

To Be At Onement a sermon by Rev. Doug McCusker

For the Jewish people of the world, we are in the midst of the High Holy Days, which started on October 3rd with Rosh Hashanah and concludes on Wednesday with Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur is considered the holiest day of the year in Judaism.

Obviously this is not a synagogue and we are not a Jewish congregation. But Judaic tradition is one of the sacred sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith. We don't talk about our 6 sources as much as we do our 7 principles, but they are an integral part of the covenant that binds our congregations together as a living tradition. For it is these sources of wisdom and spirituality that guide us in upholding our moral and ethical values in our everyday lives. These sources are as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience.

The 4th of our six sources are Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. In case you were wondering, the 5th source are the Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

In some ways these sources are in stark contrast to each other, or at least they create tension within which we are called to extract for ourselves a spiritual and ethical path. You could look at the two sources that I just mentioned and think that reason and science preclude one from accepting the stories of supernatural phenomenon that are chronicled in the Judeo Christian scripture. However, there are also parallels between loving our neighbors as ourselves and the warnings against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Weaving our sacred sources, distilling contradictions, and embracing difficult aspirations are all part of being a Unitarian Universalist. So it is in that spirit that we honor the Jewish concept of atonement as one of the most challenging and enlightening aspects of the human condition.

Setting aside a day of atonement to reflect on those times when we failed to be our better selves is laid out in the Book of Leviticus of the Hebrew scripture. The book of Leviticus articulates in minute detail the laws and customs of the Jewish faith, particularly for the priesthood. In Chapter 10, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu entered the sanctuary where God was believed to reside in order to offer fire to the altar. Because they were not consecrated or authorized to do so, they were consumed by fire and killed. In Chapter 16, God calls Moses to relay a message to Aaron that he is not to come into the sanctuary anytime he pleases. There is a right way and a wrong way. Especially when approaching God to absolve the sins of the people.

Implicit in this chapter, is a lingering wrath and anger over the Israelite's idolatry of the golden calf on Mount Sinai. This was an egregious violation of the covenant between God and the Israelites, so something needed to be done to repair the broken relationship and make things right again between the 2 parties.

That is the context of Chapter 16. God basically instructs Aaron on how to ask for forgiveness on behalf of himself and the Israelites. It is a rather prescriptive chapter with numerous steps on what the priest should where, how to cleanse himself, how to approach the altar and how to offer sacrifices of atonement. Leviticus is the ultimate Policy and Procedures manual.

We have our own version of Leviticus for how our Fellowship operates. For example, if you want to give a contribution to a specific activity here at the Fellowship, you must consult the P&P manual and follow every step in minute detail or else you face the wrath of the Council of Committees. I'm kidding of course, those procedures are there for a reason, to ensure that even good intentions don't end up causing harm.

Every time I read Leviticus Chapter 16, I think about how glad I am that I wasn't an ancient Jewish priest. There were several places in the detailed instructions that if Aaron screwed up he would die. Offering atonement is serious business, and not to be taken lightly. One must confess and ask for repentance with complete commitment to make things right again.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the ritual, was the role of the scapegoat. Literally, the goat that escapes. After the priest sacrificed a goat in atonement for the sins of the congregation, he was to bring a live goat to the altar. He then lay his hands over the goat's head and confesses all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions and all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness.

The role of the scapegoat was not to take the blame for the people's sins, rather it was a sacrificial symbol of the letting go of guilt and remorse once God had accepted their heartfelt atonement. It was always the last step in the ritual because letting go is the last step in forgiving ourselves for what we have done.

The chapter concludes with God telling the people of Israel to set aside a day of rest and fasting each year on the 7th day of the 10th month in order to offer atonement for their sins.

So what do we do with this source if we are not going to sacrifice a goat and let another one loose into the wilderness? These rituals and their modern practices belong to the Jewish people. For our part, we are called to learn from the teaching of atonement and to practice it in our lives in accordance with our own teachings and principles.

As our name Unitarian Universalism suggests, we cherish the vision of universal oneness. Whether your theology revolves around a divine deity, human connections or natural forces, universal oneness is the thread that binds us together. Universal oneness weaves through our 7 principles and our 6 sources; starting with the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, radical acceptance of one another, a world community living in peace, and culminating with respect for the interdependence of all existence of which we are a part.

Love, community, compassion and peace are ways that we live in harmony with universal oneness. Those modes of existence seek the common good. They are at the heart of every one of the world's religions, ethics and moral principles. Sins and transgressions are those things that we do that violate the universal oneness. When we tear the fabric of interdependence by separating ourselves from the ties that bind, we fall prey to temptation. I'm not talking about specific rules or prohibitions foisted on us by institutional religion. I am talking about the times when we act out of fear and hatred to privilege our egos above others. When we isolate our hearts and deny the universal oneness at the core of our existence we lay the groundwork for evil. That is when we miss the mark.

