

LOOKING BACK; LOOKING AHEAD

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Sept. 28, 2008

I have had little real personal experience with Judaism over my lifetime, except through my relationships with Jewish friends, both secular and observant Jews. And it wasn't until I was a young adult, that I read James Michener's book "The Source" and was suddenly captured by this epic story of a people whose journey had been fraught with fear and persecution---and courage and survival.

I was so gripped by their journey that I read the book at least five times and even wished, on occasion, to have been born a Jew. Oh, to be part of such a tradition, I thought, so committed to service to God, so noble and true to their faith, even under the direst of threats.

Of course, to be honest, I didn't think I could possibly endure what they had endured, or observe the kinds of strictures they were willing to observe, or undergo the kinds of persecution they had experienced. I think what I desired for myself was that kind of dedication to a religious faith, a dedication that survived regardless of the terrible vulnerability it brought.

Judy Kaplan has told us a bit about her understandings of this time of the Jewish year, from Rosh Hashanah or Jewish New Year through the Days of Awe to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

And Judy Magidson has offered us her music, out of her Jewish heritage. I'm grateful to both of them and to Angela and Linda for their help with this service recognizing the lessons to be learned from one of UUism's major Sources: Jewish teachings.

I hope to be able to expand upon that theme, and tell you what I see that is significant to UUism in the observance of the High Holy Days of this time of year.

Rosh Hashanah, or the most important of the several new year occasions celebrated by the Jews, is a time for looking back over the past calendar year, examining it, planning changes for the new year, and, most importantly, recognizing the mistakes made and setting out to make amends and to be reconciled to those harmed by those mistakes, particularly seeking forgiveness from God for disobedience to God's laws.

Rituals are observed during Rosh Hashanah to cast off those sins or mistakes, to acknowledge the damage done, and to commit oneself to making the new year better.

It's interesting to me that many people I know do not feel the need to think about mistakes made and to make amends for those mistakes. It's not a theme you're going to hear about at the Rotary, for example, or the Elks or Kiwanis. It's almost entirely the bailiwick of religious communities, to call each other to self-examination, repentance, and reconciliation.

It's also a major spiritual theme in 12 step programs where admitting shortcomings and making amends is an essential step toward healing of oneself and one's relationships.

In our secular culture, we often spend time around the first of January looking back at our year, noting our successes and our failures, and making resolutions about the coming twelve months.

In September, we look back over the past school year, perhaps, and exhort our children or ourselves to do better or keep up the good work or stay out of trouble or whatever is appropriate.

In July, at least in this congregation, we begin a new fiscal year and adjust our spending to match our income, in a way acknowledging the accuracy or inaccuracy of the previous year and making corrections as necessary.

But we rarely consider sin very seriously. We don't like the word, we resent the guilty feelings it implies, and we consign it to the dungheap of religious words we don't want to use. I have seldom heard the word "sin" used in our UU congregations. We are really schitzzy about certain religious words and "sin" is a biggie.

But it's a real concept, nevertheless, and one we acknowledge, because we all do things that are wrong, sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally, sometimes by omission. I think the word "sin" has such an accusatory and self-righteous flavor that we reject it for its tone, as much as for its meaning.

The word in Greek actually means "missing the mark", according to my studies, which is not a very accusatory or self-righteous definition. But to be accused or to accuse oneself of being a sinner does have that connotation, especially when it is accompanied by pious finger-pointing or self-righteous breast-beating.

Our rejection of the word doesn't change the fact that we make mistakes and we know we do. We are well aware of our shortcomings but it often doesn't occur to us that we would be happier if we reached out to those we've hurt and asked for reconciliation.

This isn't always possible, of course, and even in 12-step programs, the admonition is there to make amends except when to do so would injure people further.

Rosh Hashanah calls Jews to consider their shortcomings, their sins, their mistakes, and to reflect about what steps might be taken to achieve reconciliation with those who have been harmed.

All of us could doubtless spend fruitful time thinking about our relationships----with ourselves, with others, and with the universe, or God---and reflecting on what steps we might take to achieve reconciliation.

Now, it might seem backwards to consider our relationship with self, as though unselfishness demands that we always consider others' needs before our own. Yet the ancient commandment states "you must love your neighbor as yourself", implying that caring for self precedes caring for others, in the way that the airline attendant requests that we put on our own oxygen mask before trying to help others.

In what ways might we be out of step with ourselves? How might we have hurt ourselves? Do we love ourselves? Can we extend love to others if we cannot love ourselves? These questions require serious introspection and struggle with the ways we might not be caring adequately for ourselves.

The papers, TV, and the internet are full of the many ways we can harm ourselves---through poor eating habits, lack of exercise, the wrong medicines, with guns, with poor financial management, wrong political beliefs, you name it. No matter what we do, we can hurt ourselves!

