

TIKKUN OLAM: HEALING THE WORLD

A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Call To Worship

Baruch at Adonai elohenu melech ha-olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu
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 be 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.

Reading "O Hear, Israel"

Judaism begins with the declaration: "Sh'ma Yisrael...Hear O Israel..." But what does
it truly mean to hear?

The person who hears the words of friends, spouse or children,
And does not catch the note of urgency:
"Notice me, help me, care about me."
Hears—but does not really hear.

The person who stifles the sound of his conscience
And tells himself he has done enough already,
Hears—but does not really hear.

The person who listens to the rabbi's sermon
But thinks that someone else is being addressed,
Hears—but does not really hear.

As the new year begins, Adonai,
Strengthen our ability to hear.

May we hear the call for help of the lonely soul,
And the sound of the breaking heart

May we hear the words of our friends,
And also their unspoken pleas and dreams.

And may we hear you, Adonai For only if we hear You, do we have the right
To pray that You will hear us.

Sermon

Imagine this annual scene, taking place in the month of Tishrei, the seventh in the Jewish calendar (approximately September and October in the Julian Calendar): Adonai, Ruler of the Universe, in all its unimaginable glory, preparing for a yearly task of ultimate significance. Adonai takes out three books, two of modest size, one gigantic. Using whatever it is that Rulers of the Universe use to write with, Adonai writes in the Book of Life the names of the few who are thoroughly righteous; inscribes in the Book of Death the names of the few who are thoroughly wicked; and gets Divine writer's cramp from putting the rest of us in the third book.

It is Rosh Hashanah evening, the beginning of High Holy Days in the Jewish tradition. (Last Wednesday evening, this year.) At the Rosh Hashanah service, the *shofar* will be blown—the ram's horn, untuned and strange sounding—its eerie tone signifying Adonai's call to the people, and the people's call to Adonai. At this service, we, the countless millions in the very large third book, resolve to get into the Book of Life. We resolve to spend the next ten days—the Days of Awe, Days of Return and Repentance—restoring our lives to more wholeness. Specifically, we resolve to examine how we have led our lives since the last High Holy Days, and to fix what is broken. A book intended for Jewish children puts it simply and most understandably: “[The Ten Days of Penitence] is a time for us to think about what is good and what is bad, and how we have behaved all year.” (77)

If we do it right, when Adonai checks on us on Yom Kippur, ten days later, we will be in the Book of Life and on the right side of the Gates of Heaven when they clang closed for another year.

Prayerfully, sincerely, deeply, we resolve to practice *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is often translated as “repentance,” and it does imply that. But it is more accurate to translate it as “turnaround,” changing directions. Some translators prefer—and I like best of all—“return to our Source.” When we turn around from our wicked ways, we move back toward the fundamental goodness that we can feel somewhere deep in us

Assuming we made it through the gates last year—that we successfully practiced *teshuvah* during that ten Days of Awe—we can also assume that we have backslidden during the ensuing year and need the process once more. It is human nature.

For those of us who are not Jewish, we do not honor this particular time of year in this way. But we are missing a very important human practice if we do not observe *teshuvah* some time during the year—preferably, all year—in the best way we can. St. Paul noted that he was forever doing the things he should not do, and not doing the ones he should. Each of us knows ways, large and small, in which we have been like St. Paul.

Personally, I know that I fall short, all the time, in spite of my best efforts. I know that my ongoing efforts to be the best person I can be constantly take a back seat to my busy schedule and my less-than-best nature.

Before I started the actual writing of this sermon, I reflected on what I needed to do during these particular Days of Awe. I thought about my sister, the only sibling I have left, when I once had three of them. I have been meaning to get in touch with her. I have wanted to congratulate her on completing a triathlon, something she is understandably very proud of. I have wanted to ask about a couple of issues that I fear may be coming between us having a close, sisterly relationship. And I haven't done it. (She completed

the triathlon in mid July.) So, in order not to feel a total hypocrite, I wrote her a long email before I began writing the sermon. One act that turns me just a little in the direction of being the kind of person I want to be.

Before we go deeper into our own hearts' *teshuvah*, I want to enlarge the subject for a moment and talk about the title of this sermon and its relationship to our individual reflection and action during the Days of Return and Repentance.

Tikkum olam is a Hebrew phrase meaning "to heal the world." "To repair the world." Lord knows that it needs repairing. Wars happen constantly: for territory, for power, for riches, for the simple reason that the "other" looks or acts different. The gap between the unimaginably wealthy and even the middle class—never mind the genuinely poor—is no gap, but rather a chasm of Grand Canyon proportions. Humans continue to degrade the earth as though we have a couple of worlds to spare. Horrors are committed in the name of religion, perverting the profound good that comes of practicing a humble, open-hearted faith. The list goes on.

