

...We Begin Again in Love

Readings: 'The Land of Beginning Again' by Louisa Fletcher
'The Powwow at the End of the World' by Sherman Alexie
'We Return Again and Again' by Leslie Takahashi

Once upon a time, a stranger arrives in a town. It is an unusual town. Every person in town carries a large bundle on his or her or their back. The traveler is puzzled. He watches the people for a while. He notices that they always wore these bundles no matter what they were doing and every person had one. He decides to ask about this strange habit.

He stops a young man and says, "my good man, I am a stranger to your land and am fascinated by these large bundles you all carry about, but never seem to put down. What is their purpose?"

"These are our grudges," says the young man, matter-of-factly.

"Why those are a lot of grudges for a young man to have!" the traveler says.

"Oh, they are not all mine. Most are family heirlooms... See that man over there? I have quite a lot of grudges against his family. His great-great- grandfather called mine a horse thief when they both were running for mayor."

The traveler says, "you all look so unhappy. Is there no way to get rid of these burdens?"

"We've forgotten how. You see, at first, we were proud of these grudges. Tourists came from miles around, but after a few years, this became a dreary place. Nobody came and we had forgotten how to stop holding our grudges."

"If you really want to get rid of these grudges," the traveler says, "I know five magic words that will do the trick."

"You do?" says the young man. "That would be wonderful!" He runs off to gather all of the people of the town together. It takes them a while to assemble because of the heavy burdens they are carrying.

The traveler addresses the crowd. "My friends, these are simple words, yet some people find them hard to say... The trick is that you must say them to each other and truly mean them. The first two words are 'I'm sorry.' The other three are 'I forgive you.' Can you say that? Now say these words to each other."

There is a long pause, and then a quiet murmur as people start saying these magic words to one another, truly meaning them. As the spoken apologies and offers of forgiveness grow louder and louder the bundles of grudges grow smaller and smaller until they finally disappear. Freed of these heavy burdens, people are able to straighten their backs again and look one another in the eye. The traveler overhears people saying things like, "look how those trees have grown!" and "Jim, it is so good to see your face again!"¹

So goes the story 'What if No One Forgave?' by Barbara Marshman. It's one of my favorites to tell. But we know things aren't always as simple as this story would have us believe. We know that an apology, no matter how sincerely felt, is not always enough to make things right. When real harm has been done it takes actions over time before repentance is earned, if it ever is. And yet we also know, that grudges can burden us, limit us, and harm us.

Had the village in the story been a predominantly Jewish village, the grudges never would have gotten this far, this big, this back-breaking. In the Jewish tradition, there is time set aside every fall to let go of

¹ Marshman, Barbara. 'What if Nobody Forgave?' in *What if Nobody Forgave and Other Stories*. Colleen M. McDonald, ed. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999. Pages 87-89.

grudges, offer and receive forgiveness and make things right. The Jewish new year is marked in the fall, sometime in September or October on a date that follows the lunar calendar. Rosh Hashanah is the new year. It is followed by the Ten Days of Repentance and then Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These are the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, and often called the High Holy Days. They are solemn days, days to review the previous year and make amends as needed.

One of the legends associated with these days says that God has two books. The Book of Days and the Book of Life. The Book of Days has a page for each person. It's written out like a ledger, with the good deeds in one column and sins in another. The Book of Life says what will happen to each person in the coming year. Rosh Hashanah, New Year's Day, is the Day of Judgement. On that day, God reviews the ledgers one by one with Satan acting as prosecuting attorney and an angel arguing for the person's defense. The few people whose good deeds overwhelmingly outweigh their bad deeds are written into the Book of Life right away and will have good things happen to them in the coming year. The people whose bad deeds overwhelming outweigh their good deeds are written into a different section of the Book of Life and have misfortune awaiting them in the year ahead. Most people are somewhere in the middle with a mix of good and bad in their ledger. Most people don't get their names written into the Book of Life on Rosh Hashanah. God decides to withhold judgement and give humanity a little more time. If a person repents during the days of repentance that begin the year, God wipes away all their misdeeds and writes their name in the good section of The Book of Life. On Yom Kippur, the Book of Life is closed, but God still waits another 15 days before sealing it for the year, just in case any stragglers want to repent, make things right, and get their names added to the good section of the book.²

For Observant Jews, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is a solemn holiday. People marking the day fast for 24 hours, consuming no food or water from sunset to sunset. Much of the day is spent in religious services, with extra prayers added especially for the day.

