



# U'NETANAH TOKEF AND SUICIDAL IDEATION

On the High Holidays, we traditionally recite the U'neTanah Tokef prayer, named after its opening words, **וְנִתְּנָה תִּקְוָה קְדוּשַׁת הַיּוֹם - We lend power to the holiness of this day.** Yet, the most seminal part of the prayer is generally considered to be:



**בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתְּמוּן. כַּמָּה יַעֲבְרוּן, וְכַמָּה יִבְרָאוּן,  
מִי יַחֲיֶה, וּמִי יָמוּת, מִי בְּקֶצֶו, וּמִי לֹא בְּקֶצֶו, מִי בַמַּיִם, וּמִי בָאֵשׁ, מִי בַחֶרֶב,  
וּמִי בַחַיָּה, מִי בְרֶעֶב, וּמִי בְצָמָא, מִי בְרֵעַשׁ, וּמִי בַמַּגָּפָה, מִי בַחֲנִיקָה, וּמִי  
בְּסִקְלָה, מִי יְנוּחַ, וּמִי יְנוּעַ, מִי יִשְׁקֵט, וּמִי יִטְרַף, מִי יִשְׁלוּ, וּמִי יִתִּיֶסֶר, מִי  
יַעֲנִי, וּמִי יַעֲשִׂיר, מִי יִשְׁפֹּל, וּמִי יָרוּם. וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתַפְּלָה וְצַדִּיקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת  
רַע הַגְּזָרָה.**

**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 will 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. But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.**

This resource was created by Max Hollander

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The stark reminder of our mortality and life's volatility is a disturbing one, but it isn't without hope. The author of this prayer offers three actions people can take



to undo any negative decrees, echoing the rabbinic teaching in Genesis Rabbah 44:12. One stanza in particular stands out as uniquely highlighting an aspect of life to which anyone who is struggling with suicidal ideation can connect: **Who in good time and who by an untimely death.** To die by suicide is an inherently untimely death, and it can certainly feel sealed for people struggling with it. But like any other death or negative change in circumstance listed in this prayer, that decree can be averted with righteous actions. Yet the righteous action taken to prevent an untimely death might not be the actions of the person whose death is predicted. It might be your righteous, selfless act that makes the difference.

**Note:** While the purpose of this resource is to empower the loved ones of those experiencing suicidal ideation to educate themselves on what to look out for and what to understand about suicidal ideation, know this: Should your loved one die by suicide, it is not your fault. There are times when there is nothing one can do to stop it.





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Generally speaking, prayer can be both a petitioning practice and a reflective one, as we plead with God for any number of our hopes, concerns and needs, and as we remind ourselves of the hopes, concerns, and needs that are central to our lives. When we recite this prayer, we are reminding ourselves of everything that can happen to us as well as everything that can happen to the people we love. Sadly, an untimely death isn't as unlikely as we might assume for some members of our communities; therefore, anyone reciting this prayer should be cognizant of the people in their communities who are at risk of suffering from any of these calamities and do something about it. Learn more about suicidal ideation and what you can do; understand the warning signs someone experiencing it in private may be exhibiting in public; and find ways to let them know you are there for them and are always available if they need you. This might feel scary and overwhelming to address, and you may question your ability to help with an issue as enormous as suicidal ideation, but with education and love, you can do so much more than you can imagine.

If you are suffering from suicidal ideation, the greatest repentance is to reach out to someone and get the support you need to keep yourself safe.

and **Yom Kippur**, we pray for the end of this otherwise distressing prayer reminds us we aren't powerless to ensure we have a good year.

mental illness and suicidal act of righteousness and/or out to someone and get need to keep yourself safe. On **Rosh Hashanah** for a good year, but distressing prayer powerless to ensure we

**Or if someone has another at all.**





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## Activity: Know the Risks

Learning what to look for is the first righteous step in ensuring everyone in your community makes it through the new year and into the next one.



### Warning Signs:

Familiarize yourself with warning signs for suicidal ideation. Signs someone may be experiencing suicidal ideation can include a change in language. They might admit things like “not wanting to be here,” or wanting to hurt themselves in passing. There are also a range of reasons why someone may die by suicide. They may share negative reflections of themselves like:

- *I have let myself and other people down*
- *I am a burden*
- *I am a failure*
- *No one needs me*
- *I'm not good enough*
- *There's no point in living*
- *I will never find a way out of my problem*
- *I'm weak, I can't bear this pain*
- *I have lost everything*
- *I'm useless*
- *Things will never get better for me*
- *Nobody cares about me*
- *I'll show them what they have done to me*
- *If I die, it's the best for everyone.*





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Additionally, noticeable changes in behavior or emotional states can be warning signs. These behaviors or changes individually do not necessarily indicate suicidal ideation, but they should be taken seriously. They might indicate something is wrong and may even be signs of suicidal ideation. You know your loved ones best, and you can trust your instincts when something feels wrong. It is always wise to consult a professional if you have concerns. Also, it is important to understand that what we call suicidal ideation can occur on a spectrum; someone who has thoughts may or may not be at a high risk of actually harming themselves. The people at most risk are the ones who have the desire, a plan and the means of taking this action.



## *Language:*

It is imperative that you remember to use sensitive language when discussing subject matter as delicate and triggering as suicide with someone who may be experiencing suicidal ideation. Avoid using language like “commit” suicide, and instead refer to it as “died by” suicide, because while the individual is the one who acts on the impulse, its presence wasn’t their fault in the first place; it was the mental illness that killed them. 19th century scholar, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, author of the Arukh HaShulchan, wrote:

**This is the general principle in connection with suicide: We find any excuse we can and say he acted thus, because he was in terror or great pain, or his mind was unbalanced, or he imagined it was a mitzvah, because he was preventing himself from failing and committing other sins, as it is extremely unlikely that a person would commit such an act of folly with a clear mind. (Yoreh De’ah 345:5)**



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The Arukh HaShulchan acknowledges one's mental state as an external cause of one's death in the same way we have learned to differentiate the two by externalizing death by suicide. Doing so also separates suicide from the ideator, making it easier for them to recognize that they aren't fighting themselves; rather, they are fighting an illness inside of them that they can treat like any other condition.

You can learn more about this, as well as support resources and suicide prevention hotlines like **988** that you can utilize or share with someone else, in the Blue Dove Foundation's Suicide Prevention Toolkit, **Every Life Counts**.



## *Plan Your Approach:*

Using this information, formulate an approach to someone you love who you suspect is suffering from suicidal ideation who is sensitive to the unique circumstances of this issue. While there are no guarantees about the effectiveness of any conversation in situations like these, having a plan is a necessary step nonetheless.



If you are having trouble finding the right words to say, consider the following conversation starters.

- I've noticed you've been acting differently lately. I just wanted to check in and make sure everything is alright, and if not, I'd love to talk. [Offer a specific time; sometimes asking them to arrange a discussion puts more pressure on them.]
- I wish I had the right words to make you feel better, but just know I care and I am here for you.
- I cannot imagine how you feel, and I won't pretend to, but if you are willing to share how you're feeling, I'm willing to listen.



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Sometimes addressing your concerns openly and directly is the best decision. Doing so has been shown to decrease risk rather than increase it. After stressing your affection and concern for the person you love, ask them:

- Are you thinking about suicide?
- Are you considering ending your life?
- Are you thinking about killing yourself?



Offering to listen is a great first step in addressing their challenges, but don't jump to offering solutions. Let them speak. Ask questions. Show them your love. What they need right now is an open heart. Print/write out the suggestions above, or use the lines below to craft your own statement, and consider putting it in your wallet or saving it on your phone, should the need arise.

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