

Rev. Cathy Rion Starr, Unitarian Society of Hartford, 10/1/17

Returning to our Holy Wholeness

A service to wrestle with forgiveness, letting go, and atonement with humor and love, drawing on wisdom from Jewish observance of Yom Kippur and our own Unitarian history.

A few years ago, a dear friend and colleague called me – and, even though I was in the middle of working on a project here in the office, and even though I don't answer the phone so much -- I answered! For many years, we had talked frequently and she was a mentor and support to me as I began in ministry, but I hadn't spoken with her in quite a while. We chatted briefly, but it quickly became apparent that she wasn't simply calling to catch up.

It was the middle of the Jewish High Holy Days, and my Jewish UU colleague was calling to ask my forgiveness for something I didn't even realize she had done. She explained that she had distanced herself from me because it was too painful to watch my journey into parenthood while she herself had been trying everything to have children without success. She apologized for withdrawing as a friend. I accepted her apology – I had no idea that she was going through these struggles or that this was why we'd drifted from being in regular touch. I appreciated her telling me.

But she didn't stop there: then she asked me, point blank, “will you forgive me, Cathy?” I paused – it's not very often that someone asks me to forgive them – and I said Yes, of course. I love you and appreciate you and only want the best for you.

This brief interaction has stuck with me for several years now – not because offering forgiveness was a big deal in this case – it wasn't. It wasn't about me. It was about my friend and her process of healing and becoming whole again. What struck me was experiencing part of the ritual of repentance that many Jews observe.

In Jewish tradition, the Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days to review the past year and repent or atone for all times you've gone astray. [Phew, that's a task!]

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a time to reset – to make oneself whole again, to return to who you are as your best self.

It recognizes that we all stray from our best selves. “The word in Hebrew that is translated as ‘sin’ – *cheyt*’ – actually means ‘missing the mark.’”ⁱ

When we “miss the mark,” (says Dr. Louis Newman), it means there’s a wrong that needs our attention – that we need to turn away from the sin and back to a path of wholeness and integrity.

We aim to be our best selves, but we get impatient, we get tired, we experience pain (emotional or physical), we get overwhelmed, we’re simply careless, and sometimes, we get downright petty....and we do things that don’t reflect who we want to be in the world.

In the last few months, I have “missed the mark” a million times – I’ve lost my patience with Robin and Heather, I’ve been short with some of you, I’ve ignored some of the disasters in the world, I’ve assumed the worst of someone, the list goes on. Some of those times, I’ve said I’m sorry quickly, sometimes I’ve said it somewhat later, and, I’ll admit, there are a couple places where I’m still not to a place where I can apologize and move forward.

This ties me up – it takes my energy and keeps it bound up. The practice of Tshuvah, or repentance, is a release of that energy – a turning and returning to who we are and who we are meant to be, and a return to God.

When my friend called and apologized and asked for forgiveness, she was seeking to heal herself, to make herself more whole – she was carrying this burden of regret in how she’d been with me, and she released it.

Both Jewish and Unitarian Universalist traditions hold that repentance is always possible. That the option to return to right relationship and right living is never off limits.

This is a radical theological statement!

Both Jewish and Unitarian Universalist traditions hold that everyone is born whole and perfect – this is the “inherent worth and dignity” that we speak of so often. We all err, but no one is beyond hope of repair. From our Universalist tradition, we believe that no one is damned to eternal hell. No One.

Hosea Ballou, one of our Universalist ancestors, wrote the Treatise on Atonement in 1805. In it, he posited that all sin is finite – not infinite.

Ballou wrote in an era where Calvinist Puritans dominated. They believed that those not “elect” could be damned to eternal hell. So Ballou’s argument that sin was finite was a big deal. Ballou’s God was a loving, benevolent God who wants to “happify” us. For Ballou, the consequences of sin are *internal*, not external.ⁱⁱ

Similarly, Jewish tradition teaches that people are born pure, and that “God both wants to hold us accountable and wants to forgive us,” as Jewish scholar Louis Newman put it in a wonderful interview with On Being.ⁱⁱⁱ

These teachings don’t mean that horrid acts need not be atoned for – it does, however, mean that atonement is possible for anyone who is willing to do the hard spiritual work of forgiveness and making amends. Those of you who have worked the 12 steps know, perhaps better than I do, how hard that work is – but also how liberating.

My teacher, the UU theologian Rebecca Parker, teaches that atonement is a transformation where a person comes to know God beyond fear and idolatry – that atonement means coming into right relationship with God through God’s forgiveness. This transformation must come through community and ritual practice.

