

“ATONEMENT – MAKING THINGS RIGHT”

a sermon by the Rev. Paul Oakley

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro

Waynesboro, Virginia

11:00 AM, Sunday, October 9, 2016

Chanukah is easy. You light candles for eight nights. And eat latkes and sufganiyot. You spin the dreidl. You eat chocolate Chanukah gelt. You sing Chanukah songs. And if you are a child or a child at heart, perhaps you get a present each of the eight nights. Long ago the rabbis put a simple theology on the holiday, making it... easy. Despite fraught origins.

Passover is easy... Now don't you dare tell that to the people preparing the meal and making sure every detail of the Seder is perfect. But you clean the house, prepare a meal, read a book together, you eat symbolic foods, you drink, you sing some songs, you eat a festive meal, you read and sing more together. And you eat one last bit of matzah before saying good night. The reading is a story of ancestors escaping slavery, becoming free. Maybe none of it is historic. But it is beautiful. And easy on the stomach, on the ear and on the heart.

There is nothing easy about Yom Kippur. For the observant Jew, for the duration of the holiday, from sunset one day to sunset the next, there is no eating or drinking except if it is medically necessary. Washing the body, applying perfume, wearing leather shoes. All forbidden if you are traditionally observant. You're not supposed to feel comfortable. On top of that, unless you are unreligious, you spend most of your non-sleeping hours in the synagogue, listening to prayers in Hebrew, prayers you may not understand. But the more you understand, the more you have to wrestle with it. Maybe there is a great choir. The dulcet sounds belie thoughts and beliefs from a different time. On Yom Kippur more than any other day of the Jewish year, the theology implicit in the plain meanings of the prayers can batter you about the ears. For some it can even feel like a shiv jammed in between the ribs. This is the holiday of the Judging God, the God who seals one's fate in the book. Who lives and who dies may have been decided and written on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, but on Yom Kippur it is sealed, as if there is no more chance to improve and do better, no more chance to give up the harm one does to self and others. On the surface, at least, it sounds fatalistic and oppressive. Meanwhile, we've lived through the time of "I'm okay, you're okay," and we live in the age of the *Law of Attraction*. Around us we hear that all we have to do is control the way we envision the world and we can conquer pretty much anything. The ideas are especially challenging to people of our time. It is no wonder that at age 82 Leonard Cohen feels the weight of it in his last recording. "You want it darker? We kill the flame." Many of the images of God in the Yom Kippur prayers are masculine and monarchical, which doesn't go down so well in a more egalitarian age. Thankfully, the dodgy theology is set to beautiful music.

Avinu malkeinu sh'ma kolenu

Avinu malkeinu chatanu l'faneycha

*Avinu malkeinu chamol aleynu
Ve'al olaleynu vetapeinu*

Our father our king, hear our voice
Our father our king, we have sinned before you
...Bring an end to pestilence, war, and famine around us
...Bring an end to all trouble and oppression around us

The darkness of the world stands out, and the big, long, most important prayer of the day, the *Al Cheit*, is a confession of sin. And it is really, really long. What are the sins that are general enough to be written into the prayerbook to be confessed every year? Here is a sampling:

- Hardening our hearts.
- Idle chatter.
- Sexual immorality.
- The way we talk to others.
- Defrauding others.
- Making empty confession.
- Scorning parents and teachers.
- Resorting to violence.
- Foul speech.
- Pursuing the impulse to evil.
- Deceit.
- Taking bribes.
- Speaking ill of others.
- Greed.
- Arrogance.
- Condescension.
- Rashly judging others.
- Superficiality.
- Betraying trust.
- And more...

Now you may be thinking, how can everyone confess to all that? And the drama of it! The choreography of it! Lightly hitting one's chest with one's fist each time a new sin is confessed! And maybe you think of yourself or someone you love and you say to yourself, well maybe I am condescending sometimes, but it is just because there are so many stupid people around town. I certainly don't resort to violence or defraud others or take bribes And what does it mean to be sexually immoral when most of us have given up the notion of the old sexual prohibitions as too narrowly drawn, with too little adjustment for real-world circumstances? It certainly doesn't mean the same as it did for our grandparents.

So you may wonder why Yom Kippur has come to be my favorite holiday.

When I'm at Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis for Yom Kippur, it all starts as I enter the rented hall, the huge ballroom of the Chase Park Plaza, because the synagogue isn't large enough for the couple of thousand people who come maybe only on these holidays. As I enter, I am packed in with a lot of people. People who are close with me in more than just proximity. I am with people I feel a part of. Even with the solemnity of the day and the enormous crowd, there is an extremely strong sense of community. And when we come down to the end of the religious marathon that is Yom Kippur, whether we are in that massive crowd of thousands or in a group of, say fifty, in a smaller synagogue, we say the prayer of confession in the first person plural.

