

A TIME FOR TURNING

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September 19, 2004

During the period between this past Thursday, the 16th, which was the Rosh Hashana, and next Saturday, the 25th, which is Yom Kippur, our friends at Temple Hillel B’Nai Torah up the street, and countless other Jewish communities throughout the world, will be immersed in the celebration of the High Holy Days of the Jewish tradition.

Someone who is new to the Unitarian Universalist tradition might wonder why we would honor the Jewish holy days in our own worship, or the holy days of any other tradition, for that matter.

The simple answer is that we seek to understand and to honor the universal truths revealed in the world’s major traditions. We embrace the unity of human experience that all people share, in hopes that it might lead us to greater compassion, respect, wisdom, and, we pray, peace.

Judaism begins the year in two different ways, at two different times, six months apart.

In the spring, during the first month, the month of Nisan, Jews celebrate Pasach, or Passover. They remember the original events of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. These events gave birth to their unity and identity as a people, to their covenant with God, and to their religious law. Passover marks the new year by celebrating their freedom and the renewing of their covenant as a people.

But at *this* time of the year, during the harvest month of Tishri, Jewish communities celebrate a different kind of renewal: the renewal of each individual’s relationship with their God, with their true self, and with the people with whom they have interacted throughout the previous year. These renewals are brought about by acknowledging what has been damaged in those relationships, and setting them right by asking for, and granting, forgiveness.

The month of Tishri is the seventh month, and so it echoes the seventh day, the Shabbos, or Sabbath, a day of rest and contemplation, of catching one’s breath after six days of hard work. Like the Shabbos, it is a time to focus one’s attention on ultimate things, on what matters most.

In the first month, at Passover, one celebrates the *gift* of freedom. In the seventh month, during the High Holy Days, one wrestles with the *responsibilities* of freedom. One is asked to seriously consider, what have I done with my freedom? How have I lived? How have I used the gifts, the time, and life force that have been given to me?

These solemn days are pervaded by two ideas—repentance and atonement. Now, believe me, I did not relish the prospect of speaking these “big scary words” in your presence. I know that some of us have experienced these words as bludgeons, as conveying the

weight of guilt and unworthiness, and that Unitarian Universalists tend to get the heebie-jeebies around such language.

But, as usual, I will try to “unpack” the meanings and redeem these words, because there is a core of truth in them that is worth knowing and saving.

The word “repentance” is a translation of the Hebrew word “teshuvah,” which signifies a psychological, emotional and spiritual turning—a *turning* toward truth, by which one’s life become reoriented to God and to what one holds as ultimately good.

As a metaphor, imagine getting into a fight with someone you love, and storming angrily from the room. Teshuvah would mean stopping on the other side of the door, remembering that your love is the most important truth, realizing that this hurt and anger are not what you want, and turning around, coming back into the room to face your loved one, apologize for your angry words, and begin the conversation again in a more honest and caring tone.

Or imagine that you have been engaged in some behavior that is fundamentally destructive to your well-being and to your relationships. Teshuvah would mean turning away from what is destructive and toward what is wholesome—that effort of the heart, mind and will to recommit, again and again, to what is good, especially after having lost sight of it.

Repentance does not mean groveling like a miserable worm before a condescending god!

Repentance simply means *re-turning*, from a false love to a true love, from a shallow or selfish love to a deeper, more self-giving love. It means reorienting one’s heart and life to what one knows is ultimately right.

The essential meaning of atonement was captured in Victoria Safford’s reflection, which we heard in the reading earlier in the service. She named her piece “At One.” This title refers to the idea of “at-one-ment,” which is simply the word “atonement” expressed differently.

“At-one-ment” suggests the sense of peace and healing that ultimately comes when we do the difficult, humbling work of “atonement”: taking responsibility for our mistakes, digressions, and failures. Atonement and “at-one-ment” are two dimensions of the same turning movement—the effort of the heart to make amends, and the joy and release that comes with restoration.

The beloved Shaker song *Simple Gifts* speaks beautifully to this:

*When true simplicity is gained,
to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed.
To turn, turn, will be our delight,
‘til by turning, turning,*

we come round right.

One of the important ritual expressions during the High Holy Days is the blowing of the shofar, a horn made of an actual ram's horn. This wild, eerie, thrilling sound has many meanings.

Some of the shofar calls are calls of joy, startling us into wonder at the majesty of creation, the beauty and poignancy of life, the mystery of God. Some of the shofar blasts signify wailing, moaning, sobbing. They remind us of the constant presence of suffering. But through all of the various calls there remains one message that is constant: Wake up! Wake up, sleeper!

I once came across an account of a man's near-death experience. It was the testimony of someone who had suffered cardiac arrest and, during a few minutes when his body appeared to be clinically dead, his consciousness experienced something that changed him forever. The gist of his experience was a variation on "my life passed before my eyes." In the jargon of those who study near-death experiences, this would be called a "life review."

What this man saw was not only a sequence of moments from his life strung together like beads on a string. More importantly, he saw—*he comprehended with some newly acquired awareness*—the impact, positive or negative, of each of these moments.

He saw the value and the cost of his interactions: a brief conversation that seemed insignificant at the time, a passing kindness or unkindness, an act of generosity or an exchange of bitter words—each incident was presented like a four-dimensional hologram, round and full with emotional consequence.

In a moment out of time, strangely distanced from his life, he gained new X-ray eyes into his own nature and character. *He awakened* to what his existence had been made of—the sum of love, tenderness, meanness, pettiness, hurting and healing, selfishness and self-giving.

Years later, as he recounted this experience, he remained acutely aware of the devastations wrought by ignorance, and he never forgot the power, impact, and necessity of love as a way of moving through the world.

What happens after death will be always be a mystery to those left behind. When I encounter a testimony like this, I can only take it as an account of someone's subjective experience. Yet this man's story has stayed with me ever since. It comes back to me now and then as a kind of "thought experiment" for those times when I must judge my own character and intentions. It's a powerful thing to ask oneself, "How will my actions in this situation sit with me if I am confronted with them at the moment of my death?"

As I'm sure you can understand, I have been thinking a great deal about such things lately, given my mother's recent passing. I have been asking, what is ultimately

important? What really needs to be said to the people I love and with whom I have unfinished business?

In a Rosh Hashana sermon by Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, she writes,

“How do we save our lives? By taking risks, by pushing against the boundaries and limits that others have established, by being fully present. By stretching. By paying attention to the small acts of kindness that make up our everyday lives. Robert Frost puts it well: *‘Something we were withholding made us weak, until we found that it was ourselves.’* The beginning of wisdom is the ability to know oneself... And once we know how to judge ourselves, we become more able to save ourselves, and we can become among those who save others. Only when one is connected to one’s core is one truly connected to others.”

As we enter into the season of the turning leaves, let us remember to turn again toward what we truly love and truly value, especially if we had lost sight of it.

As we witness the trees releasing their leaves from the past year and allowing themselves to become naked before the sky, may we be willing risk humility, so that we can make the necessary amends with our companions in life.

In the glory of this passing season, let us awaken, again and again, to the precious gift that is our life.

Amen.