

And oh my God, what a world you have made  
here

What a terrible world, what a beautiful world

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The words I just read are the chorus to a song entitled *12/17/12*. *12/17/12* was the day that a heavily armed former student named Adam Lanza entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut and shot twenty children to death. Like so many of us, the songwriter Colin Meloy of the Decemberists was deeply shaken by the tragedy. He had a six year old of his own, Hank.

Looking at Hank on that terrible day, Meloy tells us  
in the song, he could only think

What a gift, what a gift has been given me  
Here with my heart so whole, while others may  
be grieving  
To think of their grieving

How could he take so much joy in his son's  
presence while parents in Sandy Hook were  
mourning their murdered children? And then  
again, how could he not? "What a terrible world,  
what a beautiful world."

I had my own Sandy Hook moment this  
summer. We were driving to Boston for a few days

vacation. I-95 was backed up, so Google Maps, in its infinite wisdom, sent us up I-84. By the time we reached Connecticut, Yoni was hungry. We saw a sign for a diner a few miles past Danbury and decided to stop there. When we were seated at our table at the Blue Colony Diner, I looked down at my place mat and saw the address, 66 Church Hill Road, Newtown Connecticut. I shuddered. Here I was, enjoying a nice leisurely lunch with my wife and son--the people I cherish the most in my life--on the first day of our long awaited vacation, in the same town where, three years before, 20 families' lives were tragically shattered beyond repair. My child is sitting across from me, eagerly studying the children's menu; perhaps in the very

same booth where a child from one of these families once sat. It seemed wrong, almost sacrilegious, to be eating in that diner with Yoni. It would have been even more wrong to leave.

“What a terrible world, what a beautiful world.”

It's not often that we are confronted so dramatically with just how beautiful and how terrible the world can be at the same time. But it's there, every day, if we look closely enough at what is going on around us. Tonight, many of us will eat a sumptuous festive meal surrounded by family and friends. Meanwhile, more than 3,000 Long Islanders will eat much more modest meals alone in a soup kitchen. When we get tired after our meals, we will go to sleep in the comfort of soft,

warm beds--in many cases next to the person we love. But in Europe, thousands of refugees fleeing violence and devastation will sleep out in the open tonight, in the shadow of razor wire fencing that stands between them and their hopes for safety and security. When we wake up tomorrow morning, we will make our way to our jobs or our errands; our days full of purpose and possibility. But some of our neighbors and friends may not be able to get out of bed at all; because they are in the hospital, because they are disabled, because they are struggling with depression or pain. It is a beautiful world for many of us. Yet at the same time, it is such a terrible world for those in distress; those who are suffering in our neighborhood, in

our area, and in the world.

Of course, many of us have also experienced the opposite feeling. Some of us know what is like when someone we love dies; what it is like to be overwhelmed with grief while everyone else around us is going about their business. Some of us know what it is like to see the marriage into which we put so much of our hearts and souls painfully disintegrate before our eyes; while the other couples we know seem to all be happy and thriving. Some of us know what it is like to work somewhere for years, only to discover one day that there is no work for us there anymore; even while friends and acquaintances are finding fulfillment and security in their jobs. And some of us know

what it means to watch our child struggle physically or emotionally, a child whose youth and adulthood are filled with battles, disappointments and frustrations; even while other peoples' children blossom and achieve. What a terrible world it can be for us at times like these. What a beautiful world it seems to be for others who don't have to face the challenges we are struggling with.

“Oh my God, what a world you have made here. What a terrible world, what a beautiful world.” These words are not only the lyrics of a popular song, but also a very Jewish way of looking at what it means to be human. Every morning during the Shacharit service, we recite the following blessing: “Praised are You, Adonai our

God, who fashions light and forms darkness, who makes peace and creates everything.” The rabbis who wrote this prayer took the words from Isaiah chapter 45. But, as we learn in the Talmud, the rabbis made a small change. The original verse in Isaiah reads, “God fashions light and forms darkness, makes peace and creates evil.” In an act of ancient chutzpah, the rabbis decided to soften Isaiah's language—from God who creates “evil” to God who creates “everything”—lest the blessing be too jarring. But Isaiah's message remains. God has given us a world that is full of both good and evil, peace and violence, joy and pain—a terrible world and a beautiful world. And in praising God each morning for creation, we affirm this reality so that

we can begin our day without illusions, prepared for what life may bring.

Nobody ever asks why we have to live in such a beautiful world. But, at some point, we all ask ourselves “why do we have to live in such a terrible world?” “Why do we have to live in a world where there is so much pain and suffering, so much war and violence, so much hunger and homelessness, so much disease and deprivation?” “Why do we have to live in a world where even happiness can be so fleeting?” I am not sure there are any satisfying answers to these very important questions. So many of the prayers we recite today picture God on a throne of judgment, reviewing our deeds, listening to our pleas for compassion

and rendering a verdict on our fate for the coming year. Perhaps that is exactly what God does. But if so, why do so many good people suffer, why do so many bad people prosper? It may be that God's wisdom is simply beyond our comprehension; that we don't see the bigger picture; that God is playing three dimensional chess while we are playing checkers.

Or it may be that most of what happens to us is not brought about by God, not directly anyway. Events in our world are shaped far more by the forces of nature and the actions of human beings. The only dependable reward for doing good is peace of mind. The only sure consequence for evil is a troubled soul. God supports us, comforts,

inspires us and gives us strength. God is present for us, as the Kotsker Rebbe taught, “wherever we let God in.” But God does not single us out for suffering or reward.