I get pretty tired of all the advice and I think it actually misses the point. No matter how good our food choices are, no matter how often we go for a walk, no matter what medicine we take, no matter whether we use guns or credit cards, or who we vote for, there is a deeper issue: do we care for ourselves? do we love ourselves? can we forgive ourselves for being ourselves?

Recently I had a chance to work with a spiritual director, a person trained to explore spiritual issues with another, and we talked about a relationship I was trying to understand better and feeling frustrated by. The spiritual director, Rabbi Zari Weiss, steered the conversation toward the source of my frustration----not the relationship itself but my own inner response to it. She asked me "do you have compassion for yourself, who you are and how your life has shaped you?"

I admit I was dumbstruck. I can have all kinds of compassion for others who have had a rough road to travel but I find it difficult to have compassion for myself, for the events in my life which have shaped me. And consequently I tend to fret a lot over things I feel challenged by.

I can spend long blocks of time rehearsing imaginary conversations with people about matters which somehow sting me. At the time, I see it as somebody else's behavior that is problematic. But when I am honest with myself, I see it as my own behavior which springs from a hurt place within me.

This doesn't mean we should just chill out, go easy on ourselves, quit fretting. It doesn't mean self-pity. It doesn't mean letting ourselves off the hook. It means self-understanding and acknowledging who we are and how we came to be ourselves today. And it means loving ourselves enough to make loving choices for ourselves, however that might play out in real life.

Because when we can love ourselves, forgive ourselves, we have the insight to see how we may have hurt others.

Our relationships with others are as important as our relationships with ourselves. Our relationships with those around us affect our daily lives and are largely responsible for how happy we are. If we are in conflict with others, our happiness and our spiritual lives are endangered. It is worth looking at our conflicted relationships and finding a pathway, if possible, to reconciliation.

As I mentioned earlier, not all relationships which go awry can be redeemed, of course. Sometimes the hurt is too deep. Sometimes the potential for future hurt is too great. And always, for complete reconciliation, there must be an acknowledgement of responsibility for the hurt, in order for reconciliation to proceed. And this isn't always possible, for many reasons.

Sometimes the person with whom we are in conflict is dead. Sometimes the mental state of the person makes it hard to communicate. Sometimes we have to let go of the relationship without reconciling it because of things we can't control. But we can strive for understanding of the other even without their cooperation.

What we can't do, morally and ethically, is ignore the situation. We need to take stock of it and make the best decision we can about whether it is possible to pursue reconciliation. We must do this with honesty and with a willingness to take responsibility for however we may have caused harm.

I don't know about you but I am offended by the hollow apologies offered on occasion by public figures who have caused harm and want to be let off the hook. Sincere contrition is essential, not trite apologies that do not promise a change of heart or direction.

The ten days which follow Rosh Hashanah, beginning tomorrow night, in the Jewish tradition are known as the Days of Awe and are to be spent in contemplation of the past year, planning for reconciliation with other humans, and serious introspection leading to repentance and reconciliation with God.

How can we take inspiration from the Jewish practice of finding reconciliation with God? Most of us, though not all, have a fairly non-traditional interpretation of God; some of us are atheist and do not consider the idea of God to be useful.

But most of us can see that there is power beyond human power, there are forces at work in the universe which we cannot control and must learn to live with, to adjust to, to work with if we are to survive and thrive. Early peoples called it God or the Gods and most still do. Many of us here call it Nature or Natural Law.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, this year on October 9, is the most important day of the Jewish year. It is a day of atonement for sins against God. Prayer for forgiveness is the order of the day, with fasting and other restrictions designed to make oneself uncomfortable and mindful of the essential relationship between humankind and the power called God.

What parallel might there be for us? How might we be out of sync with the Power Beyond Human Power, whatever we might call it? What can we do to restore the balance between ourselves and this Power? How does this imbalance manifest itself?

When we are affected by the wild weather patterns of climate change, when we have slurped up so many of the natural resources of this planet that prices skyrocket and living conditions decline, when nations are at war over those resources and the conflict is aggravated by religious differences----we are out of right relationship with the power beyond human power. We are in conflict with the spirit of life. We are using anger, rather than love, to get what we need.

Many of the teachings of Judaism express universal truths and those truths are most evident at this time of year, when reflection, repentance, and reconciliation, three of the building blocks of healthy human life, are emphasized and observed. Unitarian Universalism is indebted to the sages and prophets of Jewish history and understandings for this wisdom which offers so much to our own religious experience.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN: 219, "O HEAR MY PEOPLE"

ANNOUNCEMENTS

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our health and happiness as individuals and as a community is deeply affected by the kinds of relationships we have, to ourselves, to each other, and to the world beyond these doors. May we spend time in reflection; may we find repentance within ourselves for our errors, and may we seek reconciliation where we find it lacking. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.