

## On Turning: A Reflection on the High Holy Days

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We are in the midst of the Days of Awe, the time in the Jewish liturgical calendar book-ended by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, marks the day when the scrolls of fate roll open before God. On the scrolls Yahweh finds every life as it has been written by each individual – choices made, words said and unsaid, deeds done and undone. The rabbis tell us that God reads every entry and passes judgment. But Yahweh is both judgmental and merciful. Thus the gift of the Days of Awe: has ten days in which to search hearts and lives, repent, do good deeds, and learn from mistakes. The end of this grace period is Yom Kippur. On that day, the scrolls roll shut again for another year, destiny sealed.

As a child I celebrated the Jewish holidays with my father's family and what I remember best is the food. Apple slices dipped in honey, lekach, a dense honey cake, and donuts glazed with honey. Sweetness and joy and anticipation. But not always. Think back to 2011. That fall, Rosh Hashanah fell just after the terrorist attack of September 11th. I read about a Jewish congregation struggling to celebrate the New Year. Struggling because sweetness and joy felt out of reach. One member commented that their prayer, in that terrible time, was only for safety, not sweetness. How heartbreaking. The saddest and scariest times are the times when it is most important to pray for sweetness and gladness.

That's why a liturgical calendar matters. Rosh Hashanah comes every year, no matter what has happened in the world, requiring us to pray for sweetness no matter how bitter the taste in our mouths may be.

The regular coming of the Days of Awe (and Ramadan in the Muslim calendar and Lent in the Christian calendar) also remind us of the importance of a regular practice of self-examination and atonement. The discipline of repentance, which is so important to our emotional and spiritual well-being, is particularly difficult for folks like us. Let's face it, we can be a little arrogant about ourselves. We Unitarian Universalists, children of the enlightenment, dedicated to the use of reason in religion, tend to think we are smarter and more evolved than other people. We tend to think we don't need to repent like those other people. Not so much! Even we need a nudge towards repentance and atonement. So we borrow from our Jewish cousins each fall. But if we are going to borrow, let's do it right. Let's not focus on exclusively on individual atonement – at one ment as we are fond of pointing out.

Here's a description of how Jews understand the High Holy Days. "We pause in reverence before the gift of self; the vessel shatters, the divine spark shines through. And our solitary self becomes a link in Israel's golden chain. For what we are, we are by sharing. And as we share we move toward the light." That is a powerful expression of the movement from the individual to the communal. That is what Lynn Ungar talked about in our reading. The Days of Awe begin with each person tending to their own brokenness and repentance, but they culminate in a shared act of confession.

The novelist Herman Wouk, who was a practicing orthodox Jew, wrote about that sense of the communal in relation to Yom Kippur. "There is no machinery in Judaism for confession to a human being or for release from sin through an agency on earth. Confession in Judaism is a whisper of the entire congregation at once. It is confession in formal unison, no outpouring of one's own misdeeds . . . The wording throughout is plural: we . . . us . . .

our . . . Such usage in a piece of liturgy at the heart of a holy day cannot be an accident of rhetoric. It means something.”

It means that religious and spiritual meaning is found in right relationship as a people. It is embedded in Judaism. And it is embedded in our faith as well. Look at our Seven Principles, the ethical dimensions of our UU faith. First we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Then we move to affirmations of the ways we will be in community: justice, equity, compassion, acceptance, encouragement, the use of the democratic process. Then we cast our eyes outward to a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Finally, we recognize our connectedness to all of life. If I were given the task of updating those Seven Principles, I would reverse the order. I would put the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle - respect for the interdependent web of all existence – I would put that first. I would give primary attention to our human relationships, our need for each other, and our relationship to nature.

The Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures did not address themselves to men and women one by one, offering personal salvation. They addressed themselves to the entire nation of Israel, insisting that the Israelites had to reform together, to remember what made them a people. Prophets reminded their fellow citizens that when they were frightened of powerful enemies they could not depend on military might or wealth for safety. Only by keeping covenant with each other and their creator would they be safe. When those ancient people longed for an end to war their prophets told them that peace could not be found in political maneuvering or military might. Peace comes, they said, in the act of creating a just and compassionate society. Shalom is not the result of the recitation of prayers or the repetition

of rituals; it comes in living together by the terms of the covenant defined by the teachings of the Torah.

So often those ancient Israelites strayed from the foundations of their faith, the principles upon which the ancient nation of Israel had been founded. So often the ancient Israelites were tempted by the riches and glories of the world – more powerful weapons, bigger armies, and taller buildings, gold and silver. Sound familiar?

So often the ancient Israelites learned anew the hard lesson that when they turned from their covenant with Yahweh, grief befell them. They would ask, in despair, what God could possibly want with them. “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” And the answer, in the words of the prophet Micah, is so clear and simple. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8)

The message is powerful but simple: remember the covenant that bestows your identity, remember the principles upon which your community was established. Let your lives be the embodiment of those principles. We UU’S share with Judaism an understanding of salvation as something that happens in the here and now; deeds not creeds. What we don’t have is a liturgical calendar that regularly calls us to account for our deeds. That’s why we need to borrow theirs. I hope they won’t mind.

My friends, now is the time for turning. The scroll of fate has rolled open here at the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington and you have an

opportunity to acknowledge what has not worked, to heal hurts, to let go of resentments, and to make things new. The good news is you get more than ten days; you can take as much time as you need, within reason. And the really good news is that I'm not Yahweh! I am merely a guide, a companion for a while on your journey towards healthy and vibrant community.

In that role I ask you to reflect on the way you have lived your life in faith together. For some of you that will mean thinking back over many decades. For some it may mean thinking back to when you walked in the door this morning. No matter how long you have been here you are now a part of the journey of turning.

Maybe you have been hurt or disappointed or angry or afraid or confused. Maybe you have been disillusioned and are finding it hard to trust again. Some of you are carrying grudges, nursing resentments, reining in your passion and compassion. Some of you may be hanging back, wondering if this is a safe place to be fully present. The process of ministerial transition is always hard. It is always, to some extent, a grieving process. Some of you are still grieving the departure of Bob Doss more than two decades ago. Some of you miss Patrick, some Michelle, and some Josh. You have gone through a lot of ministerial transitions recently. (And I won't even try to name all the interim ministers!)

I want you to be able to grieve those losses in order to be present to the all that is happening today and will be happening tomorrow. Be present to the present because the goal of this developmental ministry is to move you forward, not backward. The goal is to arrive at a new place of shared understanding, a new identity that reflects the growing and changing that characterizes healthy human communities. And eventually new ministerial relationships.

The movement towards a new reality is the movement of the faithful during the Days of Awe: honest self-assessment, atonement, forgiveness, shared remembering of who we are called to be as a people.

Now is the time for turning. If you have been hurt or angered by past events, it is time to speak that anger honestly and listen respectfully to those with differing views. If you are hanging back, I encourage you to re-engage. If you have said or done things that caused harm, it is time to acknowledge and repair the damage where possible, and get back to the business of building and sustaining a healthy liberal religious community.

Now is the time for turning - towards the full engagement of mind and heart, towards the responsible exercise of membership, towards the embrace of innovation, evolution, transformation. For as Jack Reimer reminds us, if you fail to turn, you will be forever trapped in yesterday's ways. And I know that you do not want to belong to the Old and Tired Unitarian Church of Yesterday, forever trying and failing to create the good old days that never really were.

I close with an adaptation of the final lines from another prayer for the Days of Awe. "We pause in terror before the human deed: the cloud of annihilation, the concentrations for death, the cruelly casual way of each to each. But in the stillness of this hour we find our way from darkness into light. May we find our life so precious that we cannot but share it with the other, that light may shine brighter than a thousand suns, with the presence among us of the (Spirit of Life). Amen"