

When the Holy One, blessed is He,  
ascends His throne on the New Year,  
He first sits on the Throne of  
Judgment. But when Israel, assembled  
in the synagogues, sounds the Shofar,  
He rises from the Throne of Judgment  
and ascends the Throne of Mercy.

*Pesikta de Rav Kahana*

In an erudite and comprehensive study of comparative liturgy, Eric Werner, of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, offers a fascinating summary of more recent research on the origins of the *Unetanneh Tokef*. He tells us that M. Zulay of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the author of a volume on the *piyyutim* of Yannai, had confirmed the theory that the *Unetanneh Tokef* originated as early as the Byzantine rule (ca. 800). Dr. Werner shows that there is a remarkable similarity in style and form between *Unetanneh Tokef* and its Byzantine and Middle-Latin parallels. Yet the Jewish differential can be clearly discerned by a comparison with this part of the Middle-Latin *Dies Irae*:

What a tremble will be there!  
The book will be opened  
All hidden things will appear  
The awesome trumpet will sound  
Over all the graves.  
Whom shall I ask for protection even  
When the just ones are not safe?  
Counting the sheep, grant me space  
Among the lambs, segregate me from the goats  
My prayers are not worthy, but Thou,  
Good one, be gracious unto me.

(Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, p. 254)

Here, as in the *Unetanneh Tokef*, judgment takes place in heaven, but emphasis is placed upon the "Last Judgment," after the dead are revived and the redeemed are segregated from those condemned. In the Jewish version, however, the Judgment Day occurs on Rosh Hashanah, and the sealing of the Judgment is on Yom Kippur. The decision relates to this life, and the decree can be remedied and even repealed by the decision of repentance.

"the seal of every man's hand is set thereto"

This idea is based on a homily suggested by the verse: "He scaleth up the hand of every man, that all men whom He hath made may know it" (Job 37:7). In commenting on this verse, the Midrash states that when Adam sinned, God caused all generations of the future, righteous and wicked alike, down to the Resurrection, to pass before Adam, and said to him: "See how you have brought death upon the righteous." When Adam heard this, he was distressed that by his action death would come even upon the righteous. He pleaded with God not to record it against him that he brought death upon them. Adam was then assured that every man would be asked to record the deeds he has done and to set the seal of his own hand to his own record. The Midrash then continues to say that when God sits in judgment over His creatures, He brings their record books and exhibits to them their own deeds (*Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, *Bereshit*, 29).

This Midrash serves to remind us of the teaching that a person must hold himself fully responsible for the quality of his life. He must not succumb to the temptation to blame his conduct on forces beyond his control. The moral quality of our life is determined by the extent to which we believe that the seal of our own hand is set to the record of our deeds.

"All who enter the world dost Thou cause to pass before Thee, one by one, as a flock of sheep (*kivene maron*)"

The term *kivene maron* occurs in the Mishnah (R.H. 1:2), and is interpreted in the Talmud as "sheep" (R.H. 18a). However, older texts of the Mishnah and texts of the *Tosefta* and the Jerusalem Talmud point to the reading *kiveneron* which is from the Greek word *nomeron*, meaning a regiment of soldiers. Saul Lieberman suggests that there is visualized here a troop of soldiers climbing up, one by one, on a narrow incline (*Tosefta Ki-fshutah, Moed*, pp. 1022-23). This original meaning offers us an even more vivid picture of each person being judged as an individual by the moral quality of his life.