.

²⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor* (Koren, 2014), pp. 565-566.

17. Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD³⁰

Un'taneh Tokef gives voice to a particular mythical understanding of the universe that feels all too real and easily penetrates all our modern-day armor against sentiment and our best attempts at scientific bravado. It prompts a sustained look in the direction of the most primitive and longstanding of human feelings: vulnerability and helplessness.

18. Commentary, *Divrei Mishkan Hanefesh*³¹

It's hard to find a more provocative piece of High Holiday theology... We could not omit this declaration from the machzor, but neither could we present it unadorned... On the one hand, we knew that many people come to services on the High Holidays and wish to be chastened into accepting the uncertainty of life. On the other hand, we wished to eschew the theology that posits that bad things happen to people because they deserve it.

19. Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel³²

The *machzor* makes demands of us. It asks that we consider our lives as a gift, that we take not one life-moment for granted, that we give thought to the direction our lives are taking. We leave fingerprints wherever we go; the book of our life bears our own signature. This prayer asks us to confront the fundamental seriousness of being. Our lives are not jokes; we are created in God's image.

20. "Who by Fire," by Leonard Cohen³³

And who by fire, who by water
Who in the sunshine, who in the night time
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial
Who in your merry month of May
Who by very slow decay
And who shall I say is calling?

21. Dr. Wendy Zierler³⁴

Cohen's poem and the "who by fire" section of *Un'taneh Tokef* recall the structure of the "To everything there is a season" poem in Ecclesiastes, a tidy series of opposites that affirm the order of the universe...

22. Dr. Rabbi Jeff Hoffman³⁵

For many generations, there have been commentators – including Ramban (12th c.) and R. Yitzchak Arama (15th c.), among many others – that have taken issue with the theology of the prayer. Many worshipers, too, have had trouble believing its main thrust. After all, don't we all know pious people who involve themselves passionately with repentance, prayer, and charity, and yet who nevertheless have died young, or who have died violently?

³⁰ Op cit., L Hoffman, Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, "The Eternal and the Ephemeral: The Stark Contrasts of *Un'taneh Tokef*," p. 207.

³¹ Commentary, Rosh Hashanah Morning Service, *Divrei Mishkan Hanefesh: A Guide to the CCAR Machzor* (CCAR Press, 2016), p. 29-30

³² Op cit., L Hoffman, Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel, "Somehow Linked to G-d," p. 78.

³³ "Who by Fire" lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, first stanza.

³⁴ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Dr. Wendy Zierler, "Who by Fire," p. 133.

³⁵ Op cit., J. Hoffman.

23. Rabbi Noa Kushner³⁶

The list is a specific, unyielding look at what we know but regularly try to forget — namely, that we will die... We might even have the presence of mind to ask, “Given that I am going to die, given that my death is a fact, what will I make of my life?”

24. Catherine Madsen³⁷

The prolonged moral reckoning of the month of Elul and the Days of Awe is meant to gather and intensify the whole year’s consciousness of moral failure, to link it explicitly to our mortality, and to bring us through this crisis not to fatalism but to responsiveness.

25. Merri Lovinger Arian³⁸

This prayer makes us stare into the face of our mortality... The message of accountability, the need to own and be responsible for our own actions, is at the core of this prayer.

Source sheet prepared by Alden Solovy

Alden Solovy spreads joy and excitement for prayer. An American Israeli liturgist, poet, and educator, Alden is the Liturgist-in-Residence for the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. His writing was transformed by multiple tragedies, marked in 2009 by the sudden death of his wife from catastrophic brain injury. His teaching spans from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem to synagogues throughout North America, as well as Leo Baeck College in London and Limmud Conferences in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. He is the author of five books, three from CCAR Press: [*This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings*](#), [*This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day*](#), and [*This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer*](#). Alden’s work is anthologized in 15 volumes from Jewish and non-Jewish publishers. He writes for Ritualwell, RavBlog and the *Times of Israel*, and is a three-time winner of the Peter Lisagor Award for Exemplary Journalism. Find his latest work at ToBendLight.com. In 2012, Alden made aliyah to Jerusalem. He can be reached at asolovy54@gmail.com.

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³⁶ Op cit., L Hoffman, Rabbi Noa Kushner, “From Text to Life to Text,” pp. 65-66.

³⁷ Ibid., Catherine Madsen, “Who by Common Trial,” p. 161.

³⁸ Ibid, Merri Lovinger Arian, “Stark and Inescapable,” p. 140.