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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Days of Awe

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
September 20, 1998

Call To Worship

Baruch at Adonai elohenu melech ha-olam asher did;shanu b'mitzvotav
vitzivanm l'hadlik ner shel yomtov...Baruch atah Adonai eluhenu
melech ha-olam sheh-hechianu v'ki-imanu v'higianu lazman hazeh.

Blessed be You Lord Our God, Ruler of all space-time, who made us
holy by your commandments and commanded us to light a candle for
the holy day. Blessed by You, Lord Our God, Ruler of all space-time,
who has given us life, has lifted us up, and has brought us to this
season.

Sermon

Today is September 20, 1998. This date is -- for this year -- the first
day of the Jewish month of Tishri, the seventh and richest month in the
Jewish calendar. If you were a practicing Jew of some seriousness, you
would have spent the past month, Elul, in study and prayer, preparing
for this time.

If you were a Jew of almost any kind, you would be planning to go to
the Rosh Hashanah service tonight, dressed festively, understanding

this day to be the spiritual beginning of the Jewish year. (The physical beginning, the first month, happens in the spring, around Passover.) There are High-Holy-Day Jews, just as there are Easter-and-Christmas Christians: the marginally faithful, who do not attend worship any other time of the year, but who understand the sacredness of these special days. At Ahavath Beth Israel, our local synagogue, admission is by ticket only, and you must be a dues-paying member to receive a ticket. (My husband Bob and I are members, because he is Jewish, and we got a reminder call because we haven't turned in our pledge card for the year.)

On this night, the eerie, untuned *shofar* -- ram's horn -- is blown. On this night, God opens three books and inscribes every human name in one of them. The thoroughly righteous, those acting always out of lovingkindness, in right relationship with God, are written in the Book of Life; the thoroughly wicked, who practice injustice and hatred, who have turned away from God, are written in the Book of Death; all those in between are written in the middle book . For a week.

But, because God is a God of mercy and well as justice, we who were deemed wicked or questionable have a chance to be transferred to the Book of Life and sealed there for the upcoming year. We look toward Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, seven days hence, knowing that we have the intervening days -- the Days of Awe -- in which we can practice *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is related to repentance, but is deeper and broader than that. It means "return," return to our original state of oneness with God. It means "turning about/turning to," genuinely turning our backs upon our transgressions and misdeeds, turning back to the righteousness and lovingkindness that are the hallmarks of right relationship with God. It means "response," response to God's call to right living and also God's just and merciful response to us. (Steinsaltz, 126) *Teshuvah* involves much searching of the soul.

The observant Jew will attend a solemn and joyous Rosh Hashana morning service -- tomorrow, in this year -- where the congregation will cry out: "Our Parent, Our King, reach out to us with grace even

though we have not done enough to deserve grace; act toward us with gentle righteousness and with loving-kindness -- so as to save us."
(Waskow, 12)

But in the Jewish faith, salvation is by no means God's responsibility alone. On the contrary, most of the burden rests upon our human shoulders, for the Lord expects us to take responsibility for what we do. God forgives transgressions against God, but human failures must be repented of, and atoned for, by us in our own world, our own communities. The children's story this morning is an example of the process: if we eat someone else's pudding, we must feel remorse, yes, and we must also make more pudding.

And so the observant Jew spends the Days of Awe, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in deep, solemn, joyous soul searching and rebuilding right relationships. Our local rabbi, Dan Fink, speaks of introspection, to re-create and transform ourselves. (Fink) Awe means "dread" and "wonder." There is dread at the power of the infinite, the Almighty, who judges us by the highest standards of justice, who requires us to seek out those we have wronged in the past year and make amends. There is wonder at knowing that our deepest and highest self, toward which we strive, reflects the perfection of that which we hold Most High. And there is wonder at knowing that God extends mercy as well as justice, for we are all fallible and need mercy.

At the end of the Days of Awe, the Jewish congregation will observe Yom Kippur, that most happy, solemn and holy of days. For twenty-four hours, they will refrain from eating or drinking, from wearing leather, from washing, and from sexual intercourse. They will attend five services, the final of which is *Neilah*

I am very moved by the Jewish annual observance of these High Holy Days, by the practice of *teshuvah*, for seven days, by the ritual surrounding it. Twentieth-century Unitarian Universalist tradition has no ritual time of soul searching and assessment of character. In fact, our emphasis on the worth of the individual causes us to seldom mention

our shortcomings.

I wish we did.

The process humbles and strengthens, and brings joy. Deep, unflinching, self-examination; remorse and repentance for falling short of the mark; atonement, in word and deed: these bring "salvation," healing, a larger heart and a lighter soul, ready to plunge into the year's cycle all over again.

My guess is that it will be a very, very long time before Unitarian Universalists adopt an institutional practice of examination, repentance, atonement and salvation -- but it is one that we may practice as individuals. We may choose to join Jewish friends at this time, or Christian friends during Lent, or we may simply try to make it a cycle in our lives.

