

“Contemplating Sin”  
by Rev. Meghan Cefalu  
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On Thursday and Friday of last week Jews all across the world celebrated Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. We are now in the period of ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, called the “Days of Awe” or “Days of Repentance”. This is a time set aside for serious introspection, a time to consider the sins of the previous year and to repent.

The theme of repentance is fueled by the idea that each year on Rosh Hashanah G-d writes people’s names in various books. The books determine for the next year who will live and who will die, who will have a good life and who will have a bad life. But it is not set in stone. There are three things people can do during the Days of Awe that can alter G-d's decree: repentance, prayer, and good deeds. The books are then sealed on Yom Kippur. The common greeting among Jews during this time is L'shanah tovah, which is short for: "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year".

It seemed to me like a fitting time for us to explore concepts of sin and atonement. So today I will be sharing with you what I learned from my research and reflection on sin. Next week I'll explore the related idea of atonement.

It is hard to talk about sin without also including the concept of guilt. The two are so intertwined. Guilt gets a bad rap in our culture. I'm not sure it is an inherently bad thing. In a sermon Unitarian Universalist minister Stephen D. Edington identified three types of guilt: Manipulative guilt, neurotic guilt, and reality-based guilt.

As he describes it “manipulative guilt...comes from someone or something outside of yourself trying to convince you that you "ought" to feel guilty about something when such feelings on your part are generally unwarranted.” Many religions and parenting styles attempt to control behavior using this method.

Neurotic guilt is the kind we put on ourselves for no rational reason. A congregant I knew in Kansas struggled with this form of guilt. After she got her first well-paying job following years of graduate school she went through a period of feeling guilty every time she bought something nice for herself. One day she called to tell me – or really to confess – that she had just bought a brand new car. I could hear the strain in her voice – her excitement was tempered by her feelings of guilt. It took this woman years to realize that there is nothing sinful spending her hard-earned money on herself once in a while.

The only type of guilt that I think is valuable is reality-based guilt. Edington describes it as the “awareness that we have broken faith with what we know to be our own best selves, or broken a trust with someone who trusts in us, or caused harm...of a physical, emotional, or spiritual nature.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen D. Edington “Atonement and Accountability” February 1, 1998

It is this type of guilt that the psychiatrist Willard Gaylin talks about in his book, *Feelings*. He writes, "Guilt ... is the emotion that shapes so much of our goodness and generosity. It signals us when we have transgressed from codes of behavior which we personally want to sustain...(it) informs us that we have failed our own ideals... Guilt is the guardian of our goodness."<sup>2</sup>

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Sin is one of those concepts that once you start digging you discover it has a tangle of roots in so many other areas. I found myself asking "So then what about evil? Are there ramifications for people who engage in evil acts?" And "What is the role of forgiveness?" Each of these topics is a sermon in itself. Today I've limited the scope to exploring the idea of sin.

When we think of the Christian view of sin we often think of Original Sin. The idea that in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve disobeyed God and humanity will forever be marked by their transgression. It is interesting that early on Christianity did not engage this idea much. This interpretation of original sin was conceived in the fifth century by Augustine of Hippo. The idea that "people are born bad and are in desperate need of redemption lest they perish in a fiery hell for all eternity" conveniently justified the authority of both church and state at the time. The powers that be worked hand-in-hand to force conversions and extend the Roman empire.

Mainstream Christianity for the most part holds that people are innate sinners who are redeemed and restored to God's favor when they accept that Jesus died to atone for their sins. By contrast Unitarian Universalism holds a much more positive view of human nature. In 1803 Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou wrote "A Treatise on Atonement", a definitive statement arguing that Jesus did not die to save us from God's wrath or anger; rather he lived to show us God's love. Many Unitarian preachers around that time were proclaiming our innate capacity for goodness and beauty and that we were created in the divine image.

To this day sin is not a common topic of discussion in our congregations. But I think we need to be cautious about dismissing the idea of sin as some vestige of Christian orthodoxy. I think it is a valuable concept. And ignoring the concept does not make the phenomenon go away. Let us take it out, shake off the dust and take a closer look. It might help us to get a fresh perspective if we look through the lenses of several major world religions.

**Hinduism** holds that human foolishness emanates from ignorance. They believe that it is everyone's task in life to search for truth and to live in it. Those who are the farthest from truth are the worst off.

Mahatma Gandhi warned us that enterprise divorced from truth is potentially disastrous. He said the following could destroy a nation:

- Politics without principle
- Wealth without work
- Commerce without morality

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<sup>2</sup> Willard Gaylin. *Feelings: Our Vital Signs*. (Harpercollins. 1988)

Pleasure without conscience  
Education without character  
Science without humanity  
Worship without sacrifice

The word ignorance in our culture usually means lack of knowledge. The sin of ignorance has nothing to do with education. To ignore is to choose not to look, to hear, to feel. It is about making the choice to turn our back, to remain ignorant, and it, I believe, is the beginning of denial.

