Israel through the Lens of Yom Kippur

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

The time leading up to, during, and following High Holidays is ideal for engaging your membership, students, or participants in high-level conversation. You may choose to facilitate this Discussion Guide with your congregants, adult education departments, youth groups, board members, students, administration etc. In the Synagogue setting this guide is also suitable to offer as a supplement to your main services during Yom Kippur. (See Appendix I- Facilitation Tips and Reminders)
FRAMING:

The facilitator should set up the program by mentioning the following:

• Amongst the core themes of the High Holidays, some of the most important that emerge and that we will be dealing with today are: personal reflections, prayer, personalizing the traditions and experiences of the holiday, and taking ownership of our experience.

• These themes are exemplified through the prayer Unetanah Tokef, which is read on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

• Using the language of Unetanah Tokef and recalling the Yom Kippur War (40 years ago), the participant will have the opportunity to grapple with themes found in the prayer, ways of connecting to it, memorializing, and considering real issues related to Israel, Judaism and the world.

OPTIONS:

The following guide will provide different options for facilitators depending on their interests, knowledge, comfort level, and time allocation. Some facilitators might choose to facilitate either option I, or II, or combine elements of both. This program has been designed to enable facilitators to focus on the questions and issues with which they are most comfortable. The two options are:

I. An analysis of Unetanah Tokef

II. Connecting to Yom Kippur using the story of Kibbutz Beth Hashita as a catalyst for conversation
An analysis of Unetanah Tokef

This conversation will provide participants an opportunity to play with the main ideas raised in Unetanah Tokef, and connect those ideas to relationships with, and feelings towards, the State of Israel.

**MATERIALS:**
- Information about Unetanah Tokef
- Translation and Hebrew text of Unetanah Tokef

**TIME FRAME:**
30-45 Minutes

**PROCESS:**

1. The facilitator should begin by providing a bit of background about the story/legend behind Unetanah Tokef. (See Appendix II- Unetanah Tokef – The Background)

2. Read the English version and depending on the group’s level of fluency in Hebrew, the Hebrew text of Unetanah Tokef. Some might choose to read the entirety of the text, others might focus on the highlighted portion beginning with... How many Shall pass... and ending with... but repentance, prayer and righteousness avert that severe decree. (See Appendix III – English Translation of Unetanah Tokef)

3. The facilitator can choose from a variety of conversation topics and starters as listed below to stimulate meaningful conversation.
CONVERSATION PROMPTS:

Initial Reactions
1. What are your initial reactions, feelings, or questions from this excerpt of Unetanah Tokef?
2. Does this resonate with you?

Individual Responsibility and Divine Promise
1. We are taught that at the point when we recite the Unetanah Tokef our fate is hanging in the balance and the way of making our case to God, and to ultimately change the decree, is through teshuva, tefilla and tzedaka. Does this fit with your own understanding of, and connection to, Judaism?
2. What does the prayer teach us about the idea of human power versus divine intervention/presence?
3. Thinking about the State of Israel, how do we see the similar dichotomy of divine intervention (or fate, pre-ordained destiny etc.) and the idea of people determining their own fate?
4. How do we see our own response to the Unetanah Tokef in terms of both God’s promise of the Land of Israel and our own role and the work needed to be done to create and maintain the Israel that we dream of?

Fear/Hope
1. According to Rabbi Dr. Reuven Hammer, this prayer is considered by many to be the pinnacle of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and can best be described as “awesome and terrible”. So too, rabbinical candidate Joysa Winters explains, Unetanah Tokef is “one that strives to inspire both fear and hope”. How do you respond to these assessments? Do you see this duality in Unetanah Tokef?
2. In many ways awesome and terrible, or, even more appropriate, fear and hope can represent the State of Israel – how is this connection exemplified in today’s Israel? What are examples of this? (The facilitator can offer some recommendations for this: the hope is the longing for a State...but is there more to our hope for Israel that has
yet to be realized? Do we fear that Israel may not achieve the highest aspirations of its people? Do we fear external existential threats? Internal challenges?)

3. How does this same paradox of fear/hope relate to your relationship with Judaism, or your Jewish living (religiosity and/or spirituality)?

4. How does this same paradox of fear/hope relate to your relationship with, or connection to, Yom Kippur and this period of the High Holy days?

**Use of Language**

1. If you were to add a concept, idea or verse to this prayer, what would you add and why? What is missing for you?

2. What line, idea, or concept most resonates with you?

3. When returning to the main sanctuary and reciting this as part of the High Holiday prayers, will you think of anything new? Silently meditate in a different way? How so and why?

