

Yom Kippur: “Begin Again in Love”, by Rev. M. Lara Hoke

a sermon preached at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover September 27, 2009

I realize we don't know each other well yet. But I still think it might surprise you to know that in 1997, about 12 years ago, I briefly thought about converting to Judaism. Now mind you, I never actually came close to going through with this. But I did take a lot of courses on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible when I was in seminary in the mid 90s, and I found the Jewish tradition appealing in many, many ways. On Friday nights during my seminary years I sometimes attended Temple Israel on the Boston/Brookline border, right there on the Riverway. In part, I did this because I longed to be in the pews *without* the feelings of obligation that seminarians often feel in the pews of their own religious group. So I took to going to synagogue some weekends to get my stress-free worship fix. (Truth be told, to this day I sometimes find myself at a synagogue or other house of worship for stress-free worship at a time other than Sunday morning!)

In any case, during my seminary days I found Reform Judaism to be surprisingly appealing. I felt a little self conscious in temple, since I didn't really know what I was doing, and I don't know Hebrew, for instance. If I stood out like a sore thumb, as I suspect, people were far too polite to say anything to me. I loved all the traditions; I loved the ritual; I loved the holidays; and I loved – truly loved – that things were really spelled out. The Hebrew Scriptures get pretty specific about the details of how things should be done, and the Talmud is a book of rabbinic writings further debating just how things should be done. After my loosey-goosey Unitarian Universalist upbringing, where “it was all good” and where we were pretty casual – where we were the “all-rightniks”, to use Abraham Joshua Heschel's term from this morning's reading¹ – it was really nice to be told, “Do this action, or say these words, at precisely this time.” For instance, take the holiday of Yom Kippur. God tells Moses that “... the tenth day of the seventh month is the Day of Atonement: It shall be a holy convocation to you ...” (Levit. 23:26) And just about everything that one ought to do on the tenth day of the seventh month is right there, spelled out, in Leviticus and Numbers and in later rabbinical writings.

Having been raised UU, this feels so reassuringly definitive. We UUs are not so well-defined in the way we figure out what we're going to do and when. For instance, how did we decide we would focus on Yom Kippur today? Well, we are focusing on Yom Kippur today because the Worship Committee and I sat down, filling in our plans for the Sundays of this year, and we happened to notice that Yom Kippur fell right around this particular Sunday. And I said, “Does the UUCiA typically do a Yom Kippur service?” And someone said, “Sometimes, but it's been a little while... that might be nice!” And so we penciled it in, and here we are! We're here because we respect what the Day of Atonement can teach us, and because, well, “it might be nice”. And so we don't have scriptures to set up our worship plans for the year... we have a committee for that. And so, you see, having grown up a Unitarian Universalist, something about the specificity of Judaism was really.... well... liberating. Stress-relieving, even.

In any case, I never did take the plunge and convert, as you have probably deduced. One important reason why I didn't convert was that Judaism is really a family-oriented religion – even more family-oriented than many other traditions. Some important rituals and prayers take

¹ The reading was an excerpt from Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay “Yom Kippur” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).

place in temple with a rabbi, but so many important things happen at home with parents leading prayers and rituals. And although the idea of doing rituals and prayers at home appealed to me, I had to concede that it's hard to be Jewish all alone. And so I resigned myself to the reality that unless I happened to marry a nice Jewish girl, it would be pretty pointless to convert. As it turned out, I married a nice Unitarian Universalist girl, a former Catholic, and so my conversion to Judaism just wasn't meant to be. But you know, at the end of the day, it's not a coincidence that I married a Unitarian Universalist – I'm UU through-and-through and there is just no getting away from that.

So here we are. Later today, at sundown, our religiously observant Jewish sisters and brothers will begin their observance of Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. It is the most important Jewish holiday on the calendar, known as the Sabbath of Sabbaths. In addition to the usual Sabbath prohibitions for observant Jews, there will also be a fast that lasts 25 hours. There are other prohibitions; observant Jews are not to work on Yom Kippur. They are not to wash or bathe themselves for comfort. They are not to use oils or creams to anoint themselves. They are not to engage in sexual relations. Finally, they are not to wear leather shoes, which provide the foot much support and comfort on a day when one is to forego bodily pleasure. Observant Jews are, ideally, to spend the day in reflection and prayer, until the closing of the holiday, which will happen at nightfall tomorrow. And all of this, of course, takes place in the context of Judaism – in the context of having just celebrated Rosh Hashanah – and the in the context of the history of the Jewish people.

