

# 37

## God's Hands

*Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek  
and Ruth Messinger*

For most American Jews, the three-letter word G-O-D inevitably conjures images of a bearded king on a throne, high up in the heavens, perhaps with the voice of James Earl Jones booming out over the mountains. For some, this is a comforting image of a benign ruler, managing and guiding the world in its particulars and apportioning just deserts to the wicked and the righteous. Others recoil at the distance of the image, finding the idea of a monarch too alienating to inform their religious lives.

Be it attractive or repulsive, for Jews who come to synagogue on the High Holy Days, the sense that the divine is a judging God is only heightened by the refrain that these few days *are* the days of judgment, into which we come as peons into the hall of the mighty, judging king to await our fate for the coming year. *Un'taneh Tokef*, arguably the definitive poem of the period, begins by describing in some detail how God the king is exalted on this terrible and holy day of judgment while He reigns from his throne in truth. He alone is the judge, prosecutor, and witness who records our deeds in a tremendous book and then renders judgment for the coming year. The poem cultivates a frame of mind in which we hope God judges us favorably, but if our deeds do not merit our continued existence, then, "repentance, prayer, and charity" (line 21)—we prefer the word "giving"—may remove the severity of the decree. The poem invites us to throw ourselves at the mercy of the court.

---

Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek is the rabbi in residence of American Jewish World Service. Ruth Messinger is the president of American Jewish World Service.

The challenge, of course, is believing that there is a master who metes out rewards to the righteous and punishments to the wicked and that this master can be placated with repentance, prayer, and giving. This Judaism of reward and punishment is the Judaism that Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), Spinoza, and close observers of humanity ever after have derided as simply false.<sup>1</sup> After all, if there is a master of reward and punishment, then wealthy dictators such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe must be not just privileged or lucky, but very, very righteous, while the one billion humans who are suffering malnutrition, many of them dying for lack of food,<sup>2</sup> are not simply unlucky or victims, but very, very wicked. At some level, we take comfort in the idea of a moral system with laws as immutable as those of physics—we want to believe that the wicked are punished as surely as an apple falls from a tree—but experience tells us that isn't so.

The intellectual move of ascribing to humans ultimate responsibility for their fate, be it good or bad, allows us to preserve the image of the powerful judging God by shifting blame for misfortune to the unfortunate: if you suffer, it must be because *you* did something wrong. As Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the former Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel put it, "The six million Holocaust victims were reincarnations of the souls of sinners, people who transgressed and did all sorts of things that should not be done. They had been reincarnated in order to atone."<sup>3</sup> In other words, given the fullness of time, we are all compensated for our deeds, with the righteous flourishing and the wicked being cut down by fire, water, sword, and beast. By this logic, six million Jews were murdered in the Shoah and one billion people still die of starvation in the world—as punishment for their sins. We who eat plentifully are simply being rewarded for our righteousness.

This thinking, which seems to be at the core of *Un'taneh Tokef*, is the theology of a child—"Oh God, I'll do what you say as long as you don't spank me." Worse still, it is a flight from responsible agency. It willfully ignores the acts that humans could have taken, *should* have taken, to change our fate. In the face of suffering, we should not pray for God to save the righteous—we should act ourselves. The Torah itself makes this point powerfully in telling of the Israelites' escape from Egypt. With Pharaoh's army fast on their heels and the Red Sea directly in front of them, Moses shouts, "Stand by, and witness the deliverance which Adonai will work for you today.... Adonai will battle for you!" Moses's

calls for patience until the moment of Divine intervention are interrupted with a sharp rebuke from on high, "Why do you cry out to *Me*?" God says. "You tell the Israelites to go forward!" (Exodus 14:13–15). When Moses needed to change some aspect of the physical world, even the Holy One knew that prayer is not the way to make that happen.

Prayer cannot change the reality of suffering, although it can ameliorate the pain of suffering. This is the claim that *Un'taneh Tokef* makes with its haunting refrain that defies any easy translation. *Ut'shuvah, ut'fillah, utz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zerah*: "Repentance, prayer, and charity" do something, but what? The verb *ma'avirin* is usually understood to mean "cancel," as if repenting, praying, and giving can annul a negative decree. But as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner points out, it really means "to cross over."<sup>4</sup> It's the word that's used to describe Jacob crossing the Yabok River before wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:23). Repentance, prayer and donating do not change the facts of life—our disbursement of blessings and curses will continue to bear little relation to our moral virtue, whether or not we pray, repent, or donate. But a heart habitually opened by repentance, prayer, and donating will cross through life's inescapable misfortunes somewhat more gently. Our road will still be bumpy, but we'll have better shock absorbers.

However, if God is not emending our fates based on the sincerity of our prayers, our repentance, or our donations, then what is God doing? Does God simply sit on the throne of judgment, aloof and indifferent to our prayers while rewarding Robert Mugabe and punishing the world's bottom billion? To understand *Un'taneh Tokef* as describing the role of prayer in making it easier to cope with inevitable human suffering might answer one question—what are we doing when we pray? However, it begs another, possibly weightier question—what is *God* doing when we pray?

For an especially powerful understanding of what God does—not just when we pray, but always—we turn to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, one of the most important of the early Hasidic masters. In an audacious interpretation of the verse *Adonai tzilkha*, "God is your protection" (Psalm 121:5), Levi Yitzchak makes it painfully clear that the power to dole out justice and mercy, to bring joy into the world, and to save the innocent does not rest in Divine hands, far away from us.<sup>5</sup> Astoundingly, he reads *tzilkha* literally, as "your shadow," so that the words mean "God is your shadow." Just as the shadow of a person does whatever that person does, so, too, does the divine do what we do. Divinity is the shadow of

human action. If we save a human life, so too does God; if we decide to end a human life, God does also. At some level, the utterly transcendent divinity is right at hand, for the divinity we hope to worship is a shadow of ourselves, our best parts and our worst. If you want to see God save the innocent, *you* need to get off the couch and save the innocent. If you want to see God feed the hungry, *you* need to feed the hungry. If you want to see God stand by while the innocent suffer, all you need to do is stand by and do nothing *yourself*.

With the acknowledgment that we are God's hands and feet on earth, the accusing question of the skeptic—how can *God* stand by when children are killed in Auschwitz, Guatemala, and Darfur?—is turned back with a penetrating fury. The question becomes, how can *we* stand by when children are killed in Auschwitz, Guatemala, and Darfur?

For Levi Yitzchak, the presence of God isn't revealed in a supernal visage of the divine hand reaching down from a sky with thunder bolts and lightning rods. God's hands are the hands of humanity, and God's face the face of us all. The divinity we seek and fear lurks in the countenance of every human being, including our own, and revelation is the moment when we recognize that the flesh and bone of humanity are traces of the divine. We pray to see God's face, but the face has already been revealed, set atop every human body, and we are better served to pray for the ability to see it.

So what then do we do on Rosh Hashanah when the cantor first intones *Un'taneh Tokef*? What do we do if we cannot join our medieval ancestors in hoping that God will requite us all according to our merits? On the day of Rosh Hashanah, we pray that because of our practices of repentance, prayer, and donating, we have the resources to cross over our own pain and suffering as gently as possible. But things do not stop there. On the very first day *after* Rosh Hashanah, we pray with our hands and our feet that all who suffer will have the resources they need—provided by the divine through our actions.

