

*Yamim Nora'im 5778*  
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*Life as a Subway Train*

All summer long, a pile of unread magazines has taunted me from my nightstand. Currently, this stack glows red with artist Bob Staake's August *New Yorker* cover "Hell Train." Satan has commandeered the "H" line, his left hand on the gear shift, the right clutching his emblematic trident. A blaze of fire engulfs the car as it pulls into 42<sup>nd</sup> street. On the platform, a crowd of sweaty, crimson-faced commuters stare with resigned desperation at their flaming transportation.

From what I understand, this was a good summer to avoid the subways. Dubbed the "summer of hell" by our very own Governor Cuomo, New York public transit experienced a record number of detainments and shut-downs.

With recent months marked by dicey diplomatic crises, deep political schism, and natural disasters, the unrelenting inadequacy of our subways is one problem we could all be angry about. And while it's no small thing in these fraught times to build camaraderie with our neighbors—even if all we share are grievances about how we get to work—these delays and track changes and missed connections were actually valuable gifts.

Our lives are increasingly governed by innovations that market "control" as a lucrative commodity. Purchase a Fitbit to count how many steps we walk. Control our bodies. Plug in a Nest camera to see inside our homes. Control our space. Download transportation applications to avoid delays. Control our time. Join Facebook to track our friends. Control our networks.

When our Fitbits count and our Nests livestream, when our apps alert us and Facebook connects us—we sense that our world is in order. The more effective these technologies, the more easily we succumb to that alluring notion that we are, in fact, in control. Ironically, it is the very seamlessness of our lives that enables us to take our blessings for granted. Only when things fail—when the Fitbit dies and our apps stop streaming—do we pause and appreciate the miracle of interconnectedness that enables our textured and busy lives.

Well, this summer, things stopped working. Underground and overheated, with little to no cell phone service, we faced the glaring reminder that we have much less control than we tend to believe. And while I'd like to tell you that the subways are just subways and that there's no larger metaphor at play here, you know where this train is headed.

The devices we buy to increase our control are feeble toys in a reality where we have very little. Plan as we may for lives of happiness, health and prosperity, our trains go off track. *Mi yechiyeh umi yamut?* "Who will live and who will die?" begs the *Untane Tokef* poem. "Who will reach the ripeness of age; who will be taken before their time... Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled? Who will be calm and who will be tormented?" Our High Holy Day liturgy captures the frustrating conflict between our desperation to determine our destiny and our vulnerable recognition that it is out of our hands.

We gather together as summer's light drips onto autumn leaves and we pray fervently to be the tranquil ones, the calm ones, the ones who reach ripe old age. And yet many enter the sanctuary carrying the pain of a year that bred torment. We remember loved ones, whether or not they lived long, who died and left gaping holes in our hearts. We felt the tectonic shifts of a world governed by unknowable force when our communities were flooded, when our children grew ill, when the peace we knew was squandered by fear.

On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: we are not in control.

It would be simple if we could just admit our powerlessness and move on. But we're not wired that way. That's why we have storm trackers to warn us about the impending hurricane, and preemptive screenings to catch the first signs of disease, and a universe of non-profit organizations fighting to protect our voices, our values, and our most vulnerable.

At the end of his life, our patriarch Jacob summoned his twelve sons. The text of Genesis begins with a curious semi-repetition.<sup>1</sup>

א וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב, אֶל-בָּנָיו; וַיֹּאמֶר, הֲאִסְפוּ וְאֵנִידָה לָכֶם, אֵת אֲשֶׁר-יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם, בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים. ב  
הִקְבֹּצוּ וְשִׁמְעוּ, בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב; וְשִׁמְעוּ, אֶל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם.

*Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in the days to come.  
Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel. (Genesis 49:1-2)*

Why does Jacob tell his sons to assemble twice? The first phrase indicates that he intends to divulge the future. The second phrase noticeably omits this reasoning. Our rabbinic sages assert that Jacob's confidence was misplaced. Eleventh century French commentator Rashi tells us: "[He] wished to reveal what would take place in the future, but the Divine presence was removed from him." Like the rest of us, Jacob sought to know what lay in store for his children—for his legacy. But that control was beyond him.

