

The Timeless Wisdom of Yom Kippur

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Yom Kippur is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. And while most of us are not Jewish or of Jewish background, our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism does include Jewish teachings as one of its sources of religious wisdom. Judaism is a part of our religious heritage. And so, on this Sunday following Yom Kippur, we reflect on some of the wisdom and lessons we may draw from this sacred Jewish observance.

The name “Yom Kippur” means “Day of Atonement,” and that pretty much explains what the holiday is. It is a day set aside to atone for the sins of the past year; that is, to demonstrate repentance and make amends. One salient feature of Judaism, evident from a reading of the Hebrew scriptures, is an honest acknowledgment of the weakness and fallibility that is an inherent part of human nature. The characters of the Old Testament are no idealized saintly role models. They have the same kinds of vices and foibles as we and all people have. They’re human. This acknowledgment of normal human fallibility leads to religious observances and practices addressing that situation and seeking a path toward wholeness despite human limitations and imperfection.

This basic sense of humility is one gift we can appreciate from the Jewish side of our religious heritage. Another is the annual reminder provided by these High Holy Days. Certainly we could benefit by keeping such issues as repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the foreground of our thoughts and actions. But, hey, we’re human too. It can’t hurt to have a periodic reminder of the liberating effect of letting go of our guilt, our resentments, and our grudges and giving ourselves and our neighbors a fresh start.

That is what these Jewish High Holy Days are all about. They began a couple of weeks ago with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and ended last Monday with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The beginning of a new year brings with it the idea of new beginnings, of getting a fresh start. And the Day of Atonement complements that with the notion of becoming once again at one with ourselves, our God, and with the human community of which we are a part.

The period between the two festivals, known as the Days of Awe, remind us that there is more involved than simply sweeping the past under the rug and declaring a new start. The Days of Awe are devoted to a careful examination of who we are and how we have failed – failed others, failed our own selves, and failed God, or our highest ideals. This introspection presumably leads to regret and remorse for any harm we have done.

But that’s not enough. As author Elizabeth Cullinan notes: “The danger with *feelings* of penitence is that we allow them to take the place of those actions that are its true manifestation.” Indeed, our regret and remorse should lead to attempts at restitution, when possible, and to turning away from our past selves to better selves. Selves who will act differently in the coming new year. This is the meaning of repentance – cleaning up that messy house that Kathleen Norris mentioned in the reading earlier, and turning back, forswearing our foolish ways.

I have often preached at this time of year on the themes of Yom Kippur, but I have tended to focus primarily on the why and how of forgiving others for what they have done to us. This year I would like to look more closely at the flip side of that by exploring further the ideas of confession, repentance, and asking for forgiveness. But lest we forget the importance of also forgiving others, I’ll just remind you of the basic idea.

Jack Kornfield, a well-known Buddhist meditation teacher and psychologist says:

For most people forgiveness is a process. When you have been deeply wounded, the work of forgiveness can take years. It will go through many stages – grief, rage, sorrow, fear, and confusion – and in the end, if you let yourself feel the pain you carry, it will come as a relief, as a release for your heart. You will see that forgiveness is fundamentally for your own sake, a way to carry the pain of the past no longer. The fate of the person who harmed you, whether they be alive or dead, does not matter nearly as much as what you carry in your heart.

One very succinct description of forgiveness is “letting go of the possibility of changing the past.” When we forgive, we are letting go of something that has a stranglehold on *our* heart and mind. We are the ones released from the resentment, the bad feeling, the negativity. The one being forgiven need not even be aware of the act.

Similarly, in the case of repentance, we cannot control what someone else thinks, feels, or does. Whether someone forgives us or not is outside our control. But we can take care of our side of the equation – expressing remorse, asking for forgiveness, and committing ourselves to doing better next time. Whether others actually forgive us is a matter of their own internal housekeeping.

As I implied earlier, repentance has two major components, one passive and the other active. The passive component is confessing to ourselves our shortcomings, and feeling remorse or regret. The active component may include confessing to the injured party, acknowledging our awareness of having caused some hurt, seeking forgiveness, making amends where possible, and in fact changing our ways.

On this day of atonement, as a first step toward making amends for injuries or wrongs we may have done this year – large or small – I invite us to reflect for a moment. Where are our regrets? Whether or not we are prepared to confess to someone else and ask forgiveness and make amends, what are we ready to confess to ourselves? Let’s take a few moments to reflect on that. . . .

