

Small Steady Steps

Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills

September 29, 2019

Sundown today begins the Jewish High Holy days of Rosh Hashana, which will continue until sundown on Tuesday. Some of you here today may celebrate the holiday at your synagogue later, and if you are (or even if you aren't), I would like to wish you Shanah Tovah, which means, in English, "have a good year". Rosh Hashana itself means "Head of the Year".

Rosh Hashana marks, in the Jewish faith, the beginning of a new year. It is based upon Leviticus 23:23-32 which states that there should be a "Festival of Trumpets" and a "Day of Atonement". It says, "you shall observe a day of complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts".

Judaism is one of sources of our Unitarian Universalist liberal religion, and I find this tradition to be one of great wisdom and high value. You see, during my time working as a chaplain specializing in decedent care, I spent a lot of time sitting with people who were dealing with death or dying. And one of the most common things that I heard from people... whether they themselves were dying, or they were losing a loved one... or whether it was from people who had recently lost a loved one... the thing that most often drove them to request extra time with a chaplain... was that they were in, what we called, "Reconciliation pain".

"Reconciliation pain" is just exactly what it sounds like. Someone is in deep emotional pain because there is an unresolved need for reconciliation. Not always, but very often, that need for reconciliation is linked to another kind of pain... a kind of pain that is very closely linked to reconciliation pain, and that is "forgiveness pain."

Here is a common scenario: "I did X, and my dad's and my relationship was never the same since, and now he is dying, and I can never make it up to him." There are infinite versions of this, sometimes existing in layer upon layer, like an onion, and, also like an onion, likely to bring about tears. Most often, the layers of betrayal go both ways, back and forth year upon year, with no clear "good guy" or "bad guy", but, in the time either right before or right after a death, none of that matters, as people just wish they had "done better" so that they could have "been closer" and not had this painful issue come between them.

Most often, when we think of words like "forgiveness", "reconciliation" and "atonement" in a religious sense, we get bogged down by ideas of "sin" and "salvation", ideas long obsolete in our UU tradition. But these words are directly related to Genesis 6:18, when God says to Noah: *And I will set up My covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you and your sons, and your wife and your sons' wives with you.*

The key word there is “covenant”. On the surface, it is easy to think of this just as a “covenant” between ourselves and God, but it doesn’t have to be. Covenants occur in all sorts of places. A scriptural covenant is the spiritual covenant that is portrayed in the Bible. All Abrahamic faiths believe scriptural covenants to be vital. The covenant in Genesis is technically sandwiched between God and the whole community, as well as numerous other covenants with various persons or parties. But a covenant is really any proper, sacred or necessary accord between people, or something else important, like one’s country, or the Earth, herself.

Our ability to covenant is essential to our survival. As humans, we are primates, and, as primates, besides having some of the largest of brains in the world and opposable thumbs, we are among the most social animals on the planet. Our survival depends on our ability to form bonded pairs, families, tribes, clans, and all sorts of human relationships and organizations. Our ability to function within those human groups is strongly related to trust, and, thus, to our ability to covenant.

Therefore, the idea of “covenant” is held as sacred in all the Abrahamic religions. Those ancient authors had realized that our ability to covenant was directly linked to our survival.

The authors of Leviticus instruct the readers to take a day off from work for a day of solemn rest and atonement. It further says that those who do not do this will be “cut off from the people”. Now, this sounds harsh, but, upon reflection, it has occurred to me that if the *real* covenant... the most *important* covenant for the survival of the species is the covenant between the people, then, those who are unable or unwilling to maintain their covenantal relationship *would* be a danger to the entire group, and therefore, to be “cut off from the people...” could be seen as a necessary step, perhaps, to ensure the survival of the larger group in a harsh, war torn, desert environment.

Now, I am not advocating that, because I firmly believe in the worth and dignity of every person... even those who find it hard to get along with others. But then, I believe that every person... even every living thing... carries within the Light of the Divine. However, the point is, our covenants with each other are vitally important, and should be nurtured and cared for... and repaired, when they become worn or broken.

This is what I believe is the ultimate purpose of Rosh Hashana... to repair tears in the covenant, with Divinity of course, however you think of the Divine, and, also, and maybe especially, with each other.