Such a seemingly minor detail in Jacob's final moments is a major feature of our Jewish spiritual inheritance: we believe our future is radically open.<sup>2</sup> We are not the objects of some preordained destiny; we are subjects whose choices and behaviors beget consequences. And while we cannot know our future as Jacob desired, we play a crucial role in how destiny is shaped.

Our faith leads, then, to an inevitable conundrum: a future we cannot ascertain is in our very own hands. What do we do?

The *Untane Tokef* offers an answer. We cannot know who will live and who will die, BUT *teshuva*, *u'tefila*, *u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah ba'g'zerab*—through repentance, prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the Divine decree.

The prescription seems clear: do *teshuva* by seeking forgiveness for our missteps and resolving to improve; engage in *tefila* by opening a discourse with the Holy One; give *tzedakah* by generously supporting others. But when our subway is twenty minutes late and we have no cell phone service,

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sacks, "On Not Predicting the Future (Vayechi 5776)" 21 Dec 2015 [accessed 1 Sept 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

all we want is an apology from the MTA and our money back. How can the *Untaneh Tokef* speak to us beyond the synagogue, in our fast-paced, over-programmed lives?

By expanding our definitions.

*Teshuva* is built from the root *shuv* “to return”. Judaism envisions our best selves as our truest selves. When we err, our tradition tells us, we stray from our truth. And we err in sundry ways as evinced by our *Ashamnu* acrostic, which lists offenses for every letter of the *aleph-bet*. Reciting the *Ashamnu*, we strike our fists against our hearts. Midrash explains that our hands locate our hearts as the source of our wrongdoing. With every thump of our chest, we take responsibility and show remorse.<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth century legal scholar and rabbi Israel Meir Kagan explained, “God does not forgive us when we strike our hearts; rather, we are forgiven when our heart strikes us—that is, when we feel the pangs of conscience for our wrongdoing.”<sup>4</sup>

When our heart strikes us. *Teshuva* is more than seeking forgiveness; *teshuva* is about presence. It’s about anchoring ourselves in our bodies, in our relationships, and in our world so that we can feel and respond to the pangs of conscience that indicate when we’ve strayed, when someone is in need, or when, God forbid, the disruptions in our lives are beyond our capacity for repair.

Presence is hard to harness because of those very gadgets promising us increasing control. The longer we stare at our screens, the less time we spend seeing those yearning to meet our gaze. Glued to my phone during my commute, I miss the elderly person who deserves my seat and the hungry teenager begging for food. Presence eschews distractions that distance us from each other and diminish our accountability.

So how might we do *teshuva* in the subway? When that headlight refuses to shine down our tunnel, and we know it might be a while, let’s reject the impulse to reach for phones and turn instead to our neighbor. Perhaps a conversation that starts with the woes of public transportation can foment familiarity and friendship with others in our community. When life goes off track, our resilience will be determined not by the strength of our batteries, but by the depth of our relationships. So, next time the train is nowhere in sight—don’t send a text; start a conversation.

The *Untaneh Tokef* contends that *tefila* mitigates our uncertainty about the future. As *teshuva* orients us toward connection with one another, *tefila* draws us toward holiness. When our plans unravel, prayer is certainly an option, and I wholeheartedly invite you to spend unanticipated travel time in conversation with the Holy One. However, if praying in the subway does not jive with your commuting sensibilities, consider this: prayer is about gratitude.

Each Shabbat we bless candles, wine and challah to thank God for separating the holy from the ordinary. At lifecycle events, we sing *Shebechyanu* to express gratitude for times of rejoicing that bring sweetness to our lives and to our communities. Gratitude through prayer is our tacit acknowledgment that we are not entitled to the gifts we receive. We are owed neither joy nor Shabbat nor even challah!

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<sup>3</sup> Kohelet Rabba 7.9

<sup>4</sup> *Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur*, p. 86.

And just as we are not entitled to the blessings marked so readily in our Jewish lives, we are not entitled to subways that work, to expectations that are met, or to lives that are seamless.

The Tuesday after Labor Day, the “Summer of Hell” officially concluded. *The New York Times* surveyed commuters affected and learned that the inconvenience had a silver lining.<sup>5</sup> People expressed appreciation for the efficacy of their normal commutes, the facilities and employees that make their transportation possible, and the sense of community that arose from everyone enduring the delays together. For those with the presence of mind to seek it out, gratitude was a product of their disrupted summer.