**The Story of Rabbi Amnon**

1. How does the story of Rabbi Amnon and the genesis of the prayer affect your connection to, and understanding of, this prayer?

2. What is the message that you take from Rabbi Amnon’s story?

3. Does knowing this story make Unetanah Tokef more or less relatable to life today for you as a Jewish Canadian in 2013?

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1 Rabbi Dr. Reuven Hammer is a former President of the International Rabbinical Assembly; he is one of the founders of the Masorti Movement in Israel and is currently Head of the Masorti Beth Din in Israel.

2 Joysa Winter is a rabbinical school student and writer who has published widely on Jewish topics.

Connecting to Yom Kippur, using the story of Kibbutz Beth Hashita as a catalyst for conversation

This conversation will provide participants an opportunity to play with the main ideas raised in Unetanah Tokef, and connect those ideas to relationships with, and feelings towards, the State of Israel.

**MATERIALS:**
- Information about Unetanah Tokef
- Translation and Hebrew text of Unetanah Tokef
- Background on Yom Kippur War
- Information about the story of Kibbutz Beth Hashita, as storytelling prompt for conversation

**TIME FRAME:**
40-60 Minutes

**PROCESS:**
1. The facilitator should set the stage by asking participants to recite aloud the attached excerpt of the Unetanah Tokef (See Appendix IV - Excerpt of Unetanah Tokef)

2. This Yom Kippur marks the 40th anniversary of Yom Kippur War. The facilitator will share some of the key points associated with the War (See Appendix V - Summary of Yom Kippur War)

3. The facilitator will use the story of Kibbutz Beth Hashita as an illustration of a way in which secular Israel was able to connect – on a personal/individual/collective manner – with the holiest day in the Jewish religion. (See Appendix VI - Story of Kibbutz Beth Hashita)
CONVERSATION PROMPTS:

Initial Reactions

1. What are your initial reactions, feelings, questions from this excerpt of the Unetanah Tokef?
2. Does this resonate with you?
3. What are your initial reactions, feelings and questions after hearing the story of Kibbutz Beth Hashita
4. Do you have any personal connection to the Yom Kippur War? Do you remember it? Did you serve in it? Have you ever heard from a veteran of the war, or known someone who lost a friend or family member in the war? Has it shaped your view of Israel or your broader worldview in any way?

Dichotomy of building Israel and God’s role

1. The Unetanah Tokef reminds us of life’s fragility, of ritual, tradition, and repentance, and suggests that we are on the cusp of being written into the Book of Life. Imagine the experience of Israeli Jews observing Yom Kippur in 1973, knowing that (according to tradition) their fates were about to be sealed, suddenly faced with the attack of regional war. How might this have added an additional level of worry for those not fighting? How might a soldier have felt – on the one hand fighting for the State, on the other hand having just been reminded of the idea of Yom Kippur as a holy day of reflection and repentance?
2. In what ways could the holiday of Yom Kippur highlight the sense of control or human agency that Jews had in building a State? In what ways do Jews not have control over the direction of the State? (Destiny, regional or existential threats, God’s will, etc.)

Finding Meaning during Yom Kippur

1. The story of the Kibbutz illustrates a way in which a secular institution – the Kibbutz movement in general and Beth Hashita in particular – came to honour, commemorate and relate to the holy day of Yom Kippur. What do you understand about the way in which Beth Hashita took a religious holiday and found connection points?
2. Are you surprised that a secular community adopted a religious prayer as a way of dealing with their loss? Can you think of a time when a religious prayer helped you deal with a specific situation?

3. Without the backdrop of a war and devastating losses, how do you connect to Yom Kippur? What touch points are there for you as a Jewish Canadian in 2013?

4. What might you think of differently, reflect upon, or contemplate following this workshop for the rest of Yom Kippur?
Appendix I– Facilitation Tips and Reminder

1. As the facilitator do not present yourself as the “expert” or the one with “all the answers”, rather your role is to guide conversation in a respectful and thoughtful manner, by providing guidelines and utilizing prompts to stimulate the discussion.

2. Pay attention to the size of the group and modify accordingly. The ideal size for a facilitated dialogue is up to 20 people or so. Larger groups benefit from dialogue when participants are split into sub-groups for the crux of the conversation and the rejoin the larger group for closing.