I’m not going to ask you to share the results of your reflection. That’s between you and whoever you choose to share with. However, in the interests of practicing what I preach, I would like to say a little bit about what came of my own reflections on these questions.

My biggest confession has to do not with acts of commission, but rather with acts of omission. One of my roles as your minister is to reach out to you in your times of pain and difficulty. And I must confess that there have been many times when I have fallen short. There have been various reasons: getting caught up in more urgent – but less important – matters; not being aware of the needs; a natural avoidance of painful situations.

Those are some of the reasons, but they are by no means valid excuses. And so I am making an effort to turn away from avoidance, and toward greater engagement. But I also need your help. When you need my attention, please ask for it, and you almost certainly will receive it. And if you’re aware of a need in someone else, don’t assume that I know about it. Please share that with me as well.

Also, if you have been hurt by something I've done, or by something I've failed to do, if you can summon the courage to tell me, I will summon the courage to hear you. And I'll do my best to make amends.

In your own process of confession and repentance, you've begun the passive aspect here this morning. Acknowledging some of your shortcomings or misdeeds and feeling sorry for them. But let's not forget the active piece. The concept of repentance is one of turning – of turning from the wrong to the right. It means making a real good-faith effort to change our ways. Sorry isn't enough, even if it's sincere. If I am repeatedly sorry, and yet turn right around and act the same way again, the 'sorry' is only a mockery. I need not demand perfection from myself, but I do demand positive steps to try and change for the better.

Jack Kornfield offers a meditation of forgiveness that we have used here before. This morning I'd like to use the portions of that meditation that focus on seeking forgiveness from those you have hurt, and forgiveness for yourself. Again, this experience will take place in the safe haven of your own mind, in the safe haven of this house of worship. As you leave those safe havens, I encourage you to take the next step of confessing directly to those you may have hurt and ask for their forgiveness. Forgiveness may or may not be forthcoming, but at least you will have the comfort of knowing that you are not the one standing in the way of reconciliation. And you just might be surprised by the positive results.

I'd like to invite you now to sit comfortably and allow your breath to come slowly and easily. Let your body and your mind relax. Close your eyes if you wish.

Turn your attention to any memories or areas of your life where you feel you have not been forgiven – where you feel a need for forgiveness. Be aware of the associated feelings, of any barriers to forgiveness. Simply allow the experiences to float through your awareness without judging them . . .

Now, let's begin the process of forgiveness. First, acknowledge the ways in which you have hurt others. Allow images and memories of times when you hurt others to come to awareness. Notice that at these times you may have felt fearful, defensive, or confused. . . There is no need to condemn yourself for your mistakes; that only adds further fear and defensiveness. Open to the regret you now feel and also to the possibility that you can now release your guilt and pain. . . Gently and slowly repeat to yourself several times, "I ask for forgiveness, I ask for forgiveness."

We have all hurt, embarrassed and belittled ourselves in countless ways and probably still carry much of the pain. Now you can begin to let that go. Allow memories of times when you hurt yourself to come into awareness. As each one arises, regard it and yourself gently and lovingly and repeat several times, "I forgive myself, I forgive myself."

Thus ends the meditation, and I invite you back into the here and now. On this annual Day of Atonement, we have paused and reflected on the past year. We have considered those we've wronged, and how we might express our regret, make amends and seek forgiveness. Of course we know we'll slip again. We are still human. We will hurt and be hurt yet again. We will break our vows a thousand times. But right now, for this year, may we clear the books and

start fresh, in hopes that our efforts can bring us nearer the ideal of health and wholeness that we seek in our lives and our relationships.

I leave you with this excerpt from a piece called “At One” by the Rev. Victoria Safford:

Imagine this.

On the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every fall, every year, the people make their peace with anyone they have wronged or slighted or injured or in any way neglected in the past twelve months. The task is not to patch things up, smooth things over, reach a compromise, or sweep mistakes and uneasy memories under the rug; the task is not to feel better. The task is ownership. The goal is truth, for its own redemptive sake. *I did this. I said this to you, and it was wrong. I neglected this. I botched this. I betrayed you thusly.*

I demeaned you, whether you ever knew it or not.

This is the truth in which both of us are living. I ask you to forgive me.

Imagine how many deep breaths you would need to take. Imagine how many doors you’d have to knock on, how many phone calls you’d have to make, how many letters, how many lunches and coffees, how many awkward moments with your children and your parents, and with strangers (that cashier to whom you spoke so sharply). Awkward is irrelevant. The task is not about comfort, it is about truth, about wholeness and holiness. Restoration.

Imagine this.