So I want to point out at the outset that this Jewish observance of Yom Kippur is quite different from our service here today. Today, we are *inspired* by Yom Kippur, and we will, in our Unitarian Universalist way, appreciate some of its traditions and deep meaning. Judaism is, after all, one of the several sources of inspiration for Unitarian Universalism. But it cannot be said that we are “observing” Yom Kippur in the full sense.

Having said that, Yom Kippur is a beautiful holiday, and aside from the shofar and the story of Jonah and the great fish (which is traditionally read during Yom Kippur services)², the deep heart of the day is atonement – at-one-ment – becoming one with God, or with the Divine *not* through communion or yoga (as we talked about the last time I was here), but instead becoming one with the Divine or with all that is holy through the process of asking for and earning forgiveness, and through the process of extending forgiveness.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is a major gift to us from our Jewish heritage. The Hebrew Scriptures include story after story of forgiveness. Yes, Yahweh gets mad at His people quite often. And yes, the God of the Torah sometimes smites wrongdoers. But ultimately, in the bigger picture, Yahweh forgives and forgives, and gives His people chance after chance. Think of the story of Jonah, for instance. Ultimately, as we just heard, Jonah is forgiven for his failure to follow God's commands. The Hebrew Scriptures are also filled with stories of humans forgiving each other. Think of the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis (or, no doubt, some of you remember Joseph better as the one with the *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, as Andrew Lloyd Webber named it in a fit of grooviness). As you might remember, Joseph's jealous brothers trick him, throw him into a pit, and leave him for dead... ultimately leaving him to be sold into slavery, but

² This was the morning's Story for All Ages.

Joseph forgives them even this ultimate betrayal.³ That's serious forgiveness. That's radical forgiveness.

As wikipedia summarizes it nicely, according to the “Jewish tradition, God inscribes each person's fate for the coming year into a ‘book’ on Rosh Hashanah and waits until Yom Kippur to ‘seal’ the verdict.”⁴ Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a period known as the Days of Awe, one must try to ask for forgiveness and repent, or fix their behavior. Yom Kippur is basically the deadline for the year. But the power is very much in human hands. One of the most interesting things about Yom Kippur's formula for forgiveness is that humans have, arguably, almost as much power as God. What do I mean? Well, when it comes to sins against God (like taking the God's name in vain, or worshipping a graven image), God forgives those sins as long as one prays to God and repents. But according to the forgiveness formula of Yom Kippur, sins committed against other humans (like stealing or lying, and so forth) are forgiven by God if *and only if* the wrongdoer asks for forgiveness and receives it from the wronged party. God won't forgive the wrongdoing until the aggrieved person has first forgiven. Because the one who has been done wrong, or the victim, has so much power over the wrongdoer's atonement, there is a sense of duty to forgive. To refuse to forgive after receiving a sincere apology and an attempt at restitution is to be spiteful, perhaps even evil. As the great medieval Jewish rabbi and philosopher Maimonides puts it, “It is forbidden to be obdurate and not allow yourself to be appeased. On the contrary ... one should forgive with a sincere mind and a willing spirit”.⁵

This might sound too hard – not only to forgive, but to forgive with “a willing spirit”. You'd have to be quite righteous to forgive *not* grudgingly but instead with something like enthusiasm. Right? But the more I think about it, the more I believe that in the long run and the big picture, in a karmic sense, forgiving others with gusto and deep empathy is a smart thing to do, not just a righteous and holy thing to do. I think when we are very forgiving with those around us, they, in turn, are forgiving with us. And we all need forgiveness from time to time. Truth be told, I like to think of forgiveness as downright self-serving, if you yourself ever hope to be forgiven.

Forgiveness is self-serving in another way, of course. Namely, when you don't forgive someone who has wronged you, you hurt yourself. When you forgive someone, it's true that you give them a second chance – but it's equally true that you also give yourself a chance to start fresh. Or as Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it, “Forgiveness... is a favor we do [for] ourselves, not a favor we do [to] the other party.”⁶ When you forgive someone, you relieve them of the burden of some of their guilt, but perhaps more importantly, you free yourself from some of the draining power of anger and resentment. You free up energy and space to move on to other, life-giving pursuits.