3. Create an environment that is safe and comfortable and fosters open and honest communication.

4. Set ground rules, known as norms, that guide the conversation vis-à-vis respect, listening, etc.
Appendix II – Unetanah Tokef – The Background

UNETANAH TOKEF - THE BACKGROUND 4

The prayer entitled “U’Netaneh Tokef” is attributed to a Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany, who lived about one thousand years ago. The story behind this piyut, a prayer-poem, is sad and poignant, and may shed light on the prayer itself.

The Bishop of Mainz summoned Rabbi Amnon, a great Torah scholar, to his court and offered him a ministerial post on the condition that Rabbi Amnon would convert to Christianity. Rabbi Amnon refused. The Bishop insisted and continued to press Rabbi Amnon to accept his offer. Of course, Rabbi Amnon continued to refuse. One day, however, Rabbi Amnon asked the Bishop for three days to consider his offer.

As soon as Rabbi Amnon returned home, he was distraught at the terrible mistake he had made of even appearing to consider the Bishop's offer and the betrayal of G-d. For three days he could not eat or sleep and he prayed to G-d for forgiveness. When the deadline for decision arrived, the Bishop sent messenger after messenger to bring Rabbi Amnon, but he refused to go. Finally, the Bishop had him forcibly brought to him and demanded a response. The Rabbi responded, “I should have my tongue cut out for not having refused immediately.” The Bishop angrily had Rabbi Amnon's hands and feet cut off and then sent him home.

A few days later was Rosh HaShanah, and Rabbi Amnon, dying from his wounds, asked to be carried to shul. He wished to say the Kedushah to sanctify G-d's Name and publicly declare his faith in G-d's Kingship. With his dying breath, he uttered the words that we now know of as the U'Netaneh Tokef.

Three days later Rabbi Amnon appeared in a dream to Rabbi Kalonymous ben Meshullam, a scholar and poet, and taught him the exact text of the prayer. Rabbi Amnon asked that it be sent to all Jewry and that it be inserted in the prayers of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur for all time.
The prayer portrays G-d as a Shepherd over His flock, counting and examining each sheep one by one as it passes under His rod. So does He review the flock of humanity one by one, determining each individual's fate for the coming year.

But the individual human being is not just a helpless sheep! Rather, he or she can contribute to their verdict by altering their behavior towards G-d and Man, specifically in the areas of sincere Repentance, Prayer from the heart and Charity given with a cheerful spirit.

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4 This text is from the website http://www.ou.org/chagim/roshhashannah/unetaneh.html published by the Orthodox Union.
Appendix III– English Translation of Unetanah Tokef

ENGLISH TRANSLATION- UNETANAH TOKEF

We shall ascribe holiness to this day.
For it is awesome and terrible.
Your kingship is exalted upon it.
Your throne is established in mercy.
You are enthroned upon it in truth.
In truth You are the judge,
The exhorter, the all knowing, the witness,
He who inscribes and seals,
Remembering all that is forgotten.
You open the book of remembrance
Which proclaims itself,
And the seal of each person is there.
The great shofar is sounded,
A still small voice is heard.
The angels are dismayed,
They are seized by fear and trembling
As they proclaim: Behold the Day of Judgment!
For all the hosts of heaven are brought for judgment.
They shall not be guiltless in Your eyes
And all creatures shall parade before You as a troop.
As a shepherd herds his flock,
Causing his sheep to pass beneath his staff,
So do You cause to pass, count, and record,
Visiting the souls of all living,
Decreeing the length of their days,
Inscribing their judgment.
On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,
Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,
Who shall perish by water and who by fire,
Who by sword and who by wild beast,
Who by famine and who by thirst,
Who by earthquake and who by plague,
Who by strangulation and who by stoning,
Who shall have rest and who shall wander,
Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,
Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented,
Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low,
Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished.
But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree.

For Your praise is in accordance with Your name. You are difficult to anger and easy to appease. For You do not desire the death of the condemned, but that he turn from his path and live. Until the day of his death You wait for him. Should he turn, You will receive him at once. In truth You are their Creator and You understand their inclination, for they are but flesh and blood. The origin of man is dust, his end is dust. He earns his bread by exertion and is like a broken shard, like dry grass, a withered flower, like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that blows away and dust that scatters, like a dream that flies away. But You are King, God who lives for all eternity! There is no limit to Your years, no end to the length of Your days, no measure to the hosts of Your glory, no understanding the meaning of Your Name. Your Name is fitting unto You and You are fitting unto it, and our name has been called by Your Name. Act for the sake of Your Name and sanctify Your Name through those who sanctify Your Name.

