**Central Reform Temple**

**Rosh Hashanah Morning 2023**

**Life is what you make it?**

Life is what you make it or You have to take what you are given?

Which is it?

It’s important to change and grow or no-one can ever really change

Which is it?

You make your own good luck or Good things happen to those who wait

Which is it?

Bad things happen to good people, nothing you can do about it or leading a good life is its own reward

Which is it?

We have so many contradictory understandings of the nature of life. They can be fundamentally different; that it is difficult to know which is right. Perhaps most of our daily lives, we don’t need to know; we just live it. But then at those poignant times of sorrow and loss, pain and suffering, we somehow want to know which it is, we need to know to make sense of it all. To know the answers is to be able to cope with our illness, to be comforted at the loss of a loved one , to deal with whatever life throws at us. I was asked by a young mother whose baby was dangerously ill whether she was being punished for marrying a non-Jew. She needed to know. A father with a stroke wants to know if this is supposed to be the end or can he fight for life worth living? A divorced man is made redundant again and regrets his bad luck and bad choices. How can he change it all?

Martin Buber said If we could hang all our sorrows on pegs and were allowed to choose those we liked best, everyone of us would take back his own, for all the rest would seem even more difficult to bear. Each of us has our own trials of life and we must find our own answers. Searching for them and learning that the answers are not always in our hands is the challenge of this season and the special message of the Unetanetokef poetic prayer.

It speaks of the contradictions of life and the paradox of what is determined for us and what we can choose for ourselves. Our genes, our disposition, our upbringing is held in tension with our own will, our personal choices and our determination. We shield our children as much as we can from this paradox but as we gain more experience of life, we come to know these challenges more and more. We recite, *Untanetokef kedushat hayom ki hu nora v’ay’om*. ‘Let us proclaim the holiness of this season for it arouses the deepest emotions in us.

Life is described in the poem as contradictory. It says

Love is the foundation of God’s throne and yet the spirit of truth rests upon it.

Love would suggest compassion, empathy for all the trials of our lives yet truth is impartial, concerned only with the objective, that which is right. Which can we expect from a life that seems to value us individually and yet treats us as just one speck of a created universe. Are our lives judged by how we love others or how we judge others?

It says God is the one who judges and tests, who records and seals but everyone of us signs the record with our own lives

There are consequences to our actions. If we do not wear a seat belt or speed or drink and drive, it is given that the risks in an accident are increased by our own actions. But the inverse is not a given. If we suffer in an accident or from a disease, it does not follow that this is a consequence of our action or any fault of ours. Our choices determine some of what happens to us but not everything that happens to us is for us to decide. Perhaps this is one the hardest lessons for us to come to learn about life for this can be so unfair and unequal.

It says The great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard

The prayer says God fixes the limits of every living creature; who shall live and who shall die but God doesn’t want anyone to die. Certainly not on account of our wrongdoings or our faults. God welcomes us back from the mistakes we have made encouraging us to acknowledge them and rectify them. Perhaps the way is when we return to our best selves and the example it gives to others as an enduring legacy.

And finally it says On Rosh HaShanah judgement is formed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed and yet also teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah transform the harshness in our destiny. In what way can our responses alter our destiny? How we live is the only way to know that.

So through teshuvah, we repair our relationships with others and so with ourselves and God. Through Tefilah, we build a spiritual life that has purpose and meaning and through Tzedakah, we acknowledge that we are working for others and not just ourselves

Maimonides said we should think of ourselves and the world as perfectly balanced ; exactly half guilty and half innocent. If we commit one sin we press down the scale of guilt against ourselves and the entire world and cause its destruction. And if we perform one good deed we press down the scale of merit and bring salvation to the entire world. Our simplest acts have enormous consequences.

Is the intention of the Untanetokef to frighten us? Certainly the haunting melody may make us think so. Should we be exalted by our possibilities or humbled by our limitations? Are we to be reassured or to be condemned? Is our destiny predetermined or can we make life what we want it to be?

This coming season will be a profound experience which will arouse the deepest emotions of loss and regret, reflection and a measuring of accomplishment. We will remember and judge, repent, pray and recount our deeds. We will judge the balance in our lives, assessing the fragility, the broken dreams as well as the possibilities and the potential of what we can make live become for each of us and for those around us.

In all, we are reassured in one way: God is always present. The nature of life brings great reward and lasting sorrow. That we cannot avoid. However we are held in that balance by the knowledge that this is the nature of eternity and there is a sure, secure and comforting presence in all of our upheavals and upsets. That rock of existence, ever present and besides us always is what makes life both sublimely beautiful and excruciatingly challenging.

*Untetanetokef kedushat hayom ki hu nora v’ay’om*

Tonight let us proclaim the holiness of this season as it arouses the deepest emotions about our lives and the challenges of living it well.

May the responses to life’s challenges remind us of God’s eternal presence so that we might cope with life’s judgements and celebrate life’s blessings.

Rabbi Michael Shire