Healing the world is part of why the Jews practice *teshuvah* during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This past Friday, at Sabbath service, Rabbi Dan Fink began the service by reminding us of what is at stake in our taking spiritual self-examination seriously. He noted that the month of tishrei corresponds to the astrological sign of Libra, symbolized by the scales. He said, "The world hangs in balance constantly, between good and evil. During these ten days, we are constantly recalled to the profound responsibility we have to save the world by choosing the good. Every time each one of us chooses a good deed, we affect the balance just a little."

The interdependence of inner "work" and outer conduct is not only a Jewish concept. Recently, I read a book called *Living Peace: a Spirituality of Contemplation and Action*, by Father John Dear, a Jesuit activist priest. Father Dear is a radical pacifist, a tireless worker in the "outer" cause of peace—but he warns us that we cannot work against violence in our world unless we search our own souls fearlessly and "... root out violence within us, to forgive those who have hurt us, let go of bitterness and resentment." He then goes on to say, "true inner peace pushes us into the thick of the world's problems." (This fascinating man will be in Boise very soon—check your order of service for activities, dates, phone numbers.)

Father Dear does not use the word *teshuvah*, because he practices the Christian faith (although I'll bet, being a Jesuit, he knows Hebrew). But what he is talking about is just what the rabbis and other Jews are talking about when they speak of what we should be doing during the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The practice of *teshuvah*—during these days, or ongoing—is a complex of the inner and the outer. Traditionally, there are four ways during the Days of Awe to escape our doom, three of which are still current: "righteousness expressed through gifts of charity; prayerful supplication;...and change of conduct." (Waskow, 4) The fourth one, no longer legit, holds that you can get yourself into the Book of Life by changing your name. (I was busily planning to call myself Mary until I read further and noted that the rabbis have dropped that particular path.)

We see how the inner and the outer are interwoven in the three paths. Gifts of charity are—which we take also to mean work for justice—at least on the surface, outer acts. So is change of conduct. But neither of these can be done in the spirit of "turnaround" unless they are supported by a solid, solid foundation of humble, honest

self-examination. I, personally, know that I have fallen short of the mark every day. (How about you?) I have fudged the truth; I have spoken ill of others for the sake of my own exasperation or anger with them; I have neglected to carry out obligations to the larger community; I have allowed my physical world to get into a mess that then reflects spiritual chaos; I have overridden my spiritually-uplifting practices with busyness and self-importance; I have let sloth keep me from reaching out to those I love; I have refused to forgive others and myself, when doing so would bless the community. I have “fallen off” my diet! And part of me doesn’t care about all of it.

The part of me that does care, and cares greatly—that knows I am affecting the scales of the world—cannot move to change my external conduct unless I practice prayerful supplication.

“Prayerful supplication” can take many, many forms, depending on each of our theological foundation, philosophical orientation, personality, and upbringing. For one of us, it might involve waking in the morning, asking for guidance, then mentally stopping as many times during the day as possible, to “listen,” to still the monkey mind, to attend to the Source. For another, it might be a matter of going to a twelve-step program regularly, of practicing those miracle-working steps of surrender and self-examination and service. For someone else, it might require a daily reading of noble poets and playwrights, men and women who speak of humanity’s goodness: “what a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! ...in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world!” (*Hamlet*, I, v, 316ff.) Still others may require meditative focus of some sort, like sitting or yoga or walking or *tai chi*.

For all of us, it probably involves a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute mindfulness that is very hard to practice. It also, almost surely, involves other people, the beloved community of our congregation, our dream groups, our supportive gatherings, our twelve-step meetings, the loving and challenging friends with whom we break bread. Make no mistake, the part of us that takes a certain glee in meanness of spirit and narrow focus on self is a force to be reckoned with. And unless each of us does reckon with it, we will fall short of our own highest longings; we will fall short of our responsibility of *tikkun olam*, of saving the world.

It can be done, of course, for humans have for millennia been finding, affirming and acting upon our noblest selves. As a reading from the Jewish tradition says, “We forgive ourselves and begin again in love.”

Once we have done the reckoning, we must decide for ourselves how to carry it into the rest of the world. Our spiritual and psychological stock-taking leads us into the change of conduct spoken of by the rabbis. We make peace with ourselves. We make peace with those we need to forgive and whose forgiveness we need. We look fearlessly at this so-imperfect and beautiful world of ours and see where our acts of charity and justice can make a difference.

On Yom Kippur, the final day of the High Holy Days, observant Jews fast. At sundown, they feast and rejoice, happy to have once again fulfilled the old, old cycle of repentance, atonement, forgiveness and action.

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.

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