

WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE: UN'TANEH TOKEF THROUGH THE LENS OF REFUGEE STORIES

A HIGH HOLIDAY TEXT STUDY 2016 • 5777



צדקה

תשובה



תפלה

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The Days of Awe are a time of serious introspection and reflection for the Jewish community. *Un'taneh Tokef*, one of the central prayers of the High Holiday liturgy, poses some of the core questions that we address during these days. What will our fate be in the year to come? How do we balance divine power with free will? Do our actions have any consequence on our destiny? Through stark imagery and probing queries, *Un'taneh Tokef* seeks to help us address these questions in our own lives.

One of the other lenses through which we can meaningfully explore this liturgical poem is through the experiences of people whose lives are starkly in the balance. This year, given how much the global refugee crisis has been in the media, on our minds, and in our hearts, when we recite *Un'taneh Tokef*, it evokes some of the actual experiences that many of the world's refugees face. Ultimately, *Un'taneh Tokef's* conclusion reminds us of our agency in tempering the harsh decrees that may lie ahead through *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*. Though we cannot put an end to the global refugee crisis, we have the opportunity in the year ahead to temper the severity of the decrees faced by today's refugees. This study session is designed to help us reflect on the connections between this poignant piece of holiday liturgy and the experiences of refugees and to explore our role in softening their decree.

SUGGESTED OUTLINE

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- The Context and Theology of *Un'taneh Tokef* (25 minutes)
- Narratives of Refugees Against the Backdrop of *Un'taneh Tokef* (25 minutes)
- Moving Forward (5 minutes)

INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

We recommend beginning by sharing the introduction above with participants as a way of contextualizing why you have chosen to focus on the global refugee crisis as the topic of your High Holiday text study.

THE CONTEXT AND THEOLOGY OF UN'TANEH TOKEF (25 MINUTES)

(Note: all texts in **bold** can be found on the accompanying Source Handout.)

After you have introduced the study session, begin by reading the **first fourteen lines of the excerpt from *Un'taneh Tokef*** aloud. Explain to the participants that this liturgical poem is based on a Talmudic teaching from **Rosh Hashanah 16b** that teaches that there are written decrees for the wicked, the righteous, and those in between. Continue by pointing out to participants that the imagery of God as a writer of

human fate occurs not just in High Holiday liturgy or rabbinic literature but actually runs throughout the *Tanach* (see examples from **Exodus 32:32**, **Psalms 69:29**, **Isaiah 4:3**, and **Malachi 3:16**). Discuss the questions below as a group.

1. What do the first fourteen lines of *Un'taneh Tokef* — particularly the first two — mean to you?
2. In the biblical and Talmudic contexts, and even in the imagery of *Un'taneh Tokef*, the idea that God writes and seals our fate seems to be quite literal. Do we believe that this is the case?
3. If God does write and seal our fate, what does this mean for our ability to affect change in our lives or the lives of others?

Lift up for participants that *Un'taneh Tokef* clearly contains a theology of reward and punishment and even seems to suggest the idea of pre-destination. These are notions that many of us struggle with because we cannot accept the explanation that those who succumb to a horrible fate were insufficiently righteous. Indeed, there are other places within Jewish text that suggest that human beings do have control over our destinies. Read the passage from **Ben Sira 15:11-17** aloud, and discuss the questions below as a group.

1. Do you think the core of *Un'taneh Tokef* (lines 5-14) is still relevant today? Do you find the theology expressed in Ben Sira 15:11-17 easier to relate to?
2. Given the choice presented in Ben Sira 15:11-17, what happens when we ask the question “who shall live and who shall die” not of God but, instead, of ourselves?

Conclude this section by explaining that, though we can certainly relate to — and are even acutely and painfully aware of — the fact that members of our families and community will pass on in the year to come, the particular fates mentioned in *Un'taneh Tokef* may feel far removed for us. For 65 million refugees and displaced people across the world, however, the specifics of *Un'taneh Tokef* are still a reality today. With that in mind, take turns having participants read aloud the **assorted headlines from articles about refugees**.

NARRATIVES OF REFUGEES AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF UN'TANEH TOKEF (25 MINUTES)

Take a moment to point out to participants that the stories behind these headlines are incredibly devastating. While they are not the stories of all refugees, they are the experiences of many. For some refugees, though, there is hope — both because of steps they are able to take to change their lives for the better and because of steps we are able to take to help them to establish new lives in safety and in freedom.

Interestingly, this idea is embodied in the final lines of *Un'taneh Tokef*. Read **lines 15 and 16 of the excerpt from *Un'taneh Tokef*** and the **commentary by Rabbi David A. Teutsch**. Highlight for participants

that Rabbi Teutsch's commentary is a common interpretation of the last lines of *Un'taneh Tokef*: that repentance, prayer, and charity do not change what happens in life, but they have the ability to change our experience of life. Discuss the question below as a group.

1. While we normally think of *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* in the context of tempering the severity of our own decree, do you think our ability to engage in these pathways extends to our relationships with other people? Might we be able to lessen the severity of a tragedy another person has faced by engaging in any of these pathways? Has this ever been your experience? If so, how?

Explain to participants that you are going to now take some time to explore the concept of the severity of life's decree being tempered by *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* through the story of a Subhi, a gay refugee from Syria. Read **Subhi's story** aloud, and discuss the questions below as a group.

1. Refugees are people who take bold risks in an attempt to change their decrees. In what ways does Subhi do this? What gives him the ability to act?
2. Of course, it is impossible to believe that refugees like Subhi could overcome the unimaginable trauma, violence, and persecution they face without outside intervention. What steps did others take to help Subhi?

Point out to participants that many of us are able to do *teshuvah*, pray on behalf of others, and give *tzedakah* to those in our immediate communities, but it can be difficult to engage with those more far removed or in seemingly intractable situations. While over the last year so many of us have been awakened to the global refugee crisis, the enormity of the crisis often causes us to become overwhelmed and turn away when this topic comes up. Remind learners that they may be familiar with Maimonides' teaching that the highest level of *teshuvah* (repentance) is to be confronted with the same situation and choose to act differently and that we have that opportunity in the year to come. Discuss the questions below as a group.

1. How might we challenge ourselves not to become paralyzed by the enormity of the global refugee crisis in the year to come?
2. Given that so many of us have awakened to the realities of the global refugee crisis this year, how might we take steps to "temper judgment's severe decree" through *teshuvah*, *tzedakah*, or *tefilah* in the coming year?

MOVING FORWARD (5 MINUTES)

Conclude the session by stressing the fact that refugees have incredible agency in changing their fate. They often take huge risks to survive the persecution and violence they have experienced, as evidenced by Subhi's story. However, our willingness to engage in *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* can have real impact on their lives.

Invite participants to become part of the American Jewish movement to support refugees in the coming year — whether through direct service, advocacy, or *tzedakah*. A first step is to take home the special High Holiday door hanger from HIAS. Explain that this door hanger contains a pledge stating that, at this time when the Gates of Repentance are closing, participants commit themselves to help keep the gates of our country open to refugees. They can also add their signatures to an online petition stating the same, a link to which they will find on the door hanger.

You may also want to conclude by asking participants to reflect on one action they would like to take — in the vein of *teshuvah*, *tzedakah*, or *tefilah* — to support refugees in the coming year.

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