But we have lost our communal rituals of atonement – of confession, apology, making amends, and forgiveness.

For years, I’ve thought about attending Jewish High Holy Days services, and finally this weekend I attended Yom Kippur services at Congregation Beth Israel, the Reform Synagogue on Farmington Ave, and the oldest synagogue in the Hartford area (they were founded about the same time as USH).

Friday evening’s service began with singing. As we sang “Return again, return again, return to the land of you soul,” I felt my body relax and enter a meditative prayer.

I sat in the beautiful sanctuary and let the music and words wash over me. There was scripture (thankfully with printed English translations), lots of prayer, confession, more prayer, and lots of singing.

I knew that the Kol Nidre was an important part of Yom Kippur services – in fact, the evening service is often called the Kol Nidre service, and I’ve even played the beautiful piece on the cello – but it wasn’t until Friday night that I experienced the prayer itself:

“We will do our best to keep every promise, to fulfill every good intention and every resolution that we make during the year that has just begun, from this Day of Atonement to the next.”

“But if there are promises we truly cannot keep, however hard we try, we pray that we may be forgiven. And we ask pardon too, for those promises we could not keep in the year now ended.”^v

How beautiful. How simple. How compassionate.

Atonement is not about guilt or shame or punishment for sins, it's about acknowledging both our inherent worth AND our imperfection – and renewing our promises to live well.

At several points, we sang and recited lists of sins and wrongs, just as we did in our ritual earlier. Each time, it was a collective “for the wrongs WE have done...” “In the past year WE have found ourselves...” Together, we took responsibility for the wrongs we've done and asked God's forgiveness.

I easily related to some of the wrongs – not listening to my children, hurting other people's feelings, not speaking up when seeing injustice. Others I didn't identify with so much – robbed, acted perversely, counseled evil, acted wickedly.

But perhaps I did rob, or counsel evil, or act wickedly and I just haven't been able to acknowledge it.

Saying these lists collectively is both a burden and a relief. A burden because gosh, that's a lot of weight to carry! And my, how much have I erred and not even realized it? But also a relief – because in the collective ritual there is the safety of anonymity – the safety to admit that perhaps I did more of these than I realized, and also that everyone around me messed up too.

Together, we confess these sins. Together, we acknowledge our imperfection. Together, we asked God to forgive us. Together, we recommit to trying to do better in the year to come.

We are not alone, but together, trying to live well.

In Unitarian Universalism, we don't have such a clearly defined liturgy of repentance and reset. We don't share a God of whom we can ask forgiveness. But we have a commitment to covenant – of promising one another to do the best we can here in community together, and part of that covenant is that we come back together when we inevitably break it.

My friend was coming back into covenant with me when she asked for my forgiveness. My hope is that we here can practice ongoing acts of repentance and forgiveness.

But that individual repair of covenant is just one piece. The next step is the collective confession and repentance of Yom Kippur.

Rob Eller Isaacs is a Jewish Unitarian Universalist minister who wrote the litany that we will speak and sing in a moment.

We will confess our errors, and then sing together: “We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.” The litany has become widespread in Unitarian Universalism – a way that we honor our connection with Jewish traditions and a ritual to collectively atone for the ways we’ve missed the mark.

I invite you to open your grey hymnal to reading #637 at the back of the book and reflect silently for a moment on the ways that you have missed the mark this year.

This ritual is a way to acknowledge that we are a community of perfectly imperfect people, and part of what we do together is help each other come back into right relationship – with ourselves, with each other, and with the Source of Life.

We collectively name our wrongs. We ask forgiveness. We begin again. Returning to the holy wholeness with which we were born.

So let us know practice this ritual.

I invite you to open your hearts to compassion, honesty, and love.

Ritual **#1037 We Begin Again in Love (or #637 gray hymnal)**

Then John and I alternate the spoken lines (after each spoken line, the congregations sings together “we forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love”)

A Litany of Atonement – Rob Eller Isaacs

John: For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

Cathy: For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

John: For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

Cathy: For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

John: For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone

Cathy: For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit

John: For losing sight of our unity

Cathy: For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness

Refrain: We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

ⁱ Michael Lerner, in “Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections on Atonement,” 159.

ⁱⁱ CRS notes from Treatise on Atonement (UU Theology Class reading notes)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Refreshing Practice of Repentance, Krista Tippett with Louis Newman, On Being, 9/17/15. <https://onbeing.org/programs/louis-newman-the-refreshing-practice-of-repentance/>

^{iv} “Yom Kippur Family Service” – from Congregation Beth Israel, West Hartford, CT, 2017, p.5