

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Return to Love ... Again”

Rev. Sam Trumbore September 27, 2020

Opening Words

Let us join in solidarity this morning with our Jewish siblings.
Historically Unitarians have found common cause with Judaism
in our affirmation of the unity of God.
That declaration of faith is in the Shema:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Now hear, O Unitarian Universalists, another version of that statement
closer to a contemporary UU understanding:

Hear, O Humanity, the Spirit of Life and the Sacred Earth are one.

Tonight is the beginning of Yom Kippur one of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar,
the culmination of the Days of Awe that follow Rosh Hashana.

As each of us is so moved,
May we join Jews around the world in a time of self-examination.
May we ask forgiveness and cast off our shortcomings from the past year.
May we renew our faith and rededicate ourselves to our community.

Spoken Meditation

As we turn inward, let us contemplate that phrase, “I’m sorry.”
It is sometimes as easy to say as “pass the salt and pepper.”
Not much harder than “excuse me” or “you’re first.”
Just another daily transaction, a dab of social lubricant.

Sometimes though, the words catch in the throat.
Muscles tighten in the neck to hold them in.
Resentment might narrow the eyes slightly as the fingers clench.
“I will not apologize for anything!”

Sometimes the body stiffens and the eyes widen.
A fluttery stomach churns acidic discomfort.
Freeze or run are the conflicting impulses confusing the legs and feet.
“I want to be anywhere but here!”

So simple to say “I’m sorry.”
What a relief to confess one’s actions and remorse.
What closure to make amends and restitution.
To put an end to it ... and to return to love ... again.

Why don’t we say I’m sorry more often?

Sermon

Yom Kippur is the culmination of ten days of repentance that begin with Rosh Hashanah. Reconciling with those we have wronged, prayer and tzedakah or good deeds are the main themes during these days of awe as they are often called. During this time, people are urged to:

- examine themselves
- express remorse
- ask forgiveness
- and make decisions for self-improvement

George Robinson writes, "... On Rosh Hashanah, we are put on trial for our actions of the previous year, to be sentenced on Yom Kippur." (p. 94). Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein said in a Yom Kippur service last year, "The majority of us have chosen comfort over conviction, words over action, justification over justice and, as a result, allow the degeneration of our principles, and the erosion of our character and along with it, the character of our nation." The culmination of these days of repentance is one last chance to get right with God.

Yom Kippur begins at sunset tonight and continues for 24 hours until sunset on Monday. During that time, five prohibitions are listed, found in the Mishnah, the book of Jewish oral tradition codified after the fall of the temple in the year seventy of the common era.

1. No Eating and drinking
2. No Wearing leather shoes
3. No Bathing/washing
4. No Anointing oneself with perfumes or lotions
5. No Marital relations

In the beginning of the service the Kol Nidre prayer traditionally is sung that says:

All personal vows we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.

This has been a very controversial prayer over the years because it seems to let people off the hook for making personal promises to God and then not fulfilling them. The rabbis have argued "If a man vow unto the Lord... he shall not break his word" (Numbers 30:2). Yet this is really the common person's plea. Over the years of Jewish oppression, this prayer has asked for release from false conversion to Christianity for self-preservation, particularly during the Spanish Inquisition. In the struggle to survive, the common person may make grandiose promises to God that are not possible to keep. It is human to need to go spiritually bankrupt and start over again.

Perhaps that is why the melody of this prayer can be so moving. Personal promises to God, or to oneself for that matter, are a great burden when unfulfilled. If to God, they invite God's wrath. If to ourselves, they invite harsh self-judgment. The melody touches deeply the struggle to live a just and upright life and how often we fail at our best intentions.

And let us pause a moment to take in just how hard it is to live up to our best intentions. The story today of the bird Thezeez communicates it so beautifully. He knocks over a tree unintentionally damaging a garden yet doesn't want to take responsibility for his mistake. The words "I'm sorry"

sometimes do not come easily to our lips, especially if the consequences of saying so might be significant. Or the words may come but there may not be real remorse felt. Or the words and remorse might be there but a willingness to make amends may not, especially if the cost of the harm done is expensive. A lawyer might advise you to hold back your saying your sorry, even though you feel it, to better negotiate a settlement.

But apologizing for forgetting an anniversary or a birthday or hurting someone's feelings doesn't rise to that level. "I'm sorry, I ask for your forgiveness," is the lubricant of social relationships. From many years of marriage and parenthood, I consider this a spiritual practice. On a daily basis, I strive to resolve the conflicts and stresses in my relationship with Andrew and Philomena so we maintain peace and harmony in our household. I try not to arrive at Yom Kippur with much baggage of unresolved issues.

