

“I Beg Your Pardon”
Rev. Meghan C. Cefalu
September 28, 2008 – UUCM

Shana tova! (Hebrew: “Happy New Year!”)

The Jewish High Holy days are upon us once again.

The Jewish new year, Rosh Hashanah will begin tomorrow evening at sundown, and will last until nightfall on Wednesday.

Traditional Jewish belief is that on Rosh Hashanah God inscribes all of our names in the "books", and on Yom Kippur the judgment entered in these books is sealed for the coming year.

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Days of Awe. This is a time for people to settle all the offenses and misdeeds of the prior year with God and with our fellow human beings. The idea is that before you can get to the point of seeking atonement with God you are first to seek the forgiveness of the people you have wronged. Which means there may be people who will ask you to forgive them during this time as well. At one time it also meant that all financial debts were forgiven.

Yom Kippur, also called the “Day of Atonement”, is the holiest day in the Jewish year. It is essentially our last chance to demonstrate repentance and change God's judgment. On Yom Kippur, our fate for the coming year is sealed.

This is not a Jewish congregation, of course, but Unitarian Universalists do value the wisdom we find in the world’s religious traditions. To me a time set aside every year to become mindful of the spiritual power of forgiveness and the seeking of atonement sounds very wise.

When my husband heard I was preaching on forgiveness today he said, “Didn’t you preach about that last year?”

“Yes,” I told him, “I did.” And went on to say, “And I will probably explore the same topic every year around the High Holy Days for the rest of my career because I think people need it...I know I need it.”

At its core, forgiveness is about restoring a broken connection. The word atonement broken down is: At-one-ment. The state of being joined, as one. When something happens that breaks the connection between ourselves and someone we care about it can be painful.

One of my very first memories, as a young child, maybe only two or three years old, was what it felt like when one of my parents got mad at me. It was so painful, a physical aching in my chest. I would sob my little eyes out, a little human puddle on the floor, until my dad picked me up and wrapped his arms around me. Then when he spoke to me in soft words and looked at me with soft eyes again it was like all was right in the world.

I remember how horrible it felt then because it still hurts in my chest whenever someone I care about gets angry with me. The sudden loss of closeness, the severed connection hurts like nothing else.

Restoring that broken bond gets more complicated when we become adults. I don't know what happens, we get set in our ways I guess. We begin to feel the need to protect our ego. Crumpling into a little ball on the floor and weeping whenever someone gets mad at us is no longer an option.

And when somebody betrays us there is a tendency to cling to our hurt and anger like a badge of honor. Like if we let it go we'd have no leverage, nothing to hold onto to keep our sense of self afloat.

Yet, I think that same dire urge for connection we all had as little children is still there. Buried beneath layers of pride, numbed by years of acting like a grown-up, there is still that rending pain in our hearts that lets us know when our human bonds have been torn or frayed.

It has been said that compassion is the key that unlocks forgiveness. But getting to a place where you have genuine empathy for someone can seem nearly impossible.

In my nonviolent communication class a few weeks ago I was asked to be a part of a role-play with another student who wanted to practice communicating with her mother. I was to play the role of her mother, a far right-wing conservative.

My first thought was, "How can I begin to play this person with any kind of empathy when I disagree so emphatically with her viewpoint. I can't begin to understand how she can believe what she does?"

But then, as the role play began and I let myself speak as this mother, something remarkable happened. While the words were coming out of my mouth I began to realize and feel in my own body the emotions and values that were motivating her. It was one of those unexpected "a-ha" experiences. She is just as concerned about the direction of this county and mistrustful of people on the other side of the political spectrum as I am. We differ only in the strategies we think would work best.

Since that class I've actually found my attitude softening some towards people on the far political right. It is not about agreement in beliefs, but an appreciation for our common underlying needs.

How many of you have gone to a church where the Lord's prayer was recited every week? Even if you didn't, I think most of us are at least casually familiar with it. The Lord's Prayer is one of the most often repeated prayers in the world. The story behind it was that his disciples, recognizing his spiritual mastery, asked Jesus the very best way to pray. They wanted a prayer that covered all the bases and hit all the important sacred points. In response he taught them what we now know as the Lord's Prayer.

But what we in our culture sometimes forget is that Jesus didn't speak English. When the prayer was finally captured on papyrus, decades after Jesus' death, it was not written in the King's English. It was first passed down in the language Jesus spoke: Aramaic. From there it was translated into Greek, and later into English. In all those translations it would be impossible not to lose some of the subtle tones of meaning from the original words.

