

## Survival Without Self-Pity

All human beings, and each one of us, suffer during our lives. There are major tragedies and minor ones; those brought on by outside forces and those for which we ourselves are responsible. At times, tragedies, great or small, seem to be a matter of timing or luck.

Let us contemplate for a moment the great tragedies beyond our control. Who came to work early and who was arriving late at the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001? Who was in the eye of a storm like Katrina or Ike, and who was just beyond the periphery of its devastation? Why is it that some people with a terrible form of cancer die within weeks of being diagnosed and yet a small percentage of individuals with the same disease live for years? Why is it that people living in close proximity during the earthquake in China died and others survived? Do we have any influence on such realities or is our fate predestined?

Isn't this the issue raised by the *unetaneh tokef*, the quintessential prayer of these days of awe? The prayer is haunting in its content and in its melody. In many respects, we want to escape its message and cannot. In some respects, we may not even know its message, or that message may be so great and hidden, or so multifaceted, that if we study it every year, we will find new and significant meanings. We doubtless do not pay enough attention to the first two paragraphs of this prayer which begins: "*un'taneh tokef kedushat hayom, ki hu norah v'ayom,*" – "We will observe the mighty holiness of this day, for it is one of awe and anxiety." Anxiety has a negative connotation; being eager is the positive feeling of looking forward. But when we are anxious, when we have anxiety, it is a feeling of worry and uneasiness. And what are we anxious about? The beginning of the answer is in the second paragraph: "*vehol bah-ay olam ta-avir lefoneha keivnei*

*maron,*” – “All who enter the world dost Thou cause to pass before Thee as a flock of sheep.” This is Yom HaDin, the day and days of divine judgment. And then, as we turn the page of the *Maḥzor* come the words with which we are all so familiar. “On Rosh Hashanah the decree is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many will pass away and how many will be created, who will die and who will live, ... who shall perish by the fire of an earthquake and who by the waters of a hurricane, ...” and perhaps most importantly, “who shall attain a full measure of years and whose life will be cut short,” because we all must die, but the vast majority would prefer to live longer than shorter. But is the length of our lives ever in our own hands? Doesn’t this prayer touch our greatest fear – that forces beyond our control will determine when we depart this earth and existence?

There are certainly powerful events that we cannot control. But that does not mean that we have to abandon all hope of surviving them. There are better and worse ways to react to disasters. In his book, *Deep Survival*, author Laurence Gonzales has examined those who have survived events where others have perished. What do they have in common? “Gonzales looks for people like Ma Vuanjiang, a 31-year-old power plant executive who survived seven days buried under rubble by drinking his urine and eating paper after a massive earthquake struck China in May. Gonzales studies survivors like An Afrizal, a construction worker who survived the 2005 Tsunami by clinging to a raft for two weeks in the Indian Ocean.” “Most of the survivors share the same traits, Gonzales says.

‘These are people ... [who] tend to have a view of the world that does not paint them as a victim,’ .... “They’re not whiners who are always complaining about the bad things that are happening to them and expecting to get rescued.”

Gonzales says at least 75 percent of people caught in a catastrophe either freeze or simply wander in a daze.

‘The first thing people do when something bad happens is to be in denial, .... People who make good survivors tend to get through that phase quickly. They accept the evidence of their senses.’ ...

“Gonzales says many of the disaster survivors he studied weren’t the most skilled, the strongest or the most experienced in their group. ...

Small children and inexperienced climbers, for example, often survive emergencies in the wilderness far better than their stronger or adult counterparts. ... They survive because they’re humble, .... They know when to rest, when they shouldn’t try something beyond their capabilities, when it’s wise to be afraid.

‘Humility can keep you out of trouble,’ [according to] Gonzales .... ‘If you go busting into the wilderness with the attitude that you know what’s going on, you’re liable to miss important cues.’

Survivors tend to be independent thinkers as well. When [the] hijacked planes hit the World Trade Center during the September 11 ... terrorist attacks, hundreds of workers were trapped in the towers.... Security told many of them to stay put and wait for rescue. Most of those who heeded the directions from security died, .... Most of the survivors decided to ignore security protocol. They headed downstairs through a smoke-filled stairwell and didn’t wait to be rescued....

Survivors ... pay attention to their intuition, .... If something tells them that the mountain isn't safe to climb that day, they'll back out even if they've planned the trip for months....

Survivors also shared another trait — strong family bonds. Many reported they were motivated to endure hardships by a desire to see a loved one....

Gonzales cites the story of Viktor Frank author of Man's Search for Meaning. Frank survived three years in Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps because he was driven by the thought of seeing his wife again....”  
(Internet)

