

I celebrated a new holiday, a personal holiday, this past summer. June 1 was my celebration of ‘I-didn’t-have-a-heart-attack-day.’ I woke up on Thursday, June 1 wondering if that would my day for a heart attack. At the end of the day, failing to have had chest pains, I celebrated I-didn’t-have-a-heart-attack-day. To be clear, I also haven’t had a heart attack on any of the days prior to or subsequent to June 1.

I had been thinking about that particular day for a number of years. It started when I realized that there my life paralleled my father’s life in significant ways. My father was 32 when I was born, and I was 32 when my first children were born. My father was 52 when his father died and I was 52 when my father died. To the best of my recollection, my father had a heart attack on August 1, 1990, when he was just shy of 59 years, six months old. I began thinking that if my destiny is to follow my father’s pattern, that I, too, would have a heart attack at the same age. So I woke up on June 1 wondering just how deep the genetic programming went.

Knocking around my head was a Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayer known as *Unetaneh Tokef*, containing the lines, “Who will live, who will die, why by fire, who by water ...” The idea of this prayer is that once a year, on Rosh Hashanah, we are judged based on our behavior, and our fate is determined for the coming year. On Yom Kippur, our fate is sealed. Over the past 15 years or so since I began to realize the ways that my life paralleled my father’s life, this prayer has spoken to me in terms of predetermined destiny, that my fate had been determined and that I was destined to travel down the same path as my father. No matter how often I told myself that this is not the way God and the world work, my mind kept returning to the idea that I was destined to live my father’s experience.

My father came closer than I’d like to think of dying that day. So as not to leave it entirely in God’s hands, I began increasing my physical exercise in my late 40’s and 50’s and as this anniversary approached, I told my physician that he had one job - to monitor my health and prevent me from having a heart attack on June 1, 2023. Of course, I’ll never know what would have happened had I lived the same stress-laden sedentary life that my father lived in his 50’s. But with the benefit of exercise and certain medications, I have been able to stave off whatever genetic propensity to a heart attack I may have inherited from my father. At this point, all I know is that my overall health is good and I haven’t show signs of developing the particular condition that ultimately led to my father’s death. So I seem to be in good shape not to die on September 19, 2047 at the same age as my father when he died. There is, however, a lot of road to travel between now and then.

All this has helped me to reinforce my conviction that the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer is not a statement of fatalism, that we are not consigned to live out predetermined fates handed to us from birth. A careful reading of *Unetaneh Tokef* suggests that we have significant control over the course of our lives. The conclusion of the prayer gives us three words which change our fate – Tefillah, Teshuvah, and Tzedakah; Prayer, repentance, and good deeds. However, even this is not a guarantee of a magical formula to living a long, trouble-free life. It’s not ‘do this, and your problems will disappear.’ It suggests that these three actions will *ma’avirin et roah ha-gezerah*, avert the severity of the decree. You can change your fate, but ultimately, the decree of mortality can only be delayed somewhat, not averted entirely.

Teshuvah, changing the way you live, can change the arc of your physical and mental health. If you change how you eat, if you change how take care of and exercise your body, you can lengthen your life. Teshuvah can also change your relationships, which potentially changes your

mental health. So ask yourself, this Rosh Hashanah, where can I use teshuvah to make adjustments to the places where my life is not going the way I want? Where do I blame other people for creating problems for which I am at least partially responsible? Which of my aches and pains might I address with better attention to their root causes? Teshuvah means more than a pro-forma blanket apology. It means actually changing the way you do things. Teshuvah, even in small ways, can transform your life.

Tefillah, prayer, can reduce stress, and also can change your mental outlook on life and give you insight into healthier, more positive, patterns of behavior. Public prayer gives you the added benefit of the social connection to a community. Prayer invites you to consider not what you want, but what you really need to live a fulfilled life. It invites you to be aware of how you respond to stimuli when you are overreactive and how you can become emotionally resilient. It invites you to handle what you can and leave the rest of your burdens on God's shoulders to bear.

Tzedakah in its broad sense, as in giving time and resources to others, can transform the way you think about your life by strengthening your connections to the community around you. It reminds you of what you have that others may not, it reminds you that your responsibility towards self is balanced by your responsibility towards others. It can make you a happier, more grateful, person.

Tefillah and Tzedakah may not lengthen your life in years, but may heighten your appreciation of the gift of the years that you have. Positive attributes reinforced by Jewish prayer, like gratitude, generosity, equanimity, patience, and kindness, make you a happier person who enjoys life and finds fulfillment in each day.

There is more that we do not control about our lives than that which we do control. But much of what we control takes place between our ears in the way we embrace our fear and mortality. We can live our lives in fear of death, thinking of ourselves as only one step away from a pre-ordained death, hunting down illness and disease as if we are at war and they are the enemy. Or we can live our lives in each moment, lovingly accepting the aging of our bodies, making wise decisions about our health, transitioning to *olam haba* with the satisfaction of a life fully lived. Most of us are likely somewhere in between, aggressive at times, accepting at times, making decisions rooted in our fundamental dreams, desires, fears, and values, as we glide towards an inevitable death, someday.

May this new year be a time of personal awakening to tefillah, teshuvah, and tzedakah.

May we experience good health and blessings within our family.

And May God bless us, protect us, shine God's face upon us with favor, and lift up God's face to ours, giving us peace.

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יי וַיְשַׁמְרֶךָ:
 יָאֵר יי פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְדֶּךָ:
 יִשָּׂא יי פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשְׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם: