



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Renewing Relationships”

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Centering Thoughts

To be wronged is nothing, unless you continue to remember it. Confucius

The beginning of atonement is the sense of its necessity. Lord George Gordon Byron

We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family. Henri J. M. Nouwen

Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. Anne Lamott

Yom Kippur or Day of Judgment holds within it one of the Torah's most profound messages: there is always a second chance. No matter how far we have strayed and no matter how sinful we have been there is always an opportunity to start afresh. Levi Brackman

Sermon

We typically think of time as linear. Like you I'm sure, I was taught in history classes to read timelines which place the past at one end point on a straight line, the present at another point, and the unknown future is an arrow pointing off the line. But you and I actually live our lives in circular motion. The seasons circle around, repeating themselves, year after year. The weeks circle round, too. Sunday comes round again and again, even if we're not ready for it!

Each Sunday you and I come to a worship service to remind ourselves of that which is most important to us—whether we call it God, our highest ideals and values, and/or something else. When we are reminded of whatever is most important to us, we have an opportunity to recommit ourselves to living in a more close relationship or alignment with whatever that is we hold to be of supreme worth.

Each Sunday gives us a chance to re-set or re-start our lives so that we get closer to that which we worship. In fact, every day and every hour offers us a chance to get closer to our idea of God, to our Seven Principles, or to becoming the person we want to be rather than the one we are. But how many of us actually take stock of our lives daily or weekly? How many of us assess how closely we're following our beliefs and values? How many of us think deeply about whether our lives are on the right course? I imagine there are few of us who engage in deep, intensive introspection regularly. Mostly it's because we're too busy just getting on with our lives.

Holidays and holy days serve to punctuate our circular lives. They mark time and give us a chance to pause and notice time's passing. Birthdays, anniversaries, and New Year celebrations are perfect examples of these markers. Religions have markers, too. In Unitarian Universalism and in this Fellowship, we mark the seasonal changes, and we note many secular events each year.

Because our faith is informed by many sources, we also recognize a variety of holy days, some from world religions. We don't pretend to be Hindu or Muslim or Jewish when we acknowledge these. Instead we share something of the tradition because it either offers us an appropriate challenge or affirms our own values. This helps us further understand our individual beliefs about what it means to be human and to be alive. Today we explore wisdom from the Jewish tradition. "La shanah tovah!" or "Happy New Year!" Nearly two weeks ago Jews observed the start of a new year, called Rosh Hashanah. This was followed by ten Days of Awe, and ended with Yom Kippur (*yohm key-purr*), or the Day of Atonement. The focus of this sequence of holy days is becoming one with God.

Our Seventh Principle affirms that we are one with the universe, that we are interdependent and interconnected in a web of all that exists. You can think of this web as God if an idea of God doesn't otherwise hold much meaning for you. There are many other ways to think of God and I invite you to understand these Jewish holy days in light of your broadest understanding of this word.

These holy days which focus on our becoming one with all or with God fit well with this month's congregational theme of Unity. Other Jewish holidays focus on a historical event or God acting in the world, such as Moses leading the people out of Egypt or Esther saving the Jewish people from evil Haman. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the ten Days of Awe between these two dates, suggest we can get closer to God by righting our relationships with God and with fellow humans. Yom Kippur translates into English as the Day of Atonement. Atone comes from the Latin *ad unum*, or at one. When we say atonement means at-one-ment, this is quite literally true.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, God writes in his book his judgment of whether you've lived a life with more good acts than not, or more good thoughts than not. If you have been good mostly, you are written up in the Book of Life and given another year to live. If you have not been good mostly, you may not see another year circle around. And, just to celebrate the US men's national soccer team clinching a spot in the upcoming World Cup soccer tournament in Brazil, think of Rosh Hashanah as God the referee giving you a yellow card on that day. If you continue to foul or act badly, you'll receive a red card on Yom Kippur—an ejection from the game or God's Book of Life. Talk to me later if you need further explanation. Anyway, in between these two holy days you get ten days to change what God has written about you before God closes the Book of Life for the year, thus sealing your fate.

If you repent, if you ask forgiveness for the ways you have turned your back on God or what you know are God's commands, then God will forgive you. The God of your heart and soul will give you another chance to be a better person. God gives second chances for you to straighten out or atone.

God isn't a referee in the sky for me, but if God is the love I hold in my heart, then upon reflecting on my actions, I'll know whether I was generous or not, good enough or not. My conscience or inner voice will tell me, whether I call it God or not. I think if we take the time to be honest with ourselves, we'll know what needs correcting.

I believe if we take intentional time to reflect deeply on our lives, not only will God forgive us, but maybe we'll forgive ourselves, too. Not to excuse our failures, but to help us move on and encourage us to do better—and then we must do better. That is true atonement.

But here's the catch. God and one's self are quicker to forgive than other people. God does not wash those sins away. You and I must purify ourselves by asking forgiveness of those we have hurt. And that makes this a difficult holy time. Few of us want to spend significant time in intense introspection, probing the depths of our soul, and confronting our mistakes. Few of us want to go willingly before another to admit our mistakes or ask forgiveness. Few of us want to be held accountable for our actions.

How much easier it is to hurt someone with unkind thoughts, words, or deeds than to admit

to ourselves that we have wronged someone. How much easier it is to admit to ourselves that we have wronged someone than it is to ask that someone for forgiveness.

In the last few days I decided to be an observant UU by reflecting on my life in the past year. I wanted to experience my own Days of Awe. It wasn't easy. Identifying my flaws, confronting my mistakes, expressing my remorse, and committing to change in my life? Although I know I'm not perfect, it took a while to figure out what I need to be forgiven for—from myself, from others, and from the universe or God.

I'm sure I didn't spend enough time with my husband or extended family. I know I selfishly resented my father's illness this summer because it prevented Paul and me from taking a relaxing vacation. I probably teased my husband too much about being in discernment concerning what's next for him. I know I didn't show him or my kids enough just how much I love and appreciate them. I ask for their forgiveness.

I probably didn't show you enough appreciation, either. I'm sure I unintentionally prevented some of you from sharing your ideas. I might have wrongfully excluded you in some way. I know I don't always live up to your expectations of me. I ask for your forgiveness. I know I didn't live up to my high hopes of becoming more involved in the larger Athens community. I make excuses for myself. Sometimes I worry about exhorting you to live out your ideals while wondering if I live up to them well enough. I ask to forgive myself.

If you are kind enough to forgive me, I promise to try better. I want to be one with all that is good, all that is divine, all that is loving. You will help me be that better person because even if no God holds me accountable, as a part of this loving community I know we hold each other accountable for our actions. If we egregiously stray from our covenant and our principles, we'll call each other back to them.

If you ask for my forgiveness, although I'm not god, I will give it to you—though I expect no less atonement from you than you should get from me. Forgiveness cannot be too cheap or it has little meaning and implies you have little meaning to me if your transgressions are too easily dismissed.

Yom Kippur sometimes is called a *mikvah* in time, meaning a time for full-immersion with God. Like a bath, Yom Kippur is a time to cleanse ourselves of past wrongs by admitting them, asking for forgiveness, and acting to restore the trust and heal the relationships we have broken. This comparison to cleansing reminds me that when I get really dirty or sweaty doing some physical activity, like playing soccer, how good it feels to shower afterwards. Or if it's a really hot day and I jump into a cool lake or pool and instantly feel refreshed. The burden or dirt has been washed away. This is Yom Kippur's oneness with God—an immersion that restores and renews relationships.

Admittedly, some acts cannot readily be forgiven. Some relationships can never be repaired. But even if the person who has harmed you never knows, if you can forgive in your heart you can more easily let go of any lingering pain they may be causing you. Forgiveness can set you free, can cleanse you.

I encourage you to use this coming week to reflect deeply on your life. Consider what repentance you need, and what atonement you need. Become one with yourself, your relationships, and with your God, however you understand God. Don't let that referee show you a red card.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you have a spiritual practice of atonement or of forgiving yourself and others? Describe.
2. Have you ever thought you'd forgiven but later discovered otherwise? Share your story.
3. What has been the personal cost of not forgiving yourself or another?
4. When you have been forgiven by someone else, how have you restored the relationship?