

“Beginning Anew”
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UUMSB
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Readings:

Our first reading is from Rabbi *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, from an essay titled “Yom Kippur”, which was an essay written in 1965 in a professional journal for Rabbis.

To make the mistake we are making is to forget how much anguish there is in every human being. Scratch the skin of any person and you come upon sorry, frustration, unhappiness. People are pretentious. Everybody looks proud; inside he is heartbroken. We have not understood how to channel this depth of human suffering into religious experience. Forgive me for saying so, but we have developed Jewish sermons as if there were no personal problems...But confessing our sins is not the only aspect of the day which we must emphasize....If you don't mind, I'll tell you something my grandfather...said. We fast on both Yom Kippur and *Tisha B'av*. What is the difference between the two days? On *Tisha B'av*, he said, *ver ken essen* (who can eat?) On Yom Kippur, he said, since a Jew is like an angel, *ver darf essen* (who needs to eat)? I think that these few words offer an insight into the nature of Yom Kippur. To be angelic. It is not an empty phrase; it is a matter to be experienced and studied. One day a year we can transcend the human to enter the state of *ver darf essen* [who needs to eat].¹

Our second reading is from the great Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams. It is from an essay titled “Art, Psyche, and Society” which was published in 1972.

In a highly organized, technological society engineered by the mass media, the struggle for psychological space, for a private inner life, is acute. Overadjusted persons know only the public life; they are bent on being marketable personalities, good mixers. Robert Frost used to tell about his problem as a college student. He was awaiting admittance to a student fraternity and was told confidentially that only one factor was delaying his entry: the fact that he took long walks in the woods by himself. He had been “caught redhanded engaging in solitude.” Yet, it would be false to assume that the inner life of the individual can be significant if it is only a form of isolationism....the cultivation of the inner life itself requires community and discipline if it is to be a means of grace....The thrust of liberation from...oppression is toward a commonly shared space, and it succeeds not without dust and heat in the wilderness...²

Sermon:

When I was in college at Brandeis University my Jewish roommates observed Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur on campus rather than going home for the holidays. They went to services on campus, fasted on Yom Kippur and then we all went out to dinner together for ‘break the fast’. Break the fast is a HUGE dinner after sundown on Yom Kippur. It was the job of my Catholic friend and I, as the locals, to find the most kitschy and over the top restaurants we could for the meal. Each year we tried to up the ante. One year we went to Weylus, which was an enormous restaurant, that was actually something like 6 restaurants in the same building on

¹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Yom Kippur” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pgs 146-7.

² James Luther Adams, “Art, Psyche, and Society” in *on being human religiously*, p.142

Route 1 north of Boston. It looked like a mountain resort on a hill from the highway. Another year we went to Kowloon's where the dance floor in the restaurant is a pirate ship and lots of dishes involve fire and huge drinks with umbrellas. It is fabulous. Have any of you ever been to the Hu Ke Lau Restaurant in Chicopee? They have a singing and dancing floorshow in this huge room that brings to mind the Poconos in 1959. If only we had known about it we so would have been there. What was important in the ritual of the breaking of the fast for my friends was that they not only had a meal, but that they had a chance for frivolity and an almost carnival-like time. They had a chance to celebrate the new year and let go of any guilt or worries that had been weighing them down. They began anew. It may not have been conscious, but I think my friends were in touch with Heschel's point we heard earlier in his essay on Yom Kippur. He said it is a time when Jews are able to be like angels, in a spiritual state. To ground themselves back to their humanness, my friends wanted to be immersed in silly human inventions like kitschy theme restaurants.

Our Jewish forbearers and neighbors have particular rituals and spiritual practices on Yom Kippur to focus their attention and devotion to the practice of repairing relationships. Unitarian Universalism does not have a tradition like this as part of every congregation. However, we should be no less attentive to atoning for actions we have taken that hurt others whether intentionally or unintentionally. How do we repair relationships? We do this through spiritual practice and justice work in community.

Individual spiritual practices ground us. Community spiritual practices help us to build beloved community and work for justice, which is part of the foundation of Unitarian Universalism. The spiritual practice of atonement, or repairing broken relationship, can help us to do the work of justice every day. Atonement is vital to justice work because the first step in working for change is to see how we as individuals and as religious communities are enmeshed in systems of oppression. What kinds of unearned privilege influence how we are received in the world and how do we address that privilege?

