

At One

*a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak
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First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, a Unitarian Universalist congregation*

There are three important themes at the core of these Days of Awe: Tefilah (prayer), Teshuvah (repentance), and Tzedakah (responsible giving or charity). In this morning's service we consider all three, and give ourselves the space and time for the wisdom and the beauty of these practices to inspire and encourage us to be who we are called to be... to renew ourselves and realign ourselves with our highest purposes; to remind ourselves of who we might yet be. This is a deeply spiritual, psychologically enriching and personally grounding journey. Some of us come from families who carry on that tradition and this may be our birthright; and others of us have no experience with Judaism at all. Yet even if we are not observant Jews, the requirements of these days of awe stir in our hearts.

The rituals of the Days of Awe days ask us to take into account the entirety of our lives by looking at one year, examining how we have been, where we have sold ourselves or fallen short, or let ourselves down, when we have hurt ourselves. And even more difficult is the need to look back at the way we have hurt friends or loved ones in our life. Recognizing and admitting that we have done this, we then begin the work of healing, or reconciling our relationships... and the work of saying we are sorry, acknowledging we were wrong and asking for forgiveness. If we mean to move on into the new year, to take up a renewed way of living, then we have to find a way to forgive ourselves. Not to punish ourselves, but to release ourselves from guilt and let the burden go, preparing us to take on new responsibilities in the coming year.

Part of the practice of atonement is considering how we might have sinned against God, or broken God's law. This language may not resonate with you, and it may be difficult to find much meaning there. Yet theologically tricky as that is, I suggest it has resonance for all of us - theists, humanists and agnostics and even dyed-in-the-wool atheists. All we need do is substitute "principles and values" for God. As Unitarian Universalist minister Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray notes

"Perhaps this type of sin is when we fall victim to envy, forgetting the many blessings we have. Perhaps it is when we lose our sense of gratitude, or reverence for life. Perhaps it is a failure to have concern for those outside our small circle, a failure to see the stranger, the one who is hungry..."

We Unitarian Universalists don't have "atonement" built into our tradition. There is no official list of "sins" that we must check ourselves against and confess. We clergy are not endowed

with the power to absolve you of your transgressions. Nor can we effectively intercede with some deity that we may or may not have offended. No, we come from a different place - a Unitarian tradition that holds human beings "too good to be damned by God" and a Universalist heritage that tells us "God is too good to damn us". Yet we need to look within and turn to one another to forgive and be forgiven. We are human - we err; make mistakes... we hurt others, intentionally or not. We mess up and we cause trouble... "sin" is part of our lives.

The Hebrew word "het" is translated into English as "sin," but has its origins in archery, referring to "missing the mark". Maybe it sounds too "light" to think of just missing the mark, of an arrow going astray. But it isn't, because in this we are expected to know what that "mark" is, to be grounded in our selves and know our intentions and act out of our deepest values. For the devout, the "mark" is what your god and your tradition expects of you. These sins are actions between people, acts of omission or commission.

Atoning for one's mistakes and the wrongs we have done is not just about suffering, about "feeling bad"... and it's not just about the seriously awkward and embarrassing act of asking forgiveness from another, although that is something we must do. I want to acknowledge here the limits of this tesuvah. It may be that for some relationships reconciliation is not possible, or this may not yet be the time. But even simply admitting this into our hearts is an important step. And perhaps death has robbed us of the opportunity to do this work, and that can be a source of pain and even despair.

Yet all this is part of the healing possible at Yom Kippur. In acknowledging this pain and forgiving ourselves what we can - seeing what is possible - and to then lay our burdens down in the spirit of mercy and compassion. None of this can happen in just one cycle of seasons, or on just one Sunday. It may take many years, involve other rituals of healing and letting go, to find that healing and wholeness we seek, for the most difficult and challenging places of hurt to be healed. We are lucky that this time of reflection, atonement and beginning again comes around over and over, year after year, generation after generation.

Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield advises that "Forgiveness is a letting go of past suffering and betrayal, a release of the burden of pain and hate that we carry." When we are wronged, or hurt, or struck by tragedy, forgiveness may not be the first response that comes to us. Anger comes much easier. So does resentment and blame. Sometimes these are rather cathartic and very satisfying. Indeed, without these no good novel or short story or play would be credible.

Revenge fantasies seemed to be ingrained in us - what is war and organized aggression than a play for power , some kind of response to a real or perceived threat. But the enactment of any

such revenge, the harboring of any such resentment and the giving in to anger - or even just holding tight to those resentments and thoughts of revenge - masks what the heart truly needs. They say that **holding on to anger and resentment is like swallowing poison and expecting the other person to die.**

In truth, we human beings do this all the time... and if my own experience is any measure, it is often about a lot of really little things. Holding on to anger and resentments hold us in prison; it warps our souls and hardens hearts that are meant to be open and loving. (And I'm not talking about righteous anger - that emotional signal that may warn of injustice. No, this is that seething, simmering anger that brings bitterness and isolation...) But if we're going to practice forgiveness, these feelings of anger and resentment that we might harbor need to end. Not they will disappear - but that we will not give into or cling to them. Kornfield says:

“Forgiveness honors the heart’s greatest dignity. Whenever we are lost, it brings us back to the ground of love. With forgiveness we become unwilling to attack or wish harm to another. Whenever we forgive, in small ways at home, or in great ways between nations, we free ourselves from the past.”