We need not be observant Christians, Jews, or even theists, to practice *teshuvah*. The Jews, rejoicing in God's forgiveness, also rejoice in the human, with our innate potential for goodness. "The still small voice within is also the Ultimate and Infinite."

Is there a one among us who does not aspire to act more in accordance with our ideals than we do? We may not often consider such matters of the soul in day-to-day life (which is one reason that Judaism sets aside a particular time each year), but our longing for goodness and harmony is always with us -- somewhere within us -- nonetheless.

Perhaps the metaphor of God does not inspire you with the sense of awe which lifts you, longing for goodness, truth, peace, right relationship.

If not, what does? The interdependent web? Taken seriously, interdependence is a truly awesome concept. Perhaps it is the soaring reaches of art, music, literature, created by men and women of sublime talent. Pondering beauty can pull us right into awe.

Whatever calls you to a sense of wonder and dread -- calls you to a sense of how much there is that we but dimly apprehend -- these things also call you to live toward your highest ideals.

Simply pondering upon these matters as I prepared for this sermon (and for my participation in High Holy Days), has already had one salutary effect upon my character.

There is a man I'll call Sam, with whom I worked seven or eight years ago on a Pacific Northwest District-wide leadership team. Sometimes he didn't show up for meetings, with no explanation or notice. There was at least one important team-building meeting to which he showed up an hour late. He diminished the quality of joint presentations by "joking" negative remarks, and he avoided direct conversations.

At one crucial point, where tension was nearly making us all ill, I confronted the whole team with my perceptions and distress. The ensuing conversations helped, but I left that group firmly convinced that Sam was a passively-hostile, community-destructive kind of a guy. He knew I felt that way, and he said as we parted, "I'm going to write you a letter, and we need to talk." It never happened.

Imagine my surprise to discover very recently that Sam has been preparing for the UU ministry, and would be at a meeting I was to attend last Friday. My first thought was, "Ha! I have ten years in our ministry and I am the president of the District UU ministers' chapter. He made me and some other good folk miserable when we were working together, and he never made any amends for it -- at the very least, I can sure as heck make his life uncomfortable." I chortled in my power and judgmentalism.

Then -- directly as a result of reflecting upon moral behavior, repentance, and remorse -- I reconsidered, at least faintly ashamed of myself. Remorseful. I thought, "What earthly good would that do?" I thought, "Would I want anyone to judge me on things I did or didn't do

eight years ago, without at least talking to me?" Most importantly, I thought about my deep belief in the universe's Divine Harmony, about how I can act in ways that contribute to moral goodness, or I can act in vengeful, egotistical ways, ways that absolutely transgress all that I hold most high.

To step out of my narrative for a moment, I want you to imagine me sitting in a pleasant room in the Spokane church last Friday, working on this sermon (I had flown over and was a couple of hours early for the meeting). At exactly the moment I was writing the words I just spoke to you, guess who walked in? Sam.

It felt very, very strange. He said, "Oh, you're working," and scooted away after a couple of pleasantries, obviously happy to get out of my presence. And I almost let it remain at that! Having just actually written the words that I felt remorse at my ignoble, authoritarian thinking -- true words -- I almost just let an atonement moment go, although there was time to talk before the others came for the meeting. Even I could see the irony -- nay, the hypocrisy -- in that, and I went to find him and invite him back. I needed to be generous (though I didn't really want to), and I needed to atone in my own heart for my mean spiritedness.

I asked him, fairly gently, I think, if he felt OK about our past connections. He said, "No. In fact, when I heard you were going to be here, I felt upset in my stomach." I told him my reasons for thinking what I had, and he shared some of what had been going on with him at the time. We didn't have a long time, and we have more talking to do, but the door is open. I don't know how I'll feel about him when we're done, but I am immensely relieved that I chose the high road. One Jewish author says that true *teshuvah* change the doer, of course, and it also makes a cosmic difference, "restor(ing) the sparks of holiness which had been captured by the powers of evil." (Steinmetz, 136). Maybe I began liberating one tiny little spark.

I don't know if I would have acted the same if I hadn't been pondering on remorse and atonement, or if I hadn't been planning to participate

quite fully in High Holy Days, or if Sam had not appeared synchronicously as I was ruminating on my better nature. I do know that being aware of the process and its deep importance helped me. And I realize, as I pass mindfully through the Days of Awe, that I must look at that judgmental, narrow-spirited part of myself, closer to home.

Will you join me, at least in the privacy of your own heart? Will you join with a friend or loved one in the ongoing process? Can we challenge and support each other in the hard process of examination, repentance and atonement -- leading, then, to the joy of having come closer to that which we hold most dear? As we do this, as we practice *teshuvah*, we become stronger as a community, and we strengthen our own and others' worth and dignity.

Please join me in Responsive Reading #637.

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

Sources Consulted:

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Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: a Modern Guide To the Jewish Holidays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982.

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