

Forgiveness, the Task of Yom Kippur

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We are here today at the convergence of so much. At the beginning of autumn and our new church year, Muslims are celebrating Ramadan. And, Judaism is honoring the Days of Awe, the most holy time of their yearly cycle. It is a time of taking stock, of opening up and looking deeply, at all of our errors as well as all of our blessings.

I so appreciate these times of reflection.

We don't have an official Unitarian Universalist ritual year. As we gave up creeds and reliance on one holy book, it seemed inevitable that we would give up such patterns. But much was lost as we broke from the parts of organized religion that were rigid and stifling. I believe that many of us hunger for those predictable periods of reflection and then the cleansing and celebration that we could count on.

Human longing for ritual is deep and enduring, and yet in our culture it is often at odds with our bias toward intellectual knowing. If we lose ritual, we lose our sense of place. Without rituals to mark our arrival and our departure and our great transitions, we are adrift in the sea of life. We need an axis if we are not going to be submerged by all the currents that carry us along. People everywhere and in every age have engaged in the making of rituals, rituals which are as varied as our entire human experience.

We live in a post-enlightenment age. Collectively, we don't believe in miracles or phenomena that we can't duplicate. We have let our special love of science depress our belief in anything

that can't be measured. Yet we know -- we know -- that there is so much that is real and cannot be calculated. As we acknowledge that it takes more than science and facts to create a full and happy life, we are collectively learning that rituals -- of arrival and changing, of growing up and suffering losses -- shape us and support us and matter to us, more than we have allowed ourselves as a denomination to acknowledge.

I've noticed that my body remembers cycles, even if my head is off doing other things; my body reacts when I don't take time and honor life and the spiral of change it brings. I may finally notice that I am particularly out of sorts, and have been for several days, and then realize that the anniversary of a death is coming up. How is it that my body remembers when my mind is too busy?

We all do have our rituals, even if we call them habits. Things that anchor life, things we need to do to soothe ourselves. That cup of coffee in an early morning kitchen before the kids wake up. Pulling a few weeds from the flowerpots on our way out in the morning, as a small gesture of caring for life and home, on our way out to the larger world. Noticing birthdays, marking growth on a doorjamb, marking endings. When we get busy, we may neglect the effort. We may get on with life, but it does cost us. Over time, we may lose a bit of *joie de vivre*, and hardly notice that things are a bit dampened. When we do take time to catch up with our hearts' needs, fresh air comes back into our very bodies. I can't explain how it works. It is not something that lives in the rational. But it is real.

How many youth would have a greater sense of themselves and their place in society if we still had elders and quests and celebrations at the end of an ordeal? I remember my daughters' elation at their Bas Miztvahs. Don't those rites of passage let us know that our lives matter to the whole community?

It is our intention here to make use of all of our faculties as we strengthen ourselves for the work of healing this world.

Living with mistakes is a hard business. I know people who are so afraid of being ashamed that they can't look at their own mistakes, so they stay rigid and defended. They have lost some of their ability to be self-reflective and related to others. If we can acknowledge our

“failures to be” and reach another stage of self-forgiveness in our heart, energy comes back to us and new possibilities open up before us.

All the world's religions have some process for dealing with this. Every spiritual tradition has some kind of blessing to help us leave our mistakes behind. All religions recognize that dragging our failures around with us cuts us off from love and creativity. It is life-killing. It is evil. All spiritual systems offer the promise of atonement and redemption. However we interpret those words, whatever level of meaning or mysticism, we need to know that when we fail, we are not going to be thrown away.

In fact, I came to see while I was working in prison that it is out of my wounds and failures and broken, lowly, emptiness (as Rumi describes being human) that I am able to work intimately with others. Carl Jung said that only the wounded can heal. It is clearer to me now that it is out of our failures that compassion grows. If we can allow ourselves to see our mistakes, we are surely less quick to judge others.

Yom Kippur is about taking stock, looking inside, admitting our humanness, seeking forgiveness and starting fresh.

For sins or failures against each other, we are asked to make amends directly to one another. We must try to clean up all those messy things and harbored hurts if we can. Frankly. With each other. If you have a person in your life and there is a ragged edge between you, make a call when you get home. Send a card. Do something to offer a bit of healing.

Think for a moment . . . Who are you angry with? Who are you avoiding? Who hurt your feelings and shut you down? Are you brave enough to have a little one-on-one? Do you have the courage to clean it up?

I'll bet you know someone you have disappointed. Someone you were less than generous with. What would it mean if you made amends? What might blossom if you reach out?

Despite all of the practice we've had over a lifetime of telling each other we are sorry for all the intentional and unintentional hurts and harms we do to one another, starting these conversations is hard.