Indeed, there are no good answers to the theological question I posed. But that's okay, because knowing why we live in a world that can sometimes be so terrible would not help us. But underlying this question is an even more important one; a question whose answer is vital to our lives. “How do we live in a world that can be so beautiful but also so terrible?” The answer to this question is the key to finding meaning and fulfillment in our lives.

We might think that, if our lives may be

disrupted by tragedy at any moment, “why not just live for today. Why not just try to pack as much fun, enjoyment and pleasure into the present as we can?” There's something to be said for this approach to life. Making sure we enjoy the good things that come our way is important. But, ultimately, living only for today will inevitably prove shallow and short sighted. Life has more to offer us than just pleasure. The things that bring us the greatest rewards, love, meaningful work, making a positive difference in the world, require us to make a long term investment. And while these investments don't always pan out, we will never reap their rewards if we are only thinking of today.

Knowing that the world can be so terrible could

also push us in the opposite direction. We might allow ourselves to live in perpetual fear of what might go wrong. We might spend all our energy trying to insulate ourselves against disaster. Again, this approach has some merit. There are lots of common sense things we can do, from wearing a seat belt to carrying good health insurance, to secure ourselves against the uncertainties of life. But fear can also paralyze us. Fear can prevent us from taking the risks that can bring us love, happiness and success. If we are always afraid, we will hold ourselves back from giving ourselves fully to our relationships, our work, our passions. Fear will limit us to a tepid, unsatisfying life while still leaving us exposed to life's many perils.

Yes, we live in a world that can be a terrible place. And even if it is beautiful for us right now, there is no telling what the future will bring. Yet, we cannot afford to pretend that the future will never come or live in abject terror of what lies ahead of us. Instead, we have to approach the future with courage and faith.

In the prayer *Unataneh Tokef*, which we will recite later today, we are told that “On Rosh HaShannah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die.” The prayer goes on to list the kinds of things that can happen to us during the coming year:

Who will live a long life and who will come

to an untimely end?

Who will perish by fire and who by water;  
who by sword and who by beast; who by  
hunger and who by thirst. . .

Who will be tranquil and who will be  
tormented

Who will be impoverished and who will be  
enriched

Who will be brought low and who will be  
raised up

But we do have the power to influence our fate

“*Teshuvah* (repentance), *Tefilah* (prayer) and  
*Tzedaka* (deeds of charity and kindness) can avert  
the evil decree.” In other words, we have the

power to prevent some of these terrible things from happening. It may be a terrible world out there, but it doesn't have to be so terrible; not if we are willing to do something about it.

Even for those of us who struggle with this prayer, Unataneh Tokef provides a powerful answer to the question “How do we live in a world that can be so beautiful but also so terrible?” The answer, quite simply, is “do something about it. Make the world a better place.” Over the course of our history, we humans have done a lot to make the world a terrible place. We have made wars, sown hatred, practiced slavery, oppressed the poor, polluted our environment and created weapons of mass destruction. But we have also

done a lot to make the world a better place. We have cured diseases, lifted millions out of poverty, made peace with our enemies, made work and transportation safer, more efficient and more humane, granted equal rights to formerly second class citizens. The world may still be a pretty terrible place. But it is a lot less terrible than it was 1000 or even a hundred years ago.

We still have a lot of work to do. As individuals, the work may seem overwhelming; especially because it is our fellow human beings who are responsible for so much of the evil in this world. This is where faith and courage come in. The Talmud teaches us that “a person who saves even one life is considered as if he or she had saved an

entire world.” Each of us here has the power to save at least one life. Each of us here can provide a meal to someone who is hungry, medicine to someone who is ill, or compassion to someone who is in distress. Each of us here can give of our resources, our time, or our talents to help clothe the naked, house the homeless, or promote peace and understanding among people of different races, ethnicities and religions. Each of us can provide companionship to someone is lonely, guidance to someone who is lost, or encouragement to someone who is struggling. Each of us can do something to make the world a little less terrible, to save at least one life. With the faith that we can make a difference and the

courage to extend ourselves to others, we can answer with our hearts and our hands the most important question we face as human beings: “how do we live in a world that can be so beautiful, but also so terrible?”

As important as it is for us to believe that things can be different; as important as it is for us to do what we can to make the world less terrible and more beautiful in the future, we should not forget the present. For so many of us, it is a beautiful world too. We are blessed with abundance and security, love, health and fulfillment. Because there are no guarantees, we should not take our blessings for granted. They are so precious because they can be so ephemeral.

There is too much at stake to simply live life for only for today. But there is every reason to live in the moment. Let us show our appreciation for the good things we have by cherishing them, by using them well, and regularly thanking God for our blessings. Enjoy, acknowledge and share, share, share! For our responsibility to God and to ourselves is not only to make the world less terrible. It is also to make the world more beautiful through our love, our generosity, our creativity and our spirituality.

As the Torah describes each step of creation, we are told that God sees that it is good. But after God creates humans, “God saw all that God had made, and behold, it was very good.” Why does

God only apply the words “very good” to human beings? Because, as the commentator Meshech Chochma explains, we alone have the power to elevate the entire world through the choices we make. Let us resolve in the coming year to use that power to work toward transforming our world from something that is both beautiful and terrible, to something that is indeed very good.