

## **We Are All In This Alone Together**

September 23, 2007  
Rev. Martha Niebanck  
First Parish in Brookline

### **Call to Worship:**

Jack Reimer

Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red and orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds, and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong; and that is never easy. It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful. It means saying: I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

These things are hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways. May we learn to turn – from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith. May we turn toward each other [and “to the Force which makes forgiveness possible”] and break not the circle of love but be forever forgiving and forgiven.

### **Reading:** “*For Our Sins*”

Michael Lerner

On the Jewish High Holidays, we take *collective* responsibility for our lives and for the activities of the community of which we are a part. Although we realize that we did not create the world into which we are born, we nevertheless have responsibility for what it is like as long as we participate in it.

While the struggle to change ourselves and our world may be long and painful, it is our struggle. No one else can do it for us. To the extent that we have failed to do all that we could to make ourselves or our community all that we ought to be, we ask God and each other for forgiveness and we now commit ourselves to acting differently this coming year.

*Ve-al kulam Eloha selachol, selach lanu, mechal lanu, kuper lanu.*

For all our sins, may the Force that makes forgiveness possible.

**Reading:** “*Candles*”

Carl Dennis

If on your grandmother's birthday you burn a candle  
To honor her memory, you might think of burning an extra  
To honor the memory of someone who never met her,

A man who may have come to the town she lived in  
Looking for work and never found it.  
Picture him taking a stroll one morning  
After a month of grief with the want ads,  
To refresh himself in the park before moving on.  
Suppose he notices on the gravel path the shards  
Of a green glass bottle that your grandmother,  
Then still a girl, will be destined to step on  
When she wanders barefoot away from her school picnic  
If he doesn't stoop down and scoop the mess up  
With the want-ad section and carry it to a trash can.

For you to burn a candle for him

You needn't suppose the cut would be a deep one,  
Just deep enough to keep her at home  
The night of the hay ride when she meets Helen,  
Who is soon to become her dearest friend,  
Whose brother George, thirty years later,  
Helps your grandfather with a loan so his shoe store  
Doesn't go under in the Great Depression

And his son, your father, is able to stay in school  
Where his love of learning is fanned into flames,  
A love he labors, later, to kindle in you.

How grateful you are for your father's efforts  
Is shown by the candles you've burned for him.  
But today, for a change, why not a candle  
For the man whose name is unknown to you?

Take a moment to wonder whether he died at home  
With friends and family or alone on the road,  
On the look-out for no one to sit at his bedside  
And hold his hand, the very hand  
It's time for you to imagine holding.

## **Sermon:**

This is the time of year when this community reflects on forgiveness. We reflect on forgiveness at the same time as our Jewish neighbors, who, between Friday and Saturday observed the Day of Atonement with fasting and prayer. Our observance reflects the root of our Unitarian Universalist faith arising from a Jewish context and also invites those who were nurtured in Jewish traditions to share what has meaning in this time of ritual return.

In an observant Jewish community the last month or so has been a time of letter writing, of heart-to-heart conversations, a practicing of the magic words: "I am sorry" and "I forgive you." The fist is relaxed, the weight of self-righteousness is released, the eye of the heart is opened when persons rise above the back bending power of guilt and grudge.

My Jewish friends tell me that the process of repentance during the time of year when the barrier between God and humans is open. It is a good time to practice the art of dying well. They say, "We come to the day of Atonement having done all that is humanly possible to make amends and heal community. Our acts strengthen the fabric of community with hope as we turn toward the terror and awe of final judgment."

Last Friday's service began with the prayer of Kol nidre, which absolves each person of any unfulfilled personal vows between themselves and God for the coming year. As one rabbi explains, "Like lovers making up only to know the futility of it all for they will quarrel again, we begin by declaring that all New Year resolutions will be broken."<sup>1</sup>

The Kol nidre is followed by lengthy confessional prayers in which the community as a whole takes responsibility for the harmful behaviors of individuals. Harvey Cox, theology professor at Harvard Divinity School, attends Yom Kippur services with his wife who is Jewish. He writes:

On Erev Yom Kippur, the evening service begins its long confessional statement with some trespasses almost anyone can identify with. It asks for forgiveness for "the sin we have committed before Thee by hardening our hearts" and goes on to mention "sins we have committed before Thee in speech" and "the sin we have committed before Thee by wronging our neighbor." I can confess these transgressions because I can think of numerous times during the year when I have done them, and it is good to get them off my chest.<sup>2</sup>

He describes the feeling of nursing a dull headache from fasting as he gets more puzzled about being held accountable for sins he is sure he never committed: spurning parents, slander, bribery, lying, causeless hatred, violence and treachery.

He writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Strassfeld, "The Jewish Holidays," P. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Cox, A Christian Observes Yom Kippur, Religion On Line.

When I reached this part at my first Yom Kippur service, I was almost ready to sneak across the street for (a) grilled cheese sandwich and forgo any further confessing. I may be a sinner, but the sinner whom these prayers were describing was not me. Of course, I did not stalk out; still, being expected to confess things I had never done bothered me. It made it almost impossible for me to enter wholeheartedly into what is, in many other respects, a moving service. It seemed that I was somehow expected to confess – more than once – not only things I was not aware of, but long lists of sins that I had never even thought of committing. It seemed unreasonable.<sup>3</sup>

A young Jewish man, Walter Scott, spoke to his congregation about his own mixed feelings for Yom Kippur:

I've had a somewhat ... ambivalent relationship towards the high holidays, and particularly towards Yom Kippur. Sometimes I've come to services, sometimes I haven't. On many occasions, to be frank, I've gone up to the top of a mountain somewhere, or into the woods, basically as far away from a synagogue as possible....