Of these wrongs WE are guilty:
We betray. We steal. We scorn. We act perversely.
We are cruel. We scheme. We are violent. We slander.

And so on. No one is saying on Yom Kippur that they are individually a slanderer, even if they are. The confession is the confession that these wrongs, these acts that are harmful to others, to ourselves, to the community as a whole are acts that are present among us. It is a moral inventory of us as a collective. In this particular election season, we might riff on the Yom Kippur confessions:

We have not taken proper care of the secrets that keep our nation safe.
We have pretended that our shortcomings do not matter in the long run.
We have demeaned and abused women and minorities and those with disabilities.
We have failed to take the great challenges before us seriously.
We have played on the fears and worst impulses of those who look up to us.
We have lied in order to mislead people to act against their best interest.
We have not respected the scientific method or the way it brings us benefits.
We have denied the truth about climate change and put people in harm's way.
We have made the few extremely wealthy by robbing people of ordinary means.
We have glorified weapons without care for their impact in the community.
We have pandered. We have berated. We have hidden the truth. We have been ill prepared.

This is the stuff of Yom Kippur. It is looking at the worst we do as a total society and saying, *this we do*. We do it knowingly and unknowingly, by plan and by weakness, ruled by ideology or by expediency, willingly and unwillingly, openly and in hiding. I didn't do most of it. You didn't do most of it. And yet, there it is. It is no use acting as we collectively don't need to confess it and change our society, because there it is. There it is, and it is infecting our society. It is beyond the individual to change it. Only something bigger than the individual can make an impact on the evils that mount up in a society. Traditionally, yes, God was who you had to turn to for the big stuff. That was the worldview. But for many of us today, we know that even if God is to rid the world of its evils, it is we who will be staffing the work crews, digging out the invasive briars and hauling off asbestos we have removed from our structures.

But if the main work of Yom Kippur is this collective work, not the individual work, how does the things individuals do wrong come into play? How does it fit this model in which that single influential medieval poet claimed that it is written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur what the fate of individuals will be in the coming year? There is that too. And most of that happens before Yom Kippur itself.

The entire month of Elul, the Jewish month preceding Rosh Hashanah, is set aside for self-examination and beginning the work of making amends. In some ways, Elul is like a 12-step program, where you have to look honestly in the mirror, assess your personal wrongs, seek out those you have harmed, make restitution where possible, and ask their forgiveness. And this is key. The theology of Yom Kippur, the theology of atonement in Judaism requires that only the harmed party has the right or ability to forgive. If your wrongdoing or bad judgment has harmed another person, there is nothing God can or will do to get you out of it. You have to do the work yourself. The messy, risky, interpersonal work of admitting the truth, making good what you have made go bad to the greatest extent possible, and seeking to mend relationships wherever possible. So all this communal contrition on Yom Kippur is no substitute for your individual work. One interpretation of why we might still want to hang on to the outmoded image of God writing people's fate in a book on Rosh Hashanah is to put the screws on us to actually make amends before the High Holidays end. Otherwise we could procrastinate forever, right? At least once a year our moral obligations come with a sense of urgency and a date of expiry. And that long prayer of confession ends with this message drawn from the Torah: "Secret matters are the concern of God, but in matters that are revealed, it is for us and our children to apply our highest teachings till the end of time." The responsibility is ours. God will not do our work for us.

Each year as the end of Yom Kippur approaches, it is held, the gates of repentance are symbolically closed until the High Holy Days the next year. In the poem "Before" by Yehuda Amichai, the call to us to take it seriously that we find ourselves before the gates of repentance, though they are not open forever:

Before the gate has been closed,
before the last question is posed,
before I am transposed.
Before the weeds fill the gardens,
before there are no pardons,
before the concrete hardens.

Before all the flute-holes are covered,
before things are locked in the cupboard,
before the rules are discovered.
Before the conclusion is planned,
before God closes his hand,
before we have nowhere to stand.

Amichai's poem does not have a single sentence in it. It consists of twelve prepositional phrases in rhyming triplets. Without a predicate, this comes across to me as a statement of where we find ourselves. We are the people who perpetually live in the space and time before God closes the gates on us, where there is no fatalistic impediment to doing better. Where the community can find atonement. Yet, one does not need to believe in gates of redemption and forgiveness and atonement being closed for another year to understand that time is short to do what one needs to do in life. Sometimes we put it off at our peril.

We Unitarian Universalists often prefer to look on the bright side, to imagine we have the power to make a difference. And we are not wrong in this. But sometimes our message is incomplete as we fail to acknowledge the ways we are responsible for the wrongs of the whole society. The message of Yom Kippur is that it is possible for a community that will face its wrongs to expiate, to atone. As our early Universalist forebears taught, we share a common destiny. We are none of us going to make it through to some land of promise and possibility on our own.