I also strive to do the same with my relationships with members and friends of our congregation. You aren't getting a blanket "I'm sorry" from me to check the box. If I have harmed or offended you, I want to know, *personally*, so I can seek resolution with you that is mutually satisfying. I value the opportunity to say I'm sorry because it opens the door to the restoration of relationship. It also helps me recognize behavioral patterns or attitudes that I can seek to uproot and change. If there are blocks in me to care and compassion, I want to find them so I can heal them.

The Days of Awe focus on the person who has harmed another and their responsibility to ask for forgiveness. There is another dimension. I may *not know* the ways I have harmed another, at least not consciously. The vulnerable and marginalized in our society often experience harm that *goes unrecognized* by those who occupy the center and by those in positions of power. The effort to center the marginalized brings attention to these harms that allows them to break through denial and be noticed. This creates the context to begin a process of redress and reconciliation.

This happens at much bigger levels than interpersonal relationships. Governmental bureaucracy, its policies and procedures, can function oppressively as the nation recognized after the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Bias and violence in policing methods can and often does land much harder on those on the margins. Our society outsources to the police what it doesn't want to know about or care about like the deinstitutionalized mentally ill unable to care for themselves.

Another source of oppression and cruelty happens to non-human species. The destruction of wildlife habitat, especially forests being cut down around the world, accelerates climate change and the extinction of species. Plastic waste is killing sea life. Confined animal farming treats them like protein factories without worth or dignity beyond their market weight-to-feed ratio.

And at the level of the planet, individuals *can't* go 100% green with an electric car and solar panels and have much impact on rising sea levels and the acidification of the oceans. Only worldwide cooperation at governmental levels can put even a dent in carbon dioxide emissions.

Ultimately, we are all guilty of contributing to these problems. Even the most conscious of us, can't be *completely* carbon neutral. We can't extract ourselves out of the systems in which we are enmeshed. I know many of us do what we can do and that is good. I drive mostly on electric power and have solar panels on my roof. But I eat meat, use plastic, fly in airplanes, and wear clothes that include synthetic fibers so I don't have to iron my shirts.

This is why Yom Kippur is *so* important. None of us can repair *every* relationship. None of us can reform our relationship with the earth to erase our impact on the planet. None of us as individuals can control the social and governmental institutions we must share with others who do not embrace our values. We can't control everything in our lives or the lives of those around us.

Ultimately we are *vulnerable to judgment* – be it other human beings or the biosphere which we are incrementally threatening.

Yom Kippur forces us to directly experience that vulnerability. It strips away our armor. Defenses like, “I’m basically a good person.” “I try to do the right thing.” “People like me.” “I have a good reputation.” “I’m not responsible for the crimes of the past.” “My ancestors didn’t have slaves.” “I drive a Prius.” Give it up! All the ways we protect ourselves from the truth that just being here on this planet right now, we are making things worse.

And it doesn’t end there with absolute guilt. This isn’t about hanging our guilty souls over the pit of hell undeserving of mercy. The goal is to experientially *cut through* our defenses and *sense* that vulnerability. For those of us on the margins, that doesn’t take much as it is a daily experience. For the well defended among us, this is a rare moment.

When it does happen however, from the rich to the poor, for the sick to the healthy, from the disabled to the temporarily able bodied, from the privileged to the disadvantaged,

we *meet* each other *in* that vulnerability. We meet in a *common humanity* of being on a journey through life from birth to death, without ultimate security.

And when we meet in our common humanity, our shared vulnerability, our dependence on one another to survive and thrive, real compassion arises, real community is possible, reconciliation and renewal is possible.

The sounding of the shofar brings the day of fasting to an end amid fervent prayers for forgiveness. The feeling of remorse and vulnerability joined in communal prayer reconnects and restores. This is the moment ... to return to love again.

This is one beautiful way to build beloved community. In our common humanity, our common vulnerability, we find and rediscover the love that weaves through all life and holds us together. And from that love, we find the willingness, the commitment and the energy to go back into the world and fight for social changes; fight against animal cruelty, fight for the sustainability of our planet. The work needed to repair the world, in Hebrew, Tikkun Olam, can come from every direction, every corner of the world when we reconnect with the source.

The source for that work is our willingness to experience the shared pain of brokenness that bonds us in our common humanity.

Together and united, we can make the difference needed.

Benediction

When the piercing sound of the shofar is heard tomorrow evening as the sun sets, may the trembling of our human vulnerability end in the sweet rain of forgiveness that washes clean our transgressions and restores our spirits as we face the new days ahead. May we be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. May we use that precious year well for our good and the good of humanity.