

Episode 7: "Unetaneh Tokef for Black Lives"

Transcription

Three actors read from "Unetaneh Tokef for Black Lives":

Actor 1: Each day we hazard our Black lives in the court of the white world.

Actor 2: We know our worth.

Actor 3: Yet the white world is judge-self-appointed.

Actor 1: We pass before you to be counted.

Actor 2: 12.5 million bodies stolen.

Actor 3: 1.8 million mercifully avoided your shores.

Actor 1: Stolen shores, stolen land.

Actor 2: 10.7 million arrived unsafely.

Actor 3: Times 401 years.

Actor 1: Times infinite human indignities.

Actor 2: Times three-fifths of a human being.

Actor 3: We now number 47.8 million.

Actor 1: In the morning it is written and by curfew it is sealed.



Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? This is Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk.

In this episode, presented in collaboration with *Lilith* magazine, we'll be hearing excerpts from, and exploring issues connected to, a piece of writing originally published in *Lilith* in June of 2020. It's titled "Unetaneh Tokef for Black Lives," and it takes a liturgical poem which speaks about the nature of existence and is central to the Jewish high holidays, and builds upon it, re-imagining it to speak specifically about the killing of Black people in the United States. At the beginning, you heard the first lines of the poem. You will continue to hear selections from it throughout the episode.

And now episode seven, "Unetaneh Tokef for Black Lives"



Actor 1: *Who shall die while jogging. Hashtag Ahmaud Arbery. Who shall die while relaxing in the comfort of their home.*

Actor 2: *Hashtag Botham Jean. Hashtag Atatiana Jefferson.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while seeking help after a car crash.*

Actor 3: *Hashtag Jonathan Ferrell. Hashtag Renisha McBride.*

Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman: I came across a tweet, and it was a list of the many ways that Black people have been dying while living regular lives and how exhausting that is for us to know and experience and live and relive through media.

Aaron: This is Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman, the founder and director of Imani Strategies, and author of the piece we are discussing. She was sharing with me about what inspired her to write it. Throughout the episode, she will continue to talk about the work and how it connects to a variety of cultural and societal considerations.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while holding a cell phone.*

Actor 3: *Hashtag Stephon Clark.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while decorating for a party.*

Actor 2: *Hashtag Claude Reese.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while leaving a party.*

Actor 3: *Hashtag Jordan Edwards.*

Actor 2: *Hashtag Sean Bell.*

Imani: The next thing that happened was that it was the night before my first wife's birthday and eight days before her twelfth Yahrzeit. And as I was reflecting on the list and thinking about the ways in which my wife's passing - her transition - was so different from George Floyd's and so many other people, I really started reflecting on the Unetaneh Tokef and thinking, right, "Who shall die by."

Actor 4: *Who shall perish by water and who by fire. Who by sword and who by wild beast.*

Imani: And that chorus just started coming to me: "Who shall die by".

Actor 4: *Who by famine and who by thirst. Who by earthquake and who by plague.*

Imani: And this list was really coming to mind for me.

Actor 4: *Who by strangulation and who by stoning.*

Imani: When my first wife passed away, she had been in the hospital for three and a half weeks, and we were essentially living there. When she made transition, we were holding her hand - her sister and I - and I'm thinking about George Floyd, face down on asphalt with a knee in his neck. And I thought, there couldn't be a greater contrast. There really couldn't be a greater contrast. And so I woke up the next morning and I thought, I'm just going to start

writing. And I realized that there's only one part of the Unetaneh Tokef that really stands out to me. So I went online and I looked up: What are the parts of the Unetaneh Tokef? What is it made of? And the Schechter Institutes had an article by Rabbi David Golinkin that said the Unetaneh Tokef has six parts. Who knew? It has the part that says this is the Day of Judgment.

Actor 4: *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!*

Imani: It has the part that talks about us being counted one by one. Kol ba'ey olam.

Actor 4: *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.*

Imani: Then the piece, "Who shall live".

Actor 4: *Who shall live and who shall die. Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not.*

Imani: The part about averting the decree.

Actor 4: *But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree. For Your praise is in accordance with Your name.*

Imani: And then what God wants, which is for us to repair our relationships.

Actor 4: *For You do not desire the death of the condemned, but that he turned from his path and live.*

Imani: And then about our return to our origin.