Most of us choose at times to avoid painful realities. It is hard to resist the urge to protect ourselves from discomfort. But I think when we sever our relationship to someone or to an issue we also close off a bit of our heart. For example, it is agonizing to acknowledge the injustice routinely inflicted upon people in developing countries. From a Hindu perspective our choice not to see, and hear and learn about and, yes, even experience the heartache of it is a form of sinfulness - because we are not living in the truth.

In **Taoism** “sin” is a lack of balance – a misunderstanding of one’s place in the ways of the universe. Taoists believe that the Universe works in and through us - not the other way around. When we lose touch with our own “quiet being” chaos results. And when we misunderstand our place and begin to assert ourselves too much we cut ourselves off from the spontaneity of nature. This causes misery for us and those around us.

It makes me think of the times when I’ve tried to make other people change. I’m sure none of you have ever thought you could improve someone (even just a little bit) if you tried. “Honey, you would be so much better if only you would notice when the house is getting dirty.” Or “You would be so much more pleasant if only you would stop complaining all the time...”

While this may not sound like sin in the traditional way we understand it, it points out the imbalance that occurs when we lose perspective and assume the role of manipulating the behavior of others.

Buddhism views sin as chaos fueled by ignorance and fear. An American **Buddhist** nun, Pema Chodron, teaches that it is our “fundamental groundlessness” that lies beneath our fear that motivates craving, addiction, aggression, ignorance, jealousy and pride. She says that the way to relieve the fear is paradoxically by entering into the restlessness through meditation because she also believes that deep down we are all good and trustworthy.<sup>3</sup>

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says that wars inside us are fueled by wars outside us and vice versa. Through meditation “we can calm things down, understand them, and bring harmony back to the conflicting elements inside us.” By learning to touch the peace, joy and happiness within us we become resources for others in the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pema Chodron. *When Things Fall Apart*. (Boston: Shambala, 1997)

<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Living Buddha Living Christ*. (New York, Riverhead. 1995)

**Judaism** teaches that sin is “missing the mark” and that striving to stay true to the goal is the way to heal. There are actually several Hebrew words that are translated simply as ‘sin’. One means more accurately “a tortuous road”. So sin can be understood as diverging from order or taking a wrong path. Another term means ‘rebellion’ or ‘revolt’. Going astray is another image for the sinner. In the Bible the prophet Hosea equates sin with adultery or wandering away from the loving relationship with God – a betrayal of the Beloved.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel defines sin as the “refusal of humans to become who we are.”

One idea I found very interesting comes from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. He says that the writers of the Hebrew Bible describe sin as having a “fascinating, binding, frenetic force.” He says that, “The power of a [human] is mysteriously taken possession of by an inclination to evil that corrupts its very source...” Rather than thinking of a person using their agency to *commit* a sin - the person is caught ‘in’ the power of the sin, as if in captivity or bondage. And the way to be liberated from the sin is returning to G-d. Repentance actually means returning.

A closer study of the **Christian** understandings of sin reveals much more nuance than one might assume at first glance. These are some of the comments from diverse Christian theologians:

- Thomas Aquinas, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Catholic priest, believed that sin is an action that obstructs grace. He said, “Sin excludes grace but not the suitability for grace.”
- Paul Tillich said, “Sin is estrangement; grace is reconciliation”.
- Process theologian Norman Pittinger said, “Sin is estrangement from self, others, God and Nature.”
- Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian priest and founder of liberation theology said, “Sin is denial of love.”
- And the protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, said, “Sin is the unwillingness of [men and women] to acknowledge [their] creatureliness and dependence upon God and [their] effort to make [their] own life independent and secure.”

There are common threads running through all these different religious ideas about sin. From the Eastern religions we understand sin as separation from Truth, imbalance with the Universe, and a disconnection with inner Peace.

In Judaism and Christianity we hear themes of the obstruction of Grace, estrangement from self and God and Nature, denial of love, unwillingness to acknowledge dependence upon God.

To me what it boils down to is that sin is about denying our essential oneness; with one another, with Nature, with what is Holy. In order for any of us to treat someone violently we must first objectify the person. When we objectify someone we are denying our oneness; our common humanity.

The same is true when we are violent toward the planet and other living things. Somehow we lose the perspective that we are all creatures, made from the same stardust, inextricably dependent upon one another.

And lastly, and I assure you I am guilty of this more often than not, we forget that the Spirit of Life, the Holy, called by some “God” moves in us and through us in the form of Grace. I believe we are no more separate from this Force of Love than we are from the electrical charges in the atoms that make up our very flesh.

If sins are the actions that deny this oneness then it is actions that reaffirm our awareness of it that will bring us healing and salvation. Right now practicing Jews are spending these ten days of introspection examining their souls. Imagine what it might be like to have time set aside each year to find the ways you have strayed from the path and make amends.

Consider the people in your life you need to approach with apologies and maybe a little tenderness.

How is your current relationship with Nature? Do you feel your place in the order of things?

Is your soul at peace? Or do you need some help to make contact with your own inner stillness?

Should you choose to take on this practice – beyond this hour - may your questing lead you down the road to peace and wholeness.

L’shannah Tovah.

Amen.