In the Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashana is a very solemn and important holiday. The two days of Rosh Hashanah usher in the Ten Days of Repentance, also known as the Days of Awe, which conclude in the major fast day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. If you are not Jewish, but you have friends, colleagues or family members who are, you may want to know this and honor that this is an important celebration for them and honor them by leaving space for them to observe it.

Even if you are not Jewish, or not Observant, there is still much value and wisdom in spirit of this tradition.

As I said earlier, as a Chaplain, many people would come to me with their regrets around relationships right before or right after a death. These were events in which their covenants had been damaged and not repaired until they felt like it was too late. Occasionally, I would hear incredibly tragic and extreme tales... secrets that they only felt comfortable sharing with a member of the clergy, but that they finally felt that they *had* to share in this moment of finality. However, mostly, they weren't extreme. They were common, everyday things... small things that they had carried around for years, but that they were never able to let go of.

So now, I ask you to consider this... are you carrying around something like this? Did you, in some way, damage your covenant with others? It doesn't have to be a big thing.

Maybe you, at some point, found yourself thinking about taking something that didn't belong to you, or that you were not entitled to, and, in the end, you didn't do it, but you were *tempted*, and for that, you still feel really bad about it.

Or, maybe, at some point, you lashed out in anger at someone, and maybe you didn't even really hurt them, and maybe they actually had it coming, because they had worked your last nerve and pushed every single one of your buttons. But you did lash out at them, and for that, you still feel really bad about it.

Or, maybe, at some point, you let someone down. Maybe you said "yes" to something that you really should have said "no" to. But, at that moment, maybe you had let yourself get too hungry... or angry... or lonely... or tired... and it was a moment of weakness. Maybe they know about it, and maybe they don't. But, most importantly, you are disappointed in *yourself*, and for that, you still feel really bad about it.

Atonement is the idea of a human doing something to fix an earlier action that caused damage to a covenant. This can either be done directly by undoing the consequences of a mistake, or symbolically, through religious ritual, or material reparations. "I am so sorry that I ruined your sweater, here, let me pay for it".

Atonement is very closely linked to Forgiveness... something that most people don't really know how to do. Most people, when they think of "forgiveness", think that means that you just ignore something that in some way has caused hurt or injury. Forgiveness... real forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness that brings healing... requires work and risk. To really forgive someone, you must state the injury. You must hold it up into the light... give it a name, a voice. First you say, "You did this, and I was hurt in this way." Then, when you say "... and I forgive you," whether the other person has accepted responsibility or not. When there are two or more people involved, there is no way to control what another's response is going to be. Your healing should not be in the hands of another. It is up to you to hold the injury up into the light, and then, and only then, when you say, "I forgive you," it will be a healing experience.

In Atonement, the same is also true, but the forgiveness is for yourself. A colleague of mine who is a priest once told me, "We don't call it Confession anymore. We call it Reconciliation. People come to us to tell us things that they feel that they can only tell God, but really, what they need is to forgive themselves."

In the Jewish tradition, several days are set aside for fasting and atonement. Really, we don't have to wait for a special day, and we don't need to do it all at once in a big, grand ceremony. We certainly can, if we want to, but there is another way. We can do it in small steady steps. We can maybe do a little private ritual in the shower, where we wash ourselves clean of all the bad things that we said, or did, or felt, or profited from. We can do a little private ritual where we pick up a stone and tell that stone what we did... name that stone... and then cast it into running water so that we are able to let it go. We can write it down on a piece of paper, and then put that paper into a fire... observing all fire safety and best green practices, of course.

And, of course, we can go to someone that we have harmed in some way, say to them, out loud, "I did this, and I am sorry. I am here to make amends." The reason that this is an important part of the 12-Step program is that it works. It really does help to bring about healing. It doesn't "fix" everything right away, but it does *start* to heal a rift in the covenant... especially when applied in small, steady steps.

Whether if you do this all at once, with the sound of trumpets and days of awe, or if you do it privately, in small, steady steps... I recommend that you do it. Don't wait until there is a death or an impending death. Tend to your covenants in ways big and small, with all the care and attention that you would your garden or your home, because all of us depend upon one another on this journey that we call life. May we all walk in love and in peace.

- Joan DeArtemis, M.Div., UUSWH Intern Minister