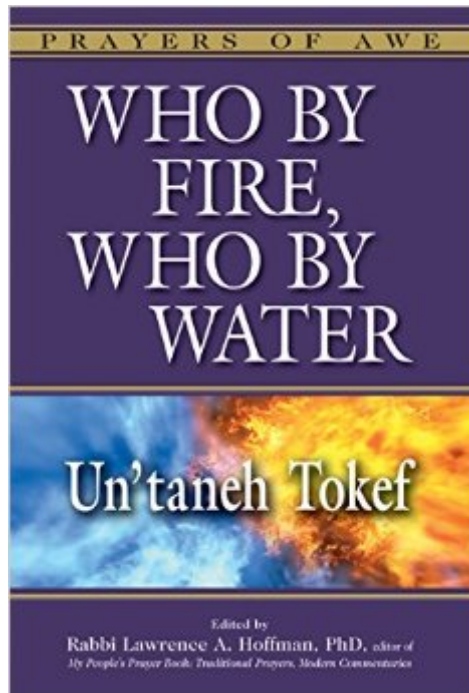


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# Who By Fire, Who By Water: Un'taneh Tokef (Prayers Of Awe)



## Synopsis

The most controversial prayer of the Jewish New Year—what it means, who wrote it, why we say it. Over forty contributors who span three continents and all major Jewish denominations examine Un'taneh Tokef's theology, authorship, and poetry through a set of lively commentaries. Men and women, scholars and rabbis, artists and poets trace the history of Un'taneh Tokef and connect the prayer to its biblical and rabbinic roots. They wrestle with the personal and community impact of its deeply moving imagery, probe its haunting message of human mortality, and reflect on its call for sanctity, transformation and renewal.

**Prayers of Awe:** A multi-volume series designed to explore the High Holy Day liturgy and enrich the praying experience for everyone—whether experienced worshipers or guests who encounter Jewish prayer for the very first time.

**Contributors:** Merri Loving, Arian, Rabbi Tony Bayfield, D.D., Rabbi Sharon Brous, Dr. Marc Brettler, Dr. Erica Brown, Rabbi Ruth Durchslag, Psy.D., Rabbi Edward Feinstein, Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, Ph.D., Dr. Joel M. Hoffman, Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar, Dr. Reuven Kimelman, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Rabbi Noa Kushner, Rabbi Daniel Landes, Rabbi Ruth Langer, Ph.D., Liz Lerman, Rabbi Asher Lopatin, Catherine Madsen, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, Ph.D., Rabbi Dalia Marx, Ph.D., Ruth Messinger, Rabbi Charles H. Middleburgh, Ph.D., Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum, Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D., Rabbi Or N. Rose, Rabbi Marc Saperstein, Ph.D., Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Rabbi Jonathan P. Slater, D.Min., Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek, Rabbi David Stern, Rabbi David A. Teutsch, Ph.D., Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Ph.D., Dr. Ellen M. Umansky, Rabbi Avraham Weiss, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, D.D., Dr. Ron Wolfson, Rabbi David J. Wolpe, Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel, Dr. Wendy Zierler

## Book Information

Series: Prayers of Awe

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Jewish Lights; 1 edition (July 1, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1580236723

ISBN-13: 978-1580236720

Product Dimensions: 6 x 2.2 x 22.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars— See all reviews— (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #469,964 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #75 in Books > Religion &

Spirituality > Judaism > Prayerbooks #85 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Holidays

## Customer Reviews

Anyone expecting Rabbi Hoffman's book to contain imaginative and sermonic material built on but unrelated to the true history, content, difficulties, and relevance of one of the most moving prayers of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, will be pleasantly surprised, because the book does not do so. Rabbi Hoffman offers his readers a wealth of information about the poem/prayer Un'taneh Tokef and introduce them into the history of prayers, why the ancients set aside a special prayer book, called machzor, for holidays, when and why poems, such as Un'taneh Tokef, were added to the service, who wrote this poem, why, and what meaning it can have for us today. The book includes essays by over forty rabbis and scholars from three continents, from all the major Jewish denominations, from mystics to rationalists, from halakhics to dancers. There is a legend that the poem was composed by a rabbi who suffered martyrdom. Rabbi Hoffman presents the legend translated into English from its original Hebrew source, analyses it, and shows that while the tale is inspiring and meaningful, it is not true. One contributor translates Un'taneh Tokef, offers a line by line commentary, and shows the sources of the poet's imagery, and the difficulties that exist in virtually every line because it is composed in ancient poetic Hebrew, because it is a composite of at least two original poems, and we do not know what the editor of the composite intended to convey. The book defines Un'taneh Tokef as "And let us acknowledge the power (of this day's holiness)." Some contributors point out the difficulties they see in the ideology and theology of the poem. Others highlight the seeming contradiction between the poem saying that a person's fate is sealed on Yom Kippur, while it later says that "repentance, prayer, and charity help the hardship pass." The primary image of the prayer/poem is God possessing tablets or scrolls in which He inscribes the deeds and destinies of human beings. This notion predates Israel. The people of ancient Mesopotamia held the identical idea. Many of the writers in this volume found this view of God disturbing. Do we want to portray God anthropomorphically, like a forgetful king who needs to write himself post-um notes to prompt him to remember to act? Another central idea of the poem is that God is involved in producing evil. Is he responsible for the holocaust? Did he cause men and women to have cancer? Another idea is that "penitence, prayer, and charity avert the evil decree" (or, as translated in the volume, "help the hardship pass"; the book explains the difference). Yet, experience has shown that this is simply untrue. A fourth disturbing picture in the poem is the people passing passively before God like ignorant unthinking sheep, a view that is antithetical to the heroism of Abraham who argued with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. Should these ideas be

understood metaphorically and, if so, how? Writers offer their positive suggestions, such as the poem is telling its readers that this is a time to wake up, to take notice, to see the fragility of life, to consider how judgments are formed and sealed, to change, to abandon despair and apathy, to set goals, to reshape our character, to challenge and take control of our fate and our destiny, to reject the notion that we are helpless before nature and God, decide to control our reactions to events that we cannot control. Victor Frankl, who survived years in a Nazi concentration camp, understood this when he wrote: "Human freedom is not freedom from conditions, but freedom to take a stand toward the condition." Readers will obtain a new understanding of this important prayer and the new understanding will aid them in seeing other High Holiday prayers more meaningfully.

Some things are lightning rods of controversy. Un'taneh Tokef is one of them. "Who By Fire, Who By Water" is a collection of Rabbis and other Jewish thinkers as they converge and offer their own thoughts and opinions on the controversial piece of Jewish literature and what it means in regard to the Jewish new year. For those seeking a fascinating look into one of the hotly debated topics of modern Judaism, "Who By Fire, Who By Water" is a core addition to any Judaic studies collection.

The first site offering the book at a discount to the original publisher. Good price

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