If you take the word atonement and split it into 2 words between the 2nd and 3rd letter you get the phrase “at onement.” That’s what I think atonement is, a return to onement. When we break our promises, or hurt others through our words or deeds, we must atone to once again be at onement with those to whom we harmed.

In our reading today we are told to search for the good. Acknowledge the bad, and use it as a teacher. Rabbi Orenstein says “do not focus there one minute longer than it takes to uncover the lesson, to find our pure core, and take a different path.”

This message holds true for the victims as well, because atonement and forgiveness go together in symbiotic relationship. True healing of any transgression requires a return to wholeness on the part of both the perpetrator and victim. Atonement and forgiveness are difficult, yet incredibly powerful when done by both sides in the pursuit of their common human bond.

I read an article recently in the Washington Post that illustrates the power of atonement and forgiveness. Ten years ago, Charles Carl Roberts IV walked into a one room Amish schoolhouse in the rural town of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. The 32-year-old father of three young children ordered the boys and adults to leave. He tied up 10 little girls between the ages of 6 and 13 and shot them, killing 5 and injuring the others. Then he killed himself.

By any measure, this was an evil act. A most heinous crime against humanity. Charles Roberts had isolated his heart from those little children, and tried to separate himself from the interdependent web of life. He was dreadfully lost. As a result of his actions, the Amish community was devastated. They had been targeted by someone who killed himself without providing answers to his motives or any clues about why their children had to suffer. Charles Roberts’ parents, who lived in that small community, were also victims. They thought that they would have to move far away. They thought that they would be blamed for not knowing the evil that their son was capable of.

But only a few hours after the massacre, an Amish man named Henry visited the Roberts home and told them that his community did not see them as enemies. Instead, they saw them as parents who were grieving the loss of their child too. Imagine the emotional maturity needed to see through their own pain and suffering to reach out to the parents of the man who killed their children.

Then on the day of Charles Roberts’ funeral, about 30 Amish men and women, including some of the parents of the victims, went to the cemetery and formed a human shield to block out the media’s cameras. About 4 weeks later the Roberts met with some of the victim’s families at a local fire hall and together they grieved the senselessness of the evil that touched them all.

The Amish not only forgave the Roberts they welcomed them into their community. When Terri Roberts, the killer’s mother, was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer, the Amish families brought her food, helped clean her house and cared for her. They even helped build an extension on the Roberts home where she displays a sign on the wall that says “Forgiven.”

About 9 months after the shooting, Terri Roberts invited the Amish to a summer picnic on their property. One of the children who came was a little girl named Rosanna. She was one of the youngest victims. She was wheelchair bound, unable to speak or feed herself. Terri, who is a grandmother, held Rosanna in her arms and rocked her to sleep. Rosanna is 16 years old now and still immobile. Terri Roberts is like another

grandmother to her. She visits with her every week not out of guilt but out of love that was made possible from horrible circumstances.

The Amish community did the opposite of what people usually do. Normally, forgiveness and acceptance come after a long emotional process. But the Amish resolved to forgive first and then work every day to align their emotions with their decision.

They refused to turn the Roberts family into scapegoats who would carry the sins of their child into the wilderness. Instead they included them into their healing circle. This gesture of compassion opened up the space for the Roberts family to forgive Charles IV, even though they would never understand why he did what he did. It also allowed them to offer their friendship to the Amish in a way that probably never would have happened otherwise. They all discovered a common good as neighbors that served as a lesson and a counterpoint to evil.

No one goes through life without hurting someone else along the way. We don't always mean to, but stress sometimes gets the better of us. Or we succumb to our insecurities or fears and lash out as a survival mechanism. Is there anyone who you have wronged, deliberately or indirectly who you've never reconciled with? Have you acted in a way that marginalizes or diminishes the worth of others?

The real test is not in living a life free of transgressions, but in how we atone for them and how we learn from our errors. Likewise, when we have been wronged, the real test is in how we help end the chain of transgressions with forgiveness.

Here we are, thousands of years after Leviticus was written, and the Jewish people continue to set aside a day, their most holy day, to bring themselves back into oneness with God and their community. One does not need to be a Jew in order to align themselves with the awesome oneness of the universe. It is available to all of us on any given day through love, kindness and compassion with our neighbors.

Atonement is a declaration from our hearts that fear and evil will never have the final word. We can let go, learn and rebuild a more loving neighborhood of humanity. May you be at onement with the world and may you be a beacon of peace and forgiveness when others fall short. Blessed be and Amen.