Actor 4: *The origin of man is dust, his end is dust.*

Imani: So that is how I approached it. How do I apply these components to what I'm seeing, to the history that we're living right now, and that we've been living for centuries, centuries? And now we have phones that record it all.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while enjoying music.*

Actor 2: *Hashtag Jordan Davis.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while selling music, trying to make a way out of no way.*

Actor 3: *Hashtag Alton Sterling.*

Imani: I think I just was really shocked at how much it resonated with people, in particular, during a summer of such pointed calls for justice that covered the globe. I hope that it served as a bridge for white Jews who are afraid of what it means for Black people to be free. Even in a time like now, where there might be relative ease, relative comfort, relative wealth, there also is precarity. So when I think about white Ashkenazi Jews and wanting to remain safe and whole and free, the system automatically pits them up against other people who want that. And the learning is that there are way more people who are not getting what they need than the people who are getting more than what they need. And both racism and anti-

semitism are often used to divide those people from coming together. From the very beginning - 1640 - African man ran away with two European guys. They got a few additional years of service to the colony, and he got life.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while sleeping.*

Actor 2: *Hashtag Aiyana Jones*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while worshiping the Lord.*

Actors 2 & 3: *Hashtag Charleston Nine.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die for a traffic violation.*

Actors 1, 2 & 3: *Hashtag Sandra Bland.*

Imani: There was a lot of disincentivizing. Whether that's the McCarthy Era and the coalitions that were destroyed between white Jews and Black Gentiles, right? Whether it's Black Lives Matter today. So that's what I'm - when I'm thinking about how we get afraid, that's what I mean. And the fear is so old. It's somatic. It's unprocessed for most people and unacknowledged. It's the fluorescent light bulb that's always on. And sometimes we tune into it. We know it. Our body knows.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while coming from the store.*

Actors 1 & 2: *Hashtag Mike Brown and hashtag Trayvon Martin.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while playing cops-and-robbers.*

Actors 1 & 3: *Hashtag Tamir Rice.*

Imani: And then I think about the on-ramps. I mean, some of the on-ramps are political education, obviously. One of the on-ramps is certainly moving away from this dominant habit of being ahistorical. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond holds as one of its core principles that we need to know our historical context. I just got off a call with a group talking about philanthropy and how nonprofits work. It was a Jewish organization talking about where their money comes from and what it means for that money to be values-aligned with the organization, values-aligned with the broader Jewish community or not, and what the impact of that is. And I was waiting to hear about the history of nonprofits and how the 501c3 designation emerged shortly after Brown vs the Board of Education, and Thurgood Marshall, having received an incredible amount of community donations to stand up through that trial - Brown vs the Board of Education. And then in came the federal controls. But I actually think the person who was on the line, the development person, didn't know that history. I didn't know that history until a couple of years ago. So another on-ramp is knowing our history, knowing our histories. Sometimes I talk, when I'm working, about the congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, which is the second oldest Jewish congregation in the country. The first is in New York. And it is famous in part because they had correspondence with George Washington and, you know, many people love the piece where George Washington says:

Actor 5: *For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.*

Imani: But he says:

Actor 5: *They who live under its protections should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.*

Imani: "In giving it on all occasions their effectual support." So what does that mean in 1790? Yes, you can live here. You've been here for hundreds of years living peaceably. Yes, you can have a cemetery. Yes, you can build this structure. Yes, you can open on a Hanukkah to dedicate - the whole community comes out. You're allowed to live peaceably here as long as you give the United States government effectual support. And of course these folks - the folks that were there from Portugal via Amsterdam, et cetera - have said, yes, we will take protection in the one territory that really has stood by religious autonomy, religious freedom. That's why Rhode Island was the last to sign on to ratify the constitution. They were waiting for those Bill of Rights to come out, to give effectual support. If we know more of our history, that's also an on-ramp. Obviously, proximity. If you listen to Bryan Stevenson or anyone prior to him, there's the - right? The principle of proximity means the closer we are to people, the more invested in them we become, the more intimate we become, the more humanized they are to us. And then the more we stand up for them as our neighbors, the more we defend them. That's also an on-ramp. Because of de facto segregation, ongoing in this country, it takes a lot.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while lawfully carrying a weapon.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Philando Castile*

Another chorus of actors: *Hashtag Freddie Gray.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while on the shoulder of the road with car problems.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Corey Jones*