Many of us by virtue of our race, class, or gender have power through our unearned privilege. It is given to us because of the value our society places on these attributes. *This kind of power and privilege cannot be given away.* We can only learn to be attentive to this power and to do our best not to misuse it. We can work to change the systems that confer this unearned privilege, that all might have equal access to resources and power. This is part of the work of Unitarian Universalism and it is a basis of our theology, that all people have inherent worth and should not have power over one another. We seek to build a world where justice is woven into the warp and weft of our lives. Where all people have lives of meaning and purpose in safe and open community. Where all people have the power to make choices about how they will live their lives and will not be bound by the power of unjust society to keep them in locked into lives of poverty or diminished expectations. Where all people have equal access to resources as basic as food, shelter, health care, and education.

It is part of our work in the world as people of faith to learn how to be in right relationship, *and* as human beings, we will of course make mistakes. The work of atonement is necessarily related to issues of power. If we incorporate atonement into our spiritual practices, we have a tool to bring justice work forward into our everyday lives.

Atonement is part of the fabric of our tradition. It is woven into our reconciliation work, justice work, and community building. We support and cultivate our attention to justice-making through our individual and community practices. The late great theologian James Luther Adams suggested that the answer for how to be spiritual individuals is to build community. In the essay we heard earlier, Adams warns us against becoming too inwardly focused and missing the call to work for justice in community. He states, "the cultivation of the inner life itself requires

community and discipline if it is to be a means of grace.”³ James Luther Adams wrote that religion is concerned with both personal ethics and behavior and with the analysis and transformation of institutional behavior.

James Luther Adams believed that if we engage in spiritual life completely separate from religious institutions, we will cease to have an impact on human institutions. He calls this Pietism. Adams describes Pietism as a solely personal relationship between God or other persons. He states “[Pietism] confines God to our personal existence and in effect leaves the rest of the world, the suprapersonal public life, to the principalities and powers of the world. Indeed, it often makes close alliance with the powers of nation, class, and race.”⁴ Another way to say this is to say in order for us to work for justice and change systems of oppression, we have to engage with the institutions and tools of oppression and injustice. We need religious community for this work.

This brings us back to Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur our Jewish neighbors as individuals atone for sins and work to mend broken relationships. They also engage in community spiritual practices like worship and feasting and individual practices like fasting. In his essay “Yom Kippur” Rabbi Heschel describes how erev Yom Kippur, the night before, is “more powerful in [his] life than that of Yom Kippur itself”⁵ He explains that this is because of the anticipation of the next day, of being in the presence of God. He calls his rabbinical colleagues to challenge their congregations to engage not only with ceremony and ritual, but with the concepts of sin, contrition and solemnity. To recognize that through ritual they are attempting to be like an angel and to be in the presence of God.

In Unitarian Universalist community we do not have any one ritual that attempts to bind us together or engage us with the holy in such a way. That isn’t how we roll. However, we engage in spiritual practices that connect us individually with our spiritual centers and with our community. Today we shared in a litany of atonement, we shared joys and sorrows, we prayed and meditated, we have and will sing together...we are in worship together. We attempt through our liturgy and our community life to offer many opportunities for us all to have that moment, to feel that we are close to the holy, that we are connected with the transcendent and with each other. James Luther Adams reminds us that this is not enough to change the world. He states that we need to remain connected to our community and institutional life; that we cannot change the system from outside the system. Atonement links us to this work because we also cannot change systems of oppression and injustice until we understand our parts in them. We have a call to understand and be attentive to how power and privilege are woven into our lives and how they affect our relationships.

My invitation is to all of us is to cultivate individual spiritual practices, and in our practices to engage with difficult spiritual ideas, like sin and reconciliation, power and relationship. I also invite us to come back together, to begin again, in love and community, each week, to bring our questions, our practices, and our open hearts to engage in spiritual work together in worship. We cannot repair the world alone. We cannot build a beloved community without community. We are in this together, learning and growing and engaging with the unknown. May our community ground us in our work for justice. May we have moments of frivolity and celebration. We are human and we will make mistakes. We will wrestle with grief and soar with joy. We will begin anew.

So may it be. Amen.

³ JLA, p. 142

⁴ Ibid p.143

⁵ Heschel, 146