If we view ourselves as the victims of fate, we surely diminish our lives, if we do not forfeit life altogether. The *un'eh taneh tokef* reminds us that there are powerful forces beyond our control, but its conclusion reminds us not to abandon hope: *u'teshuvah u'tefilah utzedakah ma-avirin et roah hagezerah*, “but repentance, prayer and acts of helping others help us to transcend the evil decree, the tragedies which we inevitably must encounter.” The question is not whether we will encounter terrible moments or events beyond our own folly and control, the only real question is how will we respond in the moment of crisis. Will we pity ourselves as whiners and victims or will we look to transcend the evil experience and survive as best we can? If the paragraph of “who will live and who will die” emphasizes that there are realities that God or nature decides, then the final statement clearly emphasizes that the response is in our hands: repentance, prayer and righteousness are all acts that we do or do not do. And those determine if we transcend the tragedies. I have encountered congregants who were diagnosed with cancer and gave up on life immediately and died quickly. I have also encountered congregants who were diagnosed with

cancer and have fought it with every fiber of their being with very little time spent on denial or pity and they have lived for years beyond the initial expectation. I have even seen congregants use their intuition to supplement the “rules of oncology protocol” to extend their lives. *Teshuvah*, repentance, means that we need to make changes when confronted with disaster; we have to look at our lives and possibilities in new, creative ways. *Tefilah*, prayer, means that we have to recognize that there are forces more powerful than our egos and that reaching out for help strengthens us. *Tzedakah*, righteousness, charity, is a concern for others and a recognition that if we want to really survive, we need to think of others.

Sometimes, our suffering is of a much more minor nature and self inflicted, but yet will be very painful to us for an hour, a day or a lifetime. We embarrass ourselves by a casual mistake or a serious flaw in our judgment. “If you goofed in a big way recently, [or not so recently,] maybe you [will benefit from hearing] about Roy Riegels as edited from Steve Goodier’s version.

The story ... [takes place during the] 1929 Rose Bowl championship football game between Georgia Tech and the University of California. Shortly before halftime, a man named Roy Riegels made a huge mistake. [Riegels, the California center, recovered a fumble in the second quarter, but] ... somehow became confused and started running in the wrong direction! One of his teammates, [Benny Lom caught] ... and tackled him after he had run 65 yards, ... at the one yard line. [This led to a Georgia Tech ... safety for two points.]

[At half time,] ... Riegels wrapped his blanket around his shoulders, sat in a corner, put his face in his hands and wept.

Coach Nibbs Price struggled with what to do with Roy. He finally looked at the team and said simply, ‘Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second.

All the players except Roy trotted out to the field. He didn’t budge. Though the coach looked back and called to him again, he remained huddled in the corner. Coach Price went to him and said,

“Roy, didn’t you hear me?”

“Coach,” he said, “I can’t do it. I’ve ruined you; I’ve ruined the school; I’ve ruined myself. I couldn’t face that crowd in the stadium to save my life.”

But Coach Price put his hand on Riegels’ shoulder and said, ‘Roy, get up and go on back; the game is only half over.’”

Roy Riegels went back and those Tech men will tell you that they have never seen a man play football as well as Roy Riegels played that second half.” Unfortunately, Georgia Tech won the game and their second national championship by a final score of 8 to 7; the safety played a significant role in the game.

But that is not the end of the story. “Despite the nationwide mockery that followed, Riegels went on to live a normal life, serving in the United States Army Air Forces during World War II and coaching football, including time at Cal, and running his own chemical company.... In 2003, a panel from the College Football Hall of Fame and CBS Sports chose Riegels’ ‘Wrong way run in the Rose Bowl’ one of the six ‘Most Memorable Moments of the Century.’”

Many of us will do something foolish or embarrassing in our lives and cry about it for a few days, years or a lifetime. None of us is able to undo

the past. There are no “do overs” or “mulligans” in real life, but there is always, according to our tradition, hope for change and the ability to do better in the future.

Steve Goodier shares the following true story about a magnificent elm tree from Po Bronson’s book: Why Do I Love These People? (Random House, 2005)

“The tree was planted in the first half of the 20th Century on a farm near Beulah, Michigan. It grew to be a magnificent tree.

In the 1950s, the family that owned the farm kept a bull chained to the elm. The bull paced around the tree, dragging a heavy iron chain with him, which scraped a trench in the bark about three feet off ground. The trench deepened over the years, though for whatever reason, did not kill the tree.

After some years, the family sold the farm and took their bull. They cut the chain, leaving the loop around the tree and one link hanging down. Over the years, bark slowly covered the rusting chain.

Then one year, agricultural catastrophe struck Michigan in the form of Dutch Elm Disease. It left a path of death across vast areas. All of the elms lining the road leading to the farm became infected and died. Everyone figured that old, stately elm would be next. There was no way the tree could last, between the encroaching fungus and its chain belt strangling its trunk.

The farm’s owners considered doing the safe thing: pulling it out and chopping it up into firewood before it died and blew over onto the barn in a windstorm. But they simply could not bring themselves to do it. It was as if the old tree had become a family friend. So they decided to let nature take its course.

Amazingly, the tree did not die. Year after year it thrived. Nobody could understand why it was the only elm still standing in the county!

Plant pathologists from Michigan State University came out to observe the tree. They observed the scar left by the iron chain, now almost completely covered by bark and badly corroded.

The plant experts decided that it was the chain that saved the elm's life. They reasoned that the tree must have absorbed so much iron from the rusting chain, that it became immune to the fungus.

It's said that what doesn't kill you will make you stronger. Or, as Ernest Hemingway put it, "Life breaks us all, but afterwards, many of us are strongest at the broken places."

We will each be tested by life, whether by outside forces or by internal ones. The test may be life threatening or altering, or it may be of a much smaller variety. We cannot avoid the test, or tests, but we definitely have the ability to transcend it or them. There is always hope that we can make lemonade from lemons. May God give each of us the strength to transcend whatever evil comes into our lives and face each day with hope.

AMEN