Generally, my feelings around this time of year tend to range from a simmering anxiety, to a rather more pronounced anxiety, and going all the way up to absolute fear and loathing. When I was an adolescent and young adult, I would typically immerse myself in tshuvah, in repentance, for the whole ten days, and on Yom Kippur I would attend every service that was offered throughout the day, in what can only be described as a great emotional ordeal. ... And at some point in my life I burned out and rebelled against this self imposed ordeal, and found myself wanting to avoid the holiday all together as just too much misery....<sup>4</sup>

Both Harvey Cox and Walter Scott wrestle with the notion of taking personal responsibility for the sins of their neighbors. Cox wonders as a Christian, “But what about confessing things other people have done? Even when I realized this is a corporate confession, the concept continued to pose a problem for me, and still does. My question is quite simple: Can anyone actually repent for someone else?”<sup>5</sup>

Walter Scott has a different concern. He wonders if rightly taking responsibility for the sins of his brothers and sisters, for all the suffering in the prisons, in homeless shelters, in Darfur, in Iraq, for all the sins of industrial civilization and globalization doesn't just overwhelm, burn-out and alienate us from one another? He says:

“Isn't it just too much to bear?” and on the other hand, if I see my part in the suffering of the earth and her people, “it is really alarming (to see) how other

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Scott, “Is this going to be on the test? Judgement and Anxiety at Yom Kippur,” Beth Chai Congregational Address

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit.

adults are able to go about their business so complacently, apparently unmoved by all this suffering. I think its this dissonance that creates the feeling of alienation — of feeling oneself to be apart from the rest of humanity — and a sense of impatience and disgust....”

Whether or not you and I gather to say the confessional prayers of Yom Kippur, we know that we participate in the reality of species loss, climate change, the violence that protects oil and water interests, the indignity of slave labor that gives us cheap food and the clothes on our backs. Just driving here today makes us responsible for the global disaster that might unfold over the course of the next decades. And just thinking about it could make us want to go to bed. How can we live with ourselves if we really know our place in the reality of suffering? We don't have to be steeped in Yom Kippur observance to wrestle with this question.

I'd like to direct our attention to the fullness of Yom Kippur, the hope for atonement, the return to one's essence.

Rabbi Alter Korf says that “Yom Kippur is about "a triangle of forgiveness. We ask God to look beyond our deeds and see us on the soul level. But if we expect God to do that, we have to be willing to forgive our friends and acquaintances that may have hurt us." "The third point of the triangle is we have to be able to forgive ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

We are all in this, alone, together. The good news embedded in the systemic, communal responsibility for suffering is that we are all connected in both our guilt and in our forgiveness. The feeling of guilt wakes us up and the relief of forgiveness makes it possible for us to learn and grow.

And the good news of our interconnected web of being is that if any ONE of us learns, changes, evolves, we are ALL affected. We are all in this, alone, together.

If we can feel communal guilt for suffering, we can also feel communal pride for the creation of health and joy.

We are here today because of countless generations of individual generous, compassionate, courageous, and disciplined acts that created this moment in time.

And so, perhaps if we begin again in love, we might learn and know that our communal connection of responsibility is not only a cause for suffering but also for joy.

Our understanding that we are in a responsible web of connection can include gratitude.

We can light candles for the gifts given to us anonymously.

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Alter Korf of Chabad of St. Petersburg, FL.

And as we light those candles of gratitude, we can know that we also have the power to change the course of history with a single act of kindness and begin again in love.

And in the words of my late colleague and friend Elizabeth Tarbox, “Although we are broken, the love that spilled out of us has joined the love that circles the world and makes it blessed.”<sup>7</sup> That love will surround and carry us to our end.

May it be so for us, Amen.

I invite us now to participate in a communal rite of confession.

**Litany of Atonement:**

**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 we have struck out in anger without just cause**

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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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Tarbox, “Legacy” in *Evening Tide*, p.56.

**Benediction:**

Rev. Mark Belletini

**A Unitarian Universalist Kol Nidre**

We vowed, not so long ago, to live lives that added, not subtracted. We promised, not so long ago, to live lives that matched our words, lives not hard and brittle with anger, but soft with letting go.

The days have flown quickly, and they will flow quickly in the year to come. Circumstance, stress, and brokenness come to all – it is the human condition. And this I say before the clear eyes of children not yet born, children who will inherit the world from us, that all the vows we will make not long from now, all the promises we will make, all the unspoken oaths we will declare, are hereby canceled, annulled, voided, and made unbinding.

We are free, not to promise to be good, but simply to get on with loving each other.

We are free, not to vow great transformations, but to engage life with tenderness and understanding and outpourings of kindness.

We are free, not to swear oaths of everlasting loyalty and righteousness, but to continue to be generous to each other, to ourselves, and to the common good.  
Shalom, Blessed Be, and Amen