In this morning's reading, Abraham Joshua Heschel talks about this in somewhat different terms. As Heschel puts it, if you “Scratch the skin of any person and you come upon sorrow, frustration, unhappiness... Everybody looks proud; inside, [s]he is heartbroken.” Heschel goes on: “We are all failures.... We have so much to be contrite about.... To put contrition another way, [we

³ See “The Force of Forgiveness”, in *Covenant and Conversation*, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, chiefrabbi.org. January 7, 2006.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yom_Kippur

⁵ Misnah Torah.

⁶ Harold S. Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2001), p. 79

need to] develop a sense of embarrassment.... We have no answer to ultimate problems. We really don't know. In this not knowing, in this sense of embarrassment, lies the key to opening the wells of creativity."⁷

What does Heschel mean by this, exactly, that our sense of contrition – our sense of humility with perhaps a hint of shame, or what he calls “embarrassment” – is “the key to opening the wells of creativity”? For both the wrongdoer and the victim of wrongdoing, so much life-force gets caught up in guilt on the one hand, and resentment on the other, that it stifles positive pursuits. So much is opened up to us when we move on as the forgiver or the forgiven. It's healing, even liberating.

There are many real life, present-day, dramatic stories of forgiveness. One I came upon recently was the story of Juan Roberto Melendez, an innocent man who spent almost 18 years on Florida's death row for a murder he did not commit. Melendez was from Puerto Rico, and 20 years ago, when he came to Florida, he did not speak English. He found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he was convicted of the murder of a beauty salon owner. Melendez was convicted wrongfully, in part, due to the false testimony of an informer... also, he was convicted wrongfully because the prosecution withheld evidence – in fact, they withheld the taped confession of the man who turned out to be the actual murderer. Now I don't know about you, but serving 18 years on death row for something I didn't do... that would be very hard for me to forgive. But Melendez has done just this. While he was in prison, he learned to speak and read English. Since he has been released, he has gone on the speaking circuit, largely talking about the power of forgiveness. Says Melendez, “One of the most important things I learned was to forgive. I've forgiven the prosecutor, the police, all those who did this to me. When you hate, you just hurt yourself.” And so, Melendez has been freed from prison – but more so, he has freed himself and given himself the gift of a second chance by living a creative and meaningful life, all because he has been able to forgive.⁸

Yom Kippur gives us an opportunity for *Tikkun Olam*, or healing and repairing the world. Our creativity is freed to work toward social justice, and to act from loving-kindness. Yom Kippur is our opportunity to turn from wrongdoing to restitution, from anger to forgiveness and creativity. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg puts it, “... when people turn, they come out stronger....” Yom Kippur is the time “when out of the brokenness we become stronger than when we claimed to be whole.”⁹

In closing, Yom Kippur is the season for turning, and of course autumn is the season for leaves to turn. By the way, do you know why leaves turn from green to orange or yellow or red this time of year? Well, as you might remember from grade school, leaves are green because of a chemical called chlorophyll. When it gets to be autumn, there's not enough sunlight for photosynthesis, and the chlorophyll disappears. When this happens, the colors beneath the chlorophyll come through – the orange, yellow or red has been there in the leaf all along, it has

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Yom Kippur” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*. Susannah Heschel, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), pp. 146-147.

⁸ *Irish Post* column, May 28, 2005. On voicesunitedforjustice.com.

⁹ Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (Touchstone, 1988), p. 210.

just been covered up and hidden. So when the leaves turn, they're not changing colors... their true colors are coming through, in a sense.

Maybe when we turn, our true colors come through, too. Maybe, just maybe, we humans are more beautiful and brilliant and vibrant than it first seems. When our hearts are open, we can be amazingly creative, amazingly kind. Perhaps our deepest, truest self is the one that emerges after we forgive, or after we receive the grace of another's forgiveness. When we let go of perfectionism we free ourselves and open up the door not just to forgiving others, but also to forgiving ourselves for our own mistakes and shortcomings. When we turn, we find the key to getting past our own human failures to find a place where we are greater than our mistakes, where we are far more than our guilt or resentment.

And so, this day, and in the days to come, in the words of this morning's Responsive Reading, let us "forgive ourselves and each other"; let us "begin again in love"¹⁰. May it be so. Blessed be, and amen.

¹⁰ "A Litany of Atonement" by Robert Eller-Isaacs, Responsive Reading number 637 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (JUA, 1993).