G’mar Hatimah Tovah – may we each be inscribed for all things good in this coming year.

This has been a challenging year for the American Jewish community. That could probably be said every year, especially if you have a particular outlook on life. But this year, in this country, we have experienced anti-Semitism in a new way. This year, we, as a Jewish community, have experienced mass-shootings in a new way.

Each of us has responded to these incidents in different ways. Perhaps we have gotten more involved in civic issues which matter deeply to us, recognizing that this is the time to say “Hineni” – I am here, and to co-create the world we want to see. Perhaps we have drawn closer to the Jewish community, wanting to stand up against those who seek to destroy us, not letting fear rule the day. Perhaps this is the first time we have been at a specifically-Jewish community event in months because we were afraid to do so and being here tonight was a very difficult decision to make. Perhaps we have grown weary of history repeating itself and are coping by actively remaining ignorant and disengaged, trying to build a fence around our hearts and spirit.

Regardless, we are glad to be together tonight in sacred community. We appreciate those who work to ensure our safety, tonight and throughout the year. And yet, I find myself being a bit nostalgic for the days when High Holy Day security meant needing to show a volunteer from the synagogue that your ID matched your ticket…and that was it.

The days without armed officers, or single points of entry. Much as I imagine how many of us (though I will admit it is harder and harder for me) remember everyone getting to fly without having to take off their shoes or take out their liquids, or even getting to travel with a full bottle of sunscreen in your carry-on bag. Times change.

Perhaps this is why in my preparations for the holidays this year, the liturgy of Unetaneh Tokef stands out for me differently than it has in the past. The prayer which says:

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 in good time, and who by an untimely death, who 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 lapidation, who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted.

And I am left asking which announcements we are paying more attention to: The ones telling us how to enter the synagogue or the ones telling us how to be inscribed in the Book of Life? The ones telling us that we need to be aware of suspicious-looking people and behavior, or the ones telling us that we need to be aware of how we treat one another?

How would our lives be different, what sort of world would we be living in, if in addition to the messages telling us “if you see something, say something,” “remember that all bags will be checked,” “be sure to locate the nearest exit,” if we also had messages telling us “You aren’t obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to desist from it.” “In a place where there is no mensch, strive to be a mensch,” “Speak little, do much, and greet everyone with a pleasant face.”?
The Talmud teaches that the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not for everyone. As those who were with us on Selichot two weeks or so ago may remember, these ten days are for those of us who are neither wholly righteous nor wholly wicked, and we have up until tomorrow evening to try to tilt the scales in our favor.

So why is it that at this time of precariousness for most of us (and I certainly count myself in this category), do we focus so much on physical security and so little on spiritual security? Even if we translate the Unetaneh Tokef slightly differently so that it more readily calls upon the world’s realities, as Rabbi Jessy Dressin does asking:

“…how many shall flourish and how many shall wilt, who shall live and who shall die, who will reach ripe age and who taken all too soon, who will drown in waters of refuge as they desperately attempt to reach the shores of freedom, who amongst fires and rubble in the aftermath of bombs, who by senseless violence and who by malicious attack, who because they do not have access to healthy food and who because of contaminated water sources, who because of environmental disaster and who because of cancer and illness, who because of mental illness and who by gun violence, who will be at peace and who will struggle to find their place, who shall be comfortable and who driven by anxiety and fear”

or metaphorically as it is offered in Machzor Lev Shalem questioning:

who shall be truly alive and who shall merely exist, who shall be happy and who shall be miserable. Who shall attain fulfillment in their day and who shall not attain fulfillment in their day; who shall be tormented by the fire of ambition and who shall be overcome by the waters of failure; who shall be pierced by the sharp sword of envy and who shall be torn by the wild beast of resentment; who shall hunger for companionship and who shall thirst for approval; who shall be shattered by the earthquake of social change and who shall be plagued by the pressures of conformity; who shall be strangled by insecurity and who shall be stoned into submission; who shall be content and who shall wander in search of satisfaction; who shall be at ease and who shall be afflicted with anxiety”

…it does not seem to me that we focus on the message of the Unetaneh Tokef enough – literally, interpretively, or metaphorically.

Why do we focus so much on security this time of year and so little on "who will live and who will die"? Essentially, aren’t they the same questions, the same anxieties manifesting in different ways? Perhaps because we believe that the former, unlike the latter, is in our control. We do x, y, and z for security and then we’ve been considered to have done our due diligence and we are, or at least certainly feel, safer. Ultimately, however, we know that it’s erroneous to think that we have full control over our lives. In the end, we know that we are only doing what is in our power. And yet, what are we doing if, as my teacher Rabbi Irwin Kula asks, “the fear and trembling that seizes us is evoked more by the remote possibility of a shooter coming to our shul than the existential fragility of life that is real every moment, and for which at least one precaution we can take is teshuva and a surrender to the “truth” that God is with us, …as we sing in Adon Olam each Shabbat, b’yado afkid ruche - into God’s hand I commit my spirit”?