The *tefila* that the *Untane Tokef* seeks is an attitude of humility that works against the temptation to place the self at the center. When the train changes our plans, let’s choose gratitude instead of rage. In so doing, we recognize that we are not entitled, but rather we are blessed. We are blessed when things work. And we are blessed by the efforts of those who rush to fix them when they break. And we are blessed by the people who stand alongside us on the platform while we wait, or by the hospital bed as we mourn, or in the shelter as we endure the storm.

Beyond presence and gratitude, the *Untane Tokef* empowers individuals to act. *Tzedakah* means more than charity, it invites us to righteous deeds. Our trains will derail and our lives will unfold in unanticipated ways. We will know the feeling of powerlessness. But Jewish tradition insists that knowledge of the future is not required to contend thoughtfully with the present. Jacob gathered his sons to reveal “*asher yikrah etchem b’acharit ha-yamim*”: what would happen to them in the end of days. Even on his deathbed, he displayed the deeply human desire to control the future for the sake of his children. But such knowledge was beyond him.

So, what did Jacob do instead? With twelve sons and no prophecy, he offered blessings. To those who were loyal and virtuous, Jacob promised honor and dignity, peace and power, wealth and reverence. To those who disappointed him by their misdeeds, he offered rebuke, and insisted upon a future free from their wrath and cruelty.

Jacob is a model for us all. Without prophecy, he relied on what he knew: that goodness should be propagated and evil extinguished. Jacob never lost the capacity to articulate a vision that would guide his family; and neither do we. Our hopes for the future mustn’t die just because our dreams are not realized. We don’t intend to bequeath pain and fear to the ones we love, so we teach them to work toward healing and harmony. If they inherit our wars, we’ll teach them to love peace. If they suffer illness, we’ll train them to find a cure. If they experience rupture, we’ll nurture their resilience.

The capacity to perform righteous deeds never departs from us. When life strands us on a platform and we can’t leave the station, we can emulate Jacob and offer blessing: by giving *tzedakah* to someone in need, by listening to the artist sharing her song, by lifting a stroller for a parent descending stairs, or by giving our spot on the next train to the fellow rider who needs it more. When life confronts us with inconvenience, we can respond with blessing.

The *Untane Tokef* propounds *teshuva*, *tefila*, and *tzedakah* as broad strategies for facing down a reality that taunts us with powerlessness. Disruptions, delays and drastic changes in our lives will test our

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Wolfe, “New York Today: ‘Summer of Hell’ Comes to an End,” *The New York Times*, 5 Sept 2017 [accessed 6 Sept 2017]

patience. Jewish tradition insists that when our best laid plans go awry, we need not concede defeat, but can instead call upon meaningful relationships, gratitude, and the capacity to offer blessing.

And Judaism also recognizes that the control we seek will always lie beyond our grasp. For this reason, the *Untane Tokef* contains a litany of unvarnished questions about what the year ahead has in store for us.

*Mi yechiyeh umi yamut?* “Who will live and who will die?” We won’t ever know. The most valuable insight of the *Untane Tokef* is the notion that increasing life experience breeds more questions than answers. There is no age or station when we suddenly gain the capacity to glimpse beyond the horizon of the present. Rather, every time we recite our liturgy, we sense more acutely how our very own lives hang in the balance.

The story of Jacob concludes with a delicate description of his death.

לג ויכל יעקב לצות את-בניו, ויאסף רגליו אל-המטה; ויאגע, ויאסף אל-עמיו

**When Jacob finished instructing his sons, he drew his feet into bed and, breathing his last, was gathered to his people (Gen 49:33).**

The image of Jacob tucking his feet beneath him in bed conveys a vivid image of serenity before his last breath. How did he manifest such calm before dying? Perhaps he saw in the eyes of his sons, and in the world he would leave behind, the imprint of a meaningful life. Jacob cultivated presence. He wrestled with God and survived, earning the name Israel.<sup>6</sup> Jacob expressed appreciation by taking stock of his sons’ virtues. And Jacob bestowed blessing. Our patriarch could finally rest because he had valued the exacting gift of being alive.

We choose life, not by having every answer, but by responding to the darkness of uncertainty with the light of relationship, gratitude, and blessing.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 32:22-31