This is hard stuff and perhaps that is why the ancients set such a time aside. Realizing that forgiveness may not come readily or easily to human beings, there are days reserved for the contemplation of where we've been and where we might want to be headed. What a gift these days are... how helpful to those of us who wish to move on, to learn from our mistakes, to create bonds with others based not only on their perfection and our comfort or ease, *but on our mutual imperfection*, each possessing the opportunity to do good and to cause harm.

Forgiveness does not condone sin or unkind actions. It does not absolve either party of all feelings. It is not about justice of the “eye for an eye” sort. Forgiveness does not mean we forget, but that we not clutch at resentments and let them color every moment of our lives. Forgiveness is a feeling of peace that can emerge here, in your heart, when you take responsibility for your own feelings, when slights and hurts are not seen as judgments of your own personal worth and dignity. And when very real hurts and threats occur, that our own worth and dignity protects us. We do not stand and demand an apology, but open our hearts to allow the possibility of forgiveness, even when it is not apparently forthcoming.

When we forgive, we make room in our hearts for more positive feelings to flow. It is hard to love, impossible almost to care about others when the past - whether actions we have committed or actions done against us - remain unforgiven, unprocessed. *Forgiveness does not change the past... but it changes you, right here, in the present.* Let go of the desire for revenge, retribution. Set aside the fear of punishment or the humiliation of our own failings.

Forgiveness - of self, of others, is hard stuff. It is that turning that asks the difficult questions, that invites us into moments of embarrassment or even disgrace. But in the turning allows for the possibility of change, of goodness of happiness. It takes strength to move on.

Forgiveness takes strength. That is why we do this in community.

“The wisdom of Yom Kippur and the practice of tesuvah, is really about strengthening community. It provides a mechanism to keep a community strong, to bring neighbors together, and to call us to see our lives in relationship to the wider community... a turning from isolation toward that wholeness.” (SFG)

The possibility of healing becomes real in community... pain from scars we have carried for years becomes lessened. When we can, on our own with the help of others, we find the courage to “lay our guilt, our grudges down, and be free of them.” Together we create a wholeness that no one person can accomplish alone. We atone and become at one - working to reconcile past hurts and renewing relationships. Here there is the safe haven for exploration. This religious community can offer us encouragement, hope, and the possibility of atonement.

In *The Forgiving Self: the Road from Resentment to Connection*, Robert Karen notes:

“The need to be forgiven is a profound factor in our lives... we are touched by forgivingness and haunted by its lack in a myriad of small and often unnoticed ways. Forgiveness is an aspect of the workings of love. It can be a bridge back from hatred and alienation as well as a liberation from the two kinds of hell: bitterness and victimhood on one side; guilt, shame and self-recrimination on the other.

The need to forgive - which may grow out of understanding, gratitude, sympathy, regret over the hurt has caused, or simply a wish to unite - may be as strong as the need to be forgiven, even if it comes upon us more subtly.”

Here we are offered this moment to reflect upon our imperfections and to seek forgiveness . It is nothing less than a chance to remake ourselves. T’shuvah, is not concerned with listing our transgressions. the Hebrew verb literally means "a turning" - returning, again and again, to the home of our souls. If we turn to those we have wronged, we can be forgiven. If we return to our selves, look within and acknowledge our missteps, we can forgive ourselves.

We can turn, and exchange the thoughtless habits and unrealized expectations that pave that road to sorrow for a life of righteous action and good deeds; of commitment, compassion and love. *This is a choice only we can make; no one can do it for us. It is an act of will, free will.* And in choosing the path of t’shuvah, we act freely, and consciously, in accordance with our ultimate, sacred purpose in the world. And this is what it means to be “at one”. to find in forgiving and being forgiven when the heart is released, we are reminded of our own goodness. When we open our heart to see the goodness of others, we are at one.

This - this moment, now; this hour here this day - is the starting place, the only one there is. And for us, this is tefillah - prayer. Prayer does not have to be a set of words written down centuries ago. It does not need to be words at all. Prayer can be whispering the deepest hopes and fears. And it can be standing side-by-side in support and care with one another.

Thus we come together here in prayer, each in his or her own way. It is community that we know we are lovable, forgivable. It is in the embrace of this community that you sense your own power and your own powerlessness. It in this space, amongst these people, that we can ask our questions, let the minor disturbances and seismic quakes that unsettle our spirits be felt and be understood.