For as much as we think we have control over others by setting up external systems to keep us safe, we believe ourselves to be powerless when it comes to "who will live and who will die." We believe that it is in God's hands entirely, or if our relationship status with God is “it’s complicated” we at most, likely believe that we personally have no agency in this matter.
So, since we have all chosen to be here tonight, what do we hope to accomplish? Do we want to feel a sense of community and tradition? Do we want to make a statement against fear? Do we seek God’s presence? Do we hope to crack our hearts open a bit wider to change how we are in this world? Something else entirely? I am often asked “Who is Yom Kippur for?” If we need to seek forgiveness from one another in order to fully repent, it would seem that Yom Kippur is more for God than for us.

The Pachad Yitzchak, a 20th century work of Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, writes in Purim 8, “The Vilna Gaon wrote: here is a rule for every Yom Tov, that it is half for God and half for you. Two holidays are exceptions to this rule. Yom Kippur is entirely for God, and Purim is entirely for you. But...there is no exception from the rule. For Yom Kippurim is Yom K-("like")-Purim. Meaning: both together make up one holy time. And in this holy time are included Purim and Yom Kippur, and it stands as half for God and half for you.”

So yes, we are repenting to God today….AND we are here to figure out who we want to be, how we want to be. We may think that it is easier to control security measures. And it sort of is, because most of us in this room aren’t the ones implementing them. The responsibility isn’t on us.

If we allow ourselves to truly think of all that is broken in our world and the great amount of work that needs to be done to make things better, it would be easy to feel powerless. So in addition to the announcements you read this evening reminding you that tickets were required, that bags would be checked, even of where each service was being held or where the bathrooms are – certainly things that are of great importance - I think it is also important that we read a few additional announcements:

(Hold up sign and read): “You aren’t obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to desist from it.” ~Rabbi Tarfon, Pirkei Avot 2:16. What is something that upsets you about the world? What is one thing that you can actually do about it? And if you want to challenge yourself, something you can actually do in the next week, that you are not yet doing (I am certain that everyone here is doing something each day to improve the world, so my question is, how can we each up our contribution?)? We know that being held accountable helps us achieve our goals, so please turn to someone next to you and share what you are planning to do to address a matter that concerns you. And we will ask that whoever you are sharing to, just listen without commenting (good or bad, or even with suggestions – more on this later).

(Hold up sign and read): “In a place where there is no mensch, strive to be a mensch.” ~Rabban Gamliel, Pirkei Avot 2:5. Where in your community- at home, where you work, where you live, perhaps even where you pray – is there a need for a mensch, a person who brings humanity, who recognizes the divine spark in others, who is willing to step up and do what needs to be done even when not asked. These can be grand gestures and also the small little things that brighten someone’s day or lighten someone’s load. In one of these places, how can you shine a bit more light – ideally throughout the year, but realistically this next week? How can you step up in a place where others are not stepping up – again, a realistic, attainable goal, and if you’d like to go the extra mile, a grander goal for the long-term. Please turn to a different person if you can, and share where you will be a mensch this week. Again whoever has the privilege of hearing the beautiful ways someone else is going to be a mensch, please do so without commenting (good or bad, or even with suggestions).

(Hold up sign and read): “Speak little, do much, and greet everyone with a pleasant face.” ~Shammai, Pirkei Avot 1:15. This is why we’ve been listening without comment. (I’m trying to set you up for a good new year.) This sounds so easy and obvious. But how often do we take this teaching to heart? Talk is cheap. The things you just told someone you’re going to do to make the world a better place - to help out at home, at school, at work, at CAA, in the greater Austin area - to address local issues, state problems, national matters, issues of global concern. If you don’t do the thing you said you were going to do, none of it really matters. Nothing will change. And with everything that everyone has going on, being a martyr while being a mensch is a bit counter-
productive. So if you’re going to actually take it upon yourself to actively improve the world we live in, do it with a smile. Please turn to someone with whom you haven’t yet had a chance to connect or deepen your conversation with someone with whom you’ve already spoken.

What strategy for success can you apply to follow one or all three parts of Shammai’s teaching? Obviously for this one, if you are listening, please do so without comment.

_Mi Yichye, u’mi yamut?_ Who will flourish and who will wilt? Who will truly be alive and who will merely exist? Who shall live and who shall die? The two primary metaphors for God throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy are Avinu Malkeinu – Our Parent, Our Ruler. We are seeking comfort and strength, love and reassurance that everything is going to be okay – and taken care of by someone else. Again, we can only control what is within our sphere of influence. We are so used to seeing signs that say “If you see something, say something,” but what Judaism teaches us, “If you see something, DO something.” As the Pachad Yitzchak teaches, each holiday is half for God and half for us. Tonight and tomorrow, how can we ensure that we are both equally asking for God to sustain us for a new year while asking the same question of ourselves? And what are we going to DO about it after the holiday?

…and who’s to say that if each of us here were to start paying more attention to the signs and announcements in this room tonight, that there might be fewer signs and announcements for us to read on our way into this room next year, and that we might be able to say that 5780 was a particularly enriching year for the American Jewish community?

G’mar Hatimah Tovah.