

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

“Beginning Again in Love”

Rev. Sam Trumbore September 23, 2007

Spoken Meditation

How many times have we broken our vows,
A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand or more?

Every morning I get up,
 I pray that I may embody the Spirit of Life and Love.
Every night I got to bed
 counting the missed opportunities to live and love.

An overflowing kitchen trash container
 with smelly green slime running down the inside wall
 tightens the muscles in my jaw
 as unkind thoughts fly from synapse to synapse..
the stray curl of blonde hair gently brushed back grabs my eye
 as the form fitting sweater curves my craving
 and my inner coonhound drools and wags his tail.
Seeing those stooping unshaven men on Clinton Avenue
 quickens my breath and
 stiffens the fortifications around my heart.

I know – you know – perfection is unattainable,
 but each arrow left in the quiver or
 each misguided arrow that flies past its target
 marks me.

How do we live with dignity and integrity
 while shedding good intentions like old flakes of skin?

Try again. And again. And yet again.
Then start all over and try again.
Vow that on the millionth failure,
 you will try again a million times a million times,

Or until you stop counting and just keep trying again
 until trying again is unnecessary.

The only other choice is to turn away into the hollow emptiness
 before
 or after
 this precious moment.

Sermon

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

Jewish tradition, though conscious of the perils and pitfalls of existence, is a constant reminder of the grand and everlasting opportunities to do the good. We are taught to love life in this world because of the possibilities of charity and sanctity, because of the many ways open to us in which to serve the Lord. "More precious, therefore, than all of life in the world to come is a single hour of life on earth-an hour of repentance and good deed.

- from God in Search of Man

Encouraging that hour of repentance and good deed is the center of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, that just concluded last night. This year I joined in the fasting and prayers with Jews around the world, attending services in Troy at Congregation Berith Sholom led by Rabbi Deborah Gordon who some may remember spoke as part of a panel here, one of the events of the feminist lecture series a few years ago. I wanted to deeply engage their experience of atonement and repentance seeking any Unitarian Universalist religious message embedded in their practices that I could bring to you this morning.

Yom Kippur is the culmination of ten days of repentance that begin with Rosh Hashanah. Repentance, 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). The culmination of these days of repentance is one last chance to get right with God

Five prohibitions are listed for Yom Kippur, 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

I didn't have any non-leather shoes and wasn't going to wear my plastic sandals with my dress clothes to the synagogue so I bought these canvass shoes I'm wearing today (in case you're wondering why I'm not wearing dressier shoes). I also shaved and washed Friday night so I wouldn't be too scruffy on Saturday since I wouldn't be able to bathe or wash. Thankfully my deodorant is unscented.

Many synagogues only let their members participate in their High Holy Days services or make non-members buy an expensive ticket because this may be the only time of the year many Jews attend. Berith Sholom has an open service as long as you call ahead and reserve space. When I arrived, someone at the door checked to make sure my name was on the list. The temple was sultry and crowded with probably 300 people and another 100 watching a video projection in their social hall.

In the beginning of the service the Kol Nidre prayer was 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.

Rabbi Michael Lerner notes that the goal of the days of repentance is not perfection but to "assess how close we have come to actualizing our potential as partners" with God and how we need to realign ourselves so that we may turn again to our highest ideals. (ref. Susan Veronica Rak sermon)

Rabbi Gordon modeled this by confessing that she knew she may have let a few people in the congregation down during the past year. With a tear in her eye, she asked for forgiveness and release as she vowed that it was never her intention to harm anyone.

As a fellow clergy person, I resonated with her words. I've been going through a process of self-reflection over the summer anticipating the opening of this beautiful space. I've been assessing how good a partner I've been with this congregation and how the emphasis in my ministry needs to change to support the congregation's goals of radical hospitality, programming excellence and community service.

I've realized that sometimes I've had my priorities wrong. I've let my enthusiasm for community activism to cause me at times to neglect people's pastoral needs in our congregation. If people call me up and want to talk, I'm mostly good about responding quickly. What I've had trouble with is paying attention to who *might* need a call or a visit. Our Caring Network is pretty good at alerting me about these needs as are a few key pastor advisors. It would seem the last person most UU's think to call when they are in crisis is their minister. And there have been times I haven't prioritized or have forgotten the information I actually did receive.

If you feel I haven't been there for you at some time you were in need of my help, know that I'm deeply regretful of having not served you well. I apologize from the depths of my heart and ask for your forgiveness. If you know of another in crisis or need of my attention, please do not assume I know about the situation. I encourage you to confidentially advise me of the need. With as many members and friends as we have, I'm not able to keep track of everyone, much as I wish I could. To be effective, I need your help.

I decided I wanted the full Yom Kippur treatment so I attended all the services till the bitter end, fasting for over 25 hours, no food or drink, even water. The services were about two and a half hours on Friday night and almost eight hours on Saturday

starting at 10am. The services follow a liturgy that includes many songs, responsive readings, and prayers to God, that Rabbi Gordon helpfully explained to expand our understanding of each intention.