Another chorus of actors: *Hashtag Terrence Crutcher*

Actor 1: *Who shall die in the first hours of the new year.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Oscar Grant.*

Imani: As a Black Jew, I am constantly having to come out. That happens all the time. I mean, I could be wearing my star, my Magen David, doesn't matter. I was interviewing a family for admission to a school. I was flagging all of the Jewish language, and the parent said, as is typical for an entering ninth grader, that her child had had her bat mitzvah the year before. And I said, "What Parsha did she read?" And she started talking to me about it. And then she said, "So, a bat mitzvah is when..." She began to explain to me what it was. So I think that one of the things about the Unetaneh Tokef is that, at the same time that it felt frightening to be repurposing it, I really need it to be mine as much as it's anybody else's. And I don't want to have to tell them how I'm Jewish in order for it to be mine.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while shopping at Walmart.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag John Crawford.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while cashing a check in peace.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Yvonne Smallwood.*

Imani: I was so grateful to the Jews of Color Initiative, for coming out with the research around the metadata. How many Jews of Color are there in this country? And even though it was contested by some - some folks said: we don't like your research; we don't like how you did it; we don't think that's the number; so-and-so said it was 6%; I don't think it's 12 to 15% - it's out there now. It's out there and it's there to pull from, and so there's a larger and larger platform that Jews of Color are standing on since Shahanna McKinney-Baldon helped to coin the term Jews of Color. It's a large platform.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while reading a book in their own car.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Keith Scott.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while taking a walk with their stepfather.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Clifford Glover.*

Imani: If you're a Jew of Color, you very likely know a lot of people of color. And you very likely know a lot of Jews. In intergroup dialogue, folks talk about the ability to be multi-partial. So to build that muscle, and also, frankly, to complicate the narrative around the 1960s and the civil rights and Heschel and King, and we tie it in a bow, but it really was quite complicated. Rabbi Heschel's daughter, Dr. Susannah Heschel, wrote a piece about the photo that we tend to see in many places, that for me was like, so eyeopening. It's a letter about that picture of her father with MLK, where she talks about their relationship and the work that he did, and I would say is maybe frustrated by the number of places where she sees the photo, where people are not doing that same work. She also points to an advertisement on a building in the background where - I can't remember what the name of the store was - but a Jewish-owned store who was completely against the work that her father was doing. So, to really start thinking about: not the Jews, but these Jews were doing this work.

And the other thing that I have been reminded of, that I learned recently, although it makes a lot of sense, is that those two clergy were friends. They were friends with one another. It was less about building solidarity across group lines than it was: You need me? I'll be there. What are we doing? We're marching? I'm marching. It wasn't, and it was, a rabbi and a pastor who decided that they would come together to demonstrate and model what anti-racist, faith-based coalition could look like across religious lines. And, sure, it did do that. So I think when we talk about complicating the narrative in that way, there are all of those parts. And imagine if, rather than saying a Jew and a Black marched together, we said two friends who chose to be in relationship with each other, despite society and even their own communities feeling afraid about that partnership, led together? How would it empower people differently if that were the framing instead?

Actor 1: *Who shall die while reaching for their wallet.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Amadou Diallo.*

Actor 1: *Who shall die while running away.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Walter Scott.*

Imani: One of the things that happens a lot in my work is that people start talking about the Black experience, the white experience, how Black people are, how white people are.

And often I think it serves us better to be thinking about anti-racist people, because independent of racial identity or ethnic identity, those are the people that I want to be with. So I think a lot of what's happening is that more people are carrying the heavy load, which frees other people up to dance or to take turns or to rest. And thinking about just the distributive property, if more people are carrying, it's less heavy for everyone.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while asking a cop a question.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Randy Evans.*

Imani: After the 2016 presidential election, most of my elders, most of my ancestors - living ancestors, if you will - responded, oh, we've been here before. Our history can serve as a roadmap in this moment and in other moments. Right? Like it's Purim tonight. We know how to win. We don't spend a lot of time there, but we know how to win. The same is true of Black history as separate from Jewish history, if you will. The fact that we still are alive is a win. The fact that we read is a win. You kidnap folks, you drag them across the sea. The communities are mixed up so that they cannot speak to each other. Brutal labor. Malnourishment. Break up your families. Sell your children. In fact, sell the children of the enslaver, right? Sell your own children, in many cases. And that was like just the first couple hundred years. And it goes on. It goes on and on. And we're alive. So many of us are alive. So we have a roadmap. I think that's one thing that keeps coming up in the communities that I'm a part of. Just going to keep doing it. There's really, in a way, no other choice.

