

I want to tell you a story about an extraordinary man. A number of years ago I met Rabbi Ronnie Cahana while visiting Camp Ramah in Canada. He served a congregation in Montreal. He was warm and friendly, intelligent and engaging, maybe 10 years older than me. Just a couple years after that meeting, he had a stroke. He was paralyzed from just below his eyes down, but his mental faculties were intact – a condition known as “locked-in syndrome.” His daughter and the rest of his family learned to transcribe his communication through blinks, which allowed him to continue to share his Torah and his poetry.

From the first moment that he could communicate, Rabbi Cahana comforted his family and his congregation, assuring them that his experience was a blessing, that he found God within the silence of his body. He continued to teach Torah, he continued to counsel members of his congregation, while in a condition that most of us would have found intolerable.

Rabbi Cahana had to learn how to live in stillness. In it, he found serenity, even joy, that astonished him.

When doctors first gave him a grim prognosis, he felt a tugging at his pants leg. He was certain it was his father, who had died seven years earlier. His father said to him, “I promise you 100 per cent [recovery]. . .”

Since then, he has begun to regain control over his head and neck, and partial control over his limbs. He can speak and he can stand for an aliyah, he is again serving his congregation part-time, and he is determined to continue to regain his abilities.

Two weeks ago, I was having trouble clarifying my thoughts to figure out what I wanted to share with you today. I felt like I was playing whack-a-mole - every time I tried to concentrate, a phone call or email would pop up and divert me to this or that issue. I was dealing with multiple problems - it was clearly a full moon!

So I opened the Mahzor and read the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer and listened to Leonard Cohen’s powerful rendition of “Who by Fire.”

Mahzor: How many will pass on and how many will be born; who will live and who will die; who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end; who by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague.

Leonard Cohen: Who by barbiturate, who in these realms of love, who by something blunt, And who by avalanche, who by powder, who for his greed, who for his hunger.

If our lives are going well, we don’t think about the things that are going wrong. But if we hit a rough patch, we start thinking about the so many ways to suffer, physically or emotionally. Most of us, unlike Rabbi Cahana, try to figure out why we are in pain. Why God or the people around us or fate or bad luck is doing this to us? In Leonard Cohen’s words, we ask ‘Who shall I say is calling?’ When I suffer, who or what is it that is trying to deliver a message to me?

*Unetane tokef* tells us that everything that happens to us is purposeful and there is a message in it. For me, though, in all the chaos I was experiencing, I couldn’t figure out what the message was and how I could convey it to you. I was becoming anxious and short-tempered at everyone around me as if they were the reason that I was stuck.

At that moment, I was not enjoying who I was and what I was doing personally or professionally. I had just gotten into an unpleasant email exchange with a colleague in which he

accused me of catering to the lowest soul of people and infantilizing Judaism. I was troubled, tormented, and disturbed; I felt impoverished and was about as low as I ever get.

I listened to Leonard Cohen ask, Who shall I say is calling? What is the caller trying to tell me? When you hear *unetane tokef*, chanted by Cantor Stuart or as we read sections of it together, how do you feel it echoed in your life, in your pain and loss and addiction and frustration? This prayer is trying to tell us something, but at that time I was having trouble figuring out what, and not for the first time.

A year ago, my father's health had been failing and *Unetaneh Tokef* on the first day of Rosh Hashanah hit me hard. I had this sudden sense of certain knowledge that it was his last Rosh Hashanah. I couldn't shake the feeling, which lasted throughout the entire holiday through Yom Kippur and beyond, because it felt like a message from God, not nearly as pleasant or inspiring as Rabbi Cahana's message from his father.

When I went back to Minneapolis after the holidays to visit my parents, I went with my dad to see his doctor, and the report was 180 degrees from what I had been hearing and experiencing over the phone. The affliction that had been weakening him had receded. Yet, I still couldn't shake that feeling that grabbed me during *unetaneh tokef*. It stayed with me right up until mid-summer, when it finally began to recede.

The message I thought I was receiving last year during *unetaneh tokef* was wrong, but it took me a long time to fully realize it. When I read *Unetaneh Tokef*, sometimes I can only see the death and the suffering, and I miss the passages noting serenity, peace, birth, and lifting up. That is my failing, and it happens when I am overcome by my thoughts. I let my thoughts consume and define me, rather than being open to the voice of God, the still, small, voice. It's not easy to distinguish a message from God from a message rooted in my own insecurity and fear about losing my father or not being a good enough father or son or husband or rabbi. That voice inside me was the voice of my fears, not the voice of God.

The key to clarifying our thoughts is not to become attached to the negativity. Thoughts need not define us. Thoughts are constantly arising in our mind, but we can teach ourselves to notice the thought without getting wrapped up in it. Think of a thought as a wisp of smoke. We can acknowledge the damaging, distracting, and disturbing thought, but rather than getting on the train of thought and obsessing on the dark places that it leads us, we can train ourselves to notice it and then let it go.

Too often, we try to escape our thoughts by immersing in Facebook, by eating, by going to the neighborhood bar, or by sitting in front of our home entertainment center. Each and every one of us has negative and fearful thoughts, but we don't have to let them hold us prisoner. We can look to Rabbi Cahana as a guide. Inside his mind, his body is dancing, twirling, tumbling, he said. He jokes, "I could be in the Cirque du Soleil."

Rather than seeking to escape those thoughts, understand what they are trying to tell you. Sit down with a caring friend and let them out. Write in a journal. Take a walk or sit in a quiet spot and meditate and talk to God. Join with your Ahavas Israel community on a regular basis for prayer time, in a quiet and safe environment focused on Torah as a guide.

You can learn to recognize the destructive thoughts and separate them from the constructive thoughts. You can learn which thoughts move you towards recovery and light, as did Rabbi Cahana's thoughts of his father; and which thoughts lead to towards anxiety and darkness, as did

my thoughts about my father. You can learn which thoughts are driven by your insecurity and neediness, and which thoughts are coming from a position of strength and confidence.

Together, as a religious community, we can help each other redirect our thoughts to understand their Torah. Together, we can learn Rabbi Cahana's Torah of serenity and joy within stillness. Together, we help each other clarify our thoughts and set aside those which are damaging; and may our holy, purified thoughts lead us to act in loving ways, befitting our most sacred nature.

Now let us begin.