We think: maybe it is too small to matter, almost forgotten by now and we'll feel stupid.

Maybe they will use it as an excuse to make us feel small and inferior, and then gossip with other friends.

Maybe they will assume more power at our expense; maybe they will want to use it against us in a future interchange . . . Who knows? But if we don't make our effort, our lives may gradually grow gnarled and bent and our hearts may stay defended. Forgiveness, letting go of past hurts, is actually a gift we give to ourselves.

Please take a moment and think of your "someone."

What is unfinished? Can you seek them out? Call? Take flowers? Make a donation on their behalf? Maybe send a card of appreciation for something good, without mentioning something that you know is petty but your heart can't let go of?

What needs to be cleaned up? How would a truly mature and loving person be in this? Can you imitate that until it feels more like you?

I think we all have at least one "someone." I hope that you will take this healing work to heart and make effort.

As hard as it is to forgive someone else, there is something even harder, and that is to forgive our own mistakes. It is the hardest work to let go of our own failures. You know what I mean. You probably even feel guilty thinking about forgiving yourself and letting go of these things for which you feel shame. You may feel that you need to suffer more. We are children of the Puritans, after all.

Let your greatest failure fill you now. You have probably thought about this thing over and over, and told yourself over and over that you can't change the past and you didn't intend to

harm and you are really, really sorry, . . . but there it is. Still the shame is there. The twist in the gut is still there.

Now I tell you that no matter what you did or failed to do, you are not only that thing. You are not those mistakes. Who you are includes an unlimited capacity for goodness and creativity and love. That is also part of who you are.

Beyond an acknowledgement of wrongdoing and an honest attempt to make things right, guilt does not serve the world. Let go and make room for new life. Make room to receive new blessings. Let go and be able to be in deeper relationship with others.

Many people live tragic lives because they never make room for such forgiveness.

We may not get there all at once, but we can begin with this ritual. Your failures may not simply vanish, but gradually, over time, you may be able to touch that tender place and feel compassion for yourself.

I realized recently that my greatest failure is less powerful now than it used to be. It feels like a miracle. Years of working on it and doing ritual and sharing my heart with compassionate others, . . . and it is better. Not erased, but better. Healing happens.

We have all had lapses in our attentiveness. Sometimes we get away with our moments of carelessness. Sometimes, something beyond price is lost and we have to make a life around that bereavement, no matter how looming it is.

If you don't work to forgive yourself, if you stay stuck, there is something selfish in it. You are depriving the world of your gifts, your creativity, your laughter. It is almost always from our own self-judgment that we stay critical of others. You owe it to those you love -- and the world -- to let go. Your life has other obligations. You are called to do healing work.

Therefore, from the wisdom of Judaism, this ritual called Tashlich.

It has been enlivened in the last decade and is becoming more and more popular within Jewish communities. Bits of bread representing our failures are cast onto moving water. The water purifies and carries away.

I invite us now into a moment of silence. Think about your failure. Is it a breach with someone no longer living? Is it about causing the loss of something precious beyond measure? Was it a breach of your own ethic, such that there is now a shadow over your life? Can you look? Do you have the courage to let yourself be with that failure without shutting down, if only for a few minutes?

The thing in your life that makes you ashamed: do you think it is worse than what all the others here are holding? Do you think that if we knew what you have done, or failed to do, you would be outcast? Do you think your failure is unforgivable?

It is not. It is not.

It is part of your humanness. It is what binds us in community. It is out of your failure that we can be related, because it is out of your failure that you can understand me, that you can feel my pain and minister to me in my times of hopelessness. Only the wounded can bring such healing.

Challah will now be passed out. This is the new year's loaf, round like the cycle of the seasons, flavored with bits of sweetness, just like life. Take a piece. It represents your failure to be your best self. When you are ready, come forward and put your bit of the bread into the bowl of water and know that you are part of this community and that you are loved and that you matter here in the fullness of who you are, with everything you have ever done and forgotten to do.

All of our visitors are welcome to participate. We suspect that you, too, have made mistakes and share this hope for restoration. We invite you to join in with us.

Come forward up the side aisles and put your piece of bread into either of the bowls and let go of your harsh judgment of yourself. Whoever you are, whatever you have done; here, in this moment, you are loved and accepted.

You are valued. You are forgiven.

After the service, I will take the bowls and their contents to a place of moving water and pour them in.

Stand with your letting go for a brief moment. A chant will be sung softly in the background.

After you have paused and let go of your bread, I invite you to take a piece of apple and dip it in honey and eat. Forgiveness is always sweet.

(Music and Ritual)

May we all begin our New Year with a sense of worthiness and belonging.

L'shanah Tova Tika Tenu. May you be inscribed in the book of life for a sweet year.