Actor 1: *Who shall die while begging for their life, their breath.*

A chorus of actors: *Hashtag Eric Garner. Hashtag George Floyd.*

Imani: The other thing that I hear arise in the conversations among the Jews of Color with whom I'm in relationship is the idea of Teshuvah. What an incredible opportunity. We spend the entire month of Elul preparing to make amends, to take account, to inventory ourselves, to see where we're at, what's been broken in the past year. Not only do we have a concept, we have a process. We have a very clear process, many offerings of processes. We initiate. We invite. We dig into a conversation. We own our part. This tool is available to all people.

Actor 1: *Who shall die by the effects of supremacy, greed, and apathy. Who by beast indeed.*

Imani: So we have a mechanism. We have a methodology. We have an imperative even. And I think among Jews of Color in dominant Jewish organizational life, it's like, how do we create an environment where people want to be with you; where people want to contribute to your organization; where they know that they're going to invest in, and you're going to invest in, people who are meaningful to them? And what kind of work are you going to do? What kind of groundwork are you going to do? I have all these garden metaphors, but this is what I often - I will say to a client, you want to take this plant that is thriving over here, right? This Jew of Color, or this person of color - it is thriving and the environment is perfect. It is happy. It is nourished. You want to take them from there and you want to pluck them up and you want to put them in your boardroom. How are you preparing the ground for that to happen? What kind of sunlight does it need? What kind of air? What kind of temperature? What kind of water? You can't just - you have to be careful when you're transferring plants. And what's the role going to be? To sit and look pretty? To sit and be the person of color when the dynamic of the organization or of the leadership or of the board is literally foreign. At best, it's foreign. And at worst, it's harmful.

Actor 1: *But repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment's severe decree.*

Actor 2: *But repentance, prayer and charity avert judgment's severe decree?*

Actor 3: *But turning, connection and giving, these return us to our God?*

Actor 1: *Whose repentance? Whose prayer? Whose charity?*

Actor 2: *Temper, please temper.*

Actor 3: *Temper already! Temper.*

Imani: Because of the history of our country, in particular, I feel called to say that Black people are not here for you.

Actor 1: *For sins against God, the Day of Atonement brings forgiveness.*

Actor 2: *For sins against one's fellowman, the Day of Atonement brings no forgiveness till he has become reconciled with the fellowman he wronged. Mishnah Yoma 8:9.*

Imani: I'm incredibly moved that this meant something to other people. Perhaps I'm even more moved because it wasn't - I didn't write it for that. As a Black woman, to say that I spent time doing something for my own joy, satisfaction and healing, is to take a piece back.

Actor 1: *The Day of Atonement brings no forgiveness till he has become reconciled with the fellowman he wronged.*

Imani: The history of Black women in this country is to serve, to produce capital for the 0.01%. Many of them got to be the 0.01% because bodies of color labor. The response of my community has increased my sense of belonging. And, I wrote it for me.



Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*. Selections from "Unetaneh Tokef for Black Lives," were read by actors Cassandra Blair, Joshua Wolf Coleman, and Jonathan CK Williams, with additional vocal support from actors Julie Lockhart, Clay Steakley, and Diana Tanaka. Other readings were performed by Rebecca Rasmussen and Mark McClain Wilson.

Thank you to Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman for allowing us to share her writing and for providing her insights, and thanks to Kelly Davis for her contributions to this episode. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Thank you to the Covenant Foundation for supporting the launch of *The Dybbukast* and our development of related resources. Speaking of which, please visit us at theatredybbuk.org/podcast, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page. In addition, please go to lilith.org to read not only the work which we featured, but other pieces of writing from throughout the magazine's history. On the website, you can also learn about upcoming events and choose to subscribe. New episodes of *The Dybbukast* will be available every second Friday of the month. This episode was presented in collaboration with *Lilith* magazine and was produced by theatre dybbuk.



Actor 1: When will you atone?

Actor 3: How will you atone?

Actor 2: For you, like us, will be judged.

Actors 1, 2 & 3: You, like us, will return to dust.