Biblical scholars have gone back and studied Aramaic to try to better understand the intent and nuance of the ancient texts. One scholar, Neil Douglas-Klotz, has taken the Lord's Prayer and retranslated it from the Aramaic giving several possible alternate renditions of each of the phrases. I have found that studying the different translations has enhanced my appreciation of the prayer.

Take the line: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us. The author says that, "Besides *forgive* the root of the first word may also be translated "return to its original state," "reciprocally absorb," "reestablish slender ties to," and "embrace with emptiness."¹

The word used in the book of Luke that is translated as *sins* could also be rendered as "failures," "mistakes," "accidental offenses," "frustrated hopes," or "tangled threads" – "the latter implying that some mending or restoration is needed."

He says that, "The prayer reaffirms that our original state is clear and unburdened, one where our slender ties to creation are based on mutual releasing, with every breath we breathe."

Perhaps for you, like for me, the prayer has become rote and overused to the point of losing all meaning. Yet I believe prayer can be a powerful instrument of intention. Listen to the poetry and the layers of meaning in these alternate phrases:

- Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of other's guilt.
- Forgive our hidden past, the secret shames, as we consistently forgive what others hide.
- Lighten our load of secret debts as we relieve others of their need to repay.
- Erase the inner marks our failures make, just as we scrub our hearts of others' faults.
- Absorb our frustrated hopes and dreams, as we embrace those of others' with emptiness.
- Untangle the knots within so that we can mend our hearts' simple ties to others.
- Compost our inner, stolen fruit as we forgive others the spoils of their trespassing.
- Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of other's guilt.²

¹ Neil Douglas Klotz. *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic words of Jesus*. HarperCollins 1990.

² *Ibid.*

The meaning of the parable of the Little Soul that Gail read earlier is simple. We are all here to teach one another and offer each other opportunities to forgive. I like the story. It made me smile when I first read it. And it made me think about all the petty annoyances I've had with various people over the years. Aw, they were just in my life right then to teach me about forgiveness.

And that may be true on some level. But in my work I often run into people who tout rather pithy theology-light beliefs like, "We are all co-creators of the Universe with God," and "God won't give you more than you can handle." Or the belief that positive affirmations can bring just about anything into being, from higher self-esteem to a new Lexus.

Its not that those beliefs are wrong exactly. It is just that they do not hold up well when real life happens to people.

The test of a theological belief it has to make sense in extreme cases. The question I ask myself is, for example, how would these ideas be of use when trying to offer comfort to a woman in Iran whose child just died of starvation because of US sanctions against her country? Can I look her in the eye and tell her she co-created her Universe with God? Maybe she was not saying her daily affirmations. And when she later kills herself in a fit of rage and grief and despair, could I really say with any integrity that God didn't give her more than she could handle?

Or a bit closer to home: I could never tell a woman that she and her father had a prior agreement that when on earth together he was going to beat her and humiliate her throughout her childhood and into her teen years and on into adulthood so that she could learn forgiveness. I would not say to her that he was somehow giving her a precious gift. Or that she should remember, even at the moments when he hits her with his fist or with his words, that her father is a perfect soul, a beloved child of God.

How could anyone bring themselves to tell her she actually should be grateful to him because without him she would not have the opportunity to learn forgiveness. No, I just can't get behind that. That is both an immature and irresponsible theology.

So how do I speak to this woman of forgiveness?

I might say that forgiveness does not mean she has to forget what her father did to her. Her entire life has been shaped by his mistreatment of her. Her self-image, her relationships, the way she keeps her eyes lowered when she talks to people. How could she ever forget?

I might suggest the idea that it doesn't really matter if her father even deserves to be forgiven. That that is not the point. Because forgiveness is about releasing her own anger. It is really much more about her than it is about him.

And I would have to say that it may simply be impossible to restore the torn connections between her and her father. And for that she may simply need to mourn. In the words of the blog author Real Live Preacher, "Forgiveness does not always lead to a healed relationship.

Some people are not capable of love, and it might be wise to let them go along with your anger. Wish them well, and let them go their way.”³

Or as Jack Kornfield said, “Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.”

So on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, and as we enter the Days of Awe, I hope we take this opportunity to reflect on the relationships in our lives.

Might one of them need a little mending?

In this season of forgiveness, may we learn to loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of other’s guilt. And untangle the knots within so that we can mend our hearts’ simple ties to others.

Shana Tova!
And Amen.

³ Real Live Preacher, RealLivePreacher.com Weblog, July 7, 2003