5 This text is from the website: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Rosh_Hashanah/In_the_Community/Services/Prayers/Mahzor_Content/Unetanah_Tokef.shtml?p=2
Appendix IV– Excerpt of Unetanah Tokef

EXEMPLARY OF THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF UNETANAH TOKEF

Who shall live and who shall die,
Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,
Who shall perish by water and who by fire,
Who by sword and who by wild beast,
Who by famine and who by thirst,
Who by earthquake and who by plague,
Who by strangulation and who by stoning,
Who shall have rest and who shall wander,
Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,
Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented,
Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low,
Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished.
But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree.
Appendix V– Summary of Yom Kippur War

KEY FACTS OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR 6

Key Facts

• Syria and Egypt launched a surprise attack against Israel on Yom Kippur in 1973.

• Israel suffered many casualties, but ultimately repelled the invading armies.

• The resulting ceasefire spurred the first attempt to broker a peace between Egypt and Israel.

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise offensive against Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar (on which Jews traditionally fast). Israeli troops in fortifications along the Suez Canal and in the Golan Heights were vastly outnumbered by Soviet-trained and -armed Egyptian and Syrian forces. In the lead up to war, Egypt had consistently called for Israel to cede all the territory it captured during the Six Day War, and had threatened to attack if Israel did not bow to their demands.

After costly attacks in the first days of the War, Israel regained control of the Golan Heights and pushed toward Damascus in order to compel the Syrian leadership to seek a ceasefire. In a daring move, Israeli forces in the Sinai crossed the Suez Canal – cutting off the Egyptian Third Army still operating in the Sinai. As a result, and in addition to the passage of UN Resolution 338 (which called on “all parties to the present fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity immediately”) the war ended.

While Israel successfully warded off the Arab invasion, it sustained heavy losses – almost 2,700 Israelis were killed in the Yom Kippur War.

Despite Egypt having launched a successful surprise attack, the subsequent Israeli victory in the Sinai led Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to adopt a more diplomatic approach toward the Jewish state. In 1975, Egypt and Israel agreed to settle their differences by peaceful rather than military means with an interim agreement. This ultimately paved the way for a future peace treaty between the two former enemy states, which has been upheld to this day.
Repercussions of the War: 7

• Following the 1967 War Israelis and Jews felt victorious and strong, the Yom Kippur War changed this collective mentality and gave Israelis a renewed sense of vulnerability.

• At the time, Chief of Staff, David Elazar had asked then PM Golda Meir for permission to launch a preemptive strike, and Golda Meir denied permission. The Yom Kippur War and its significant losses led to the demise of her political career.

• Yom Kippur War ended an era of Labour Party monopoly, following Golda Meir’s downfall, Menachem Begin became the first Likud PM.

• Under Begin’s leadership, Israel and Egypt reach a peace treaty.

• The war proved to be a diplomatic disaster for Israel especially in terms of African countries, with which Israel has previously enjoyed positive relationships.

• In the years after the war, a significant peace movement was established with the creation of such movements as Peace Now (Shalom Achshav) and Oasis of Peace (Neve Shalom/Wahat-Al-Salam)

7 Adapted from Makom’s resource package on the Background of Yom Kippur War.
Appendix VI– Story of Beth Hashita

THE STORY OF BETH HASHITA

Kibbutz Beth Hashita is a secular Kibbutz that was established on December 4, 1928. It is recognized as one of the leading centers of cultural Judaism and well known for their cultural activities throughout the Kibbutz Movement and Israel in general.

Prior to the Yom Kippur War, Beth Hashita took Yom Kippur as an opportunity for taking stock personally and communally. They marked the day as significant using cultural aspects, group ceremony and reflection, but without making it religious or even entering a synagogue.

In 1973, the Yom Kippur War traumatized all of Israeli society, but no more so than Kibbutz Beth Hashita. Eleven members of Beth Hashita fell in battle. Because the war unfolded so quickly, soldiers were not deployed to notify families of the deceased. As a result, soldiers were temporarily buried and after the war families were notified. In the case of Beth Hashita, all 11 affected families were notified at the same time. From then on, the kibbutz was forced to search for the ritual and forms of remembrance that were authentic to a secular community and pay homage to the individual loses and communal tragedy of the war.

In 1990, Israeli composer Yair Rosenblum came to live on Kibbutz Beth Hashita. Moved by the kibbutz's memorial ceremonies, he composed a new melody to the liturgical poem Unetaneh Tokef, which was a traditional part of the High Holiday service. This powerful and far-reaching melody became a central focus of the holiday.

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8 This story comes from the Makom website http://makomisrael.org/