One of those prayers called Al Cheit (AHL CHAYT)(we did in ten different versions on Saturday) enumerated all the different ways we'd sinned in the past year. I don't know about you, but I'm an amnesiac when it comes to the less egregious wrongs I've done. The Al Cheit jogged my memory as I reflected on words like:

- arrogance, bigotry, cynicism, deceit
- egoism, flattery, gossip greed, injustice, jealousy
- holding grudges, being lustful
- malicious, narrow-minded obstinate, possessive
- quarrelsome, rancorous, selfish, dishonest
- weakness of will, xenophobia

None of these are extremely grave. They represent the smaller things that we might excuse one at a time, but which slowly corrode our good will when they remain unacknowledged. We were not expected to confess these publicly but were given ample time to search our hearts and silently take stock. Theoretically, we'd been doing this for the last ten days so they should easily come to mind. When we did speak these sins aloud, we spoke in the plural. For as a collective, we had all committed these sins.

I kind of wish we had a opportunity within our Unitarian Universalist liturgical year to do a life review and consider if the direction we are going is the best one for us. If even the most beautiful garden is untended, weeds quickly overrun it. A regular time of year for a life review could motivate us to become more conscious and purposeful. No one need judge anyone else. We would all judge ourselves and also forgive ourselves as we start fresh once more. Such an act would be purifying and revitalizing. Perhaps we need our own Unitarian Universalist version of Yom Kippur as it is the holiest day in the Jewish Calendar.

The central metaphor used in the Yom Kippur service is the gates of atonement that open on Rosh Hashanah and close on the evening of Yom Kippur. Thus observant Jews should be working hard to repair and redirect their lives in this period of time. The consequences are dire as their names may not be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year if they are not sincere in their efforts. Yet Rabbi Gordon told us that all this was metaphorical. The High Holy Days were set aside to heighten our sensitivity, yet God is always ready to forgive, the gates of repentance never barred. Yet, tomorrow might be our last day on earth and who would we want to die with a heavy

heart? (One of those paradoxical tensions clergy like to point out and keep everyone a little on edge.)

The work of Yom Kippur is really repairing relationships. Mary Sellon and Dan Smith, in their book, *Practicing Right Relationship* write:

We hunger for relationship. Without relationship, we perish. Without loving relationships, we rarely thrive. We long for our relationships to be positive. We want them to connect us with other people in creative, and life-giving ways. We feel a sense of appreciative awe when we truly 'see' someone...and are seen by them. Positive relationships support and nurture us. They connect us, letting us know we're not alone. They sustain us in difficult times and add pleasure to our celebrations.

Rev. Desmond Tutu has noted:

Our humanity is caught up in that of all others. We are human because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence.

When we look closely at the sins to be repented on Yom Kippur, many, if not all of them are relational sins. Were we to update the list, we'd want to add sins against our relationship with the planet, words like waste, over-consume, endanger and pollute its air, water and lands; its animals, minerals and vegetables.

The Saturday morning service lasted three hours, followed by a memorial service for loved ones we'd lost. After a short break, Rabbi Gordon led a children's service and told the story of Jonah and the big fish to the kids. She pointed out that there was only one Jew in the story. And Jonah was not a very good example. The sailors feared God and don't want to throw Jonah overboard when he attempted to escape God's charge to be a prophet to Nineveh. The Ninevites listened to Jonah, repented and changed their ways. But Jonah wanted to see them destroyed by the mighty hand of the Lord and was quite disappointed when it doesn't happen. Rabbi Gordon told the kids Jews need to be humble on this Day of Atonement. Reading Jonah each year as the haftorah helped. (I didn't know what haftorah was, so I looked it up. The haftorah is a reading from the prophets to interpret and magnify the reading from the Torah, a tradition started in ancient times when reading from the Torah was banned.)

One could say that the whole Yom Kippur service tries to curb our egotism and self-aggrandizement. God doesn't smite Jonah when he runs away. God encourages him to literally turn and go the other direction, another way to understand repentance.

Hungry, thirsty and tired we stood for the last half hour of the service squeezing out our last moments of regret and repentance before the closing of the gates with sunset and a final blowing of the shofar. We broke fast together with food and fellowship in their social hall.

As we waited for the final part of the liturgy, listening to the cantor's ornamented voice supported by a beautiful choir, we heard the sound of rain outside on the windows. Rabbi Gordon reminded us that one of the original purposes for the traditional song Avinu Malkenu was to make it rain.

The rain had a powerful effect on me. I'd felt myself resisting the liturgy and nitpicking about aspects of the service I didn't like. The fasting and the rain together lightened my spirits and opened me to the beauty of the music and the promise of a loving and forgiving God who eagerly wants to embrace us and help us live in harmony with divine law; a God wanting us to see the futility of self-absorption and the joy of loving community.

Have I become a God fearing Jew? No. Through participation in the service, I gradually opened up my heart to the Spirit of Life and Love that passed through the leaders and the congregation. The high commitment to moral integrity in the Jewish teachings and practice, even to the point of an obligation to rebuke moral transgressors, inspires me. To maintain a high moral commitment we flawed human beings need a spiritual safety valve that allows us all, again and again, to begin again in love.

In that spirit, our final hymn this morning is a litany with a sung response. If you are ready to begin again in love, now is your chance. Matt is going to help us learn it now.

Benediction

Of the many, many words of the Reform Yom Kippur liturgy I read, these grabbed me and I had to write them down:

this is the vision of a great and noble life
to endure ambiguity and to make light shine through it
to stand fast in uncertainty
to prove capable of unlimited love and hope

Happy Jewish New Year and may all of you have your name written in the Book of Life for another year.

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