The first religious service, which happens in the evening includes a prayer asking God to absolve people from the vows they were unable to fulfill. What vows might you need to be released from? In other services, the community as a whole repents for the sins of all. People are encouraged to review their lives individually as well and repent the specific wrongs that he or she or they committed. As this year gets underway, are there things for which you must repent?

We obviously follow a different calendar than the one the Jewish community uses for religious observance, but it is worthwhile at this time, in the early days of our calendar year, to look at the past year, examine our good deeds and our bad deeds and do what is necessary to make things right.

Taking a moral inventory, offering apologies for our shortcomings, and doing what can be done to make things right is an important part of living in right relations, living with integrity, making our values real. We all mess up, make mistakes, hurt people, fall short of our aspirations. And when that happens, we are called to make it right. The Jewish tradition offers us resources for how to do this, techniques like the magic words in the story that will lighten our metaphorical load.

The Hebrew word for repentance is teshuvah. Literally, it means "turning." I love the metaphor in that. Repentance is a turning ourselves away from our previous actions, turning ourselves toward God or other sources of meaning and strength, turning ourselves toward a new way. In one of the best introductory books on Judaism, Stephen M. Wylen explains three stages of teshuvah:

² Wylen, Stephen M. *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism*. New York, Paulist Press, 1989. Page 115.

'First, a person must admit to having done wrong. It is possible to find all kinds of justification for our misdeeds, to excuse them or explain them away or to blame them on someone else. Teshuvah requires that one admit that his misdeeds were simply wrong; they should not have been done.

The second stage of teshuvah is to be truly sorry for the wrongs one has committed. This does not automatically follow from the first stage. One may be glad to have committed a wrong. One may confess, "I did it, and I would do it again." Teshuvah requires that one be filled with regret for having done wrong. The third stage of teshuvah is to vow never to repeat the sin. This stage is also very difficult. Even if a person deeply regrets having committed a sin, the memory of the pleasure or gain which that sin brought might cause him to reserve to himself the option of repeating it at some future time...

If one has sinned against another person, one is required to make restitution if at all possible. One must seek the forgiveness of those who have been wronged."³

It's a simple formula, admit wrong doing, be truly sorry, don't do it again, seek forgiveness, make restitution in some way but we know it is hard to live.

We also know that wisdom about repentance is shared across many traditions. We all need some way to name our mistakes and make things right. One place where the steps of teshuvah are echoed is in the twelve steps that help so many lead lives of integrity and recovery. They were first used by alcoholics but now many with behavior they struggle to control find strength in twelve step programs.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 8: Made a list of all person we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

Over the last months, calls for repentance, for teshuvah, for turning to a new way, have filled our headlines, our social media feeds, and our hearts. The #MeToo movement, which was energized by reporting about Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein published in October, has led women and others to tell their stories about sexual harassment and sexual assault. Many in this congregation have participated. We have remembered hard experiences we lived through, witnessed, and supported loved ones through. We have seen powerful men in politics, media, the arts, and other fields lose respect and their jobs after their misdeeds became widely known. Many of us have had personal heroes brought low and had to rethink our opinions of people we had previously admired. We have told our stories. We have participated in conversations about what it might look like to hold people accountable for sexual assault and sexual harassment.

And we have heard some terrible, insincere apologies. Apologies that, likely with the assistance of public relations professionals and lawyers, are not actually apologies at all. "I am sorry if you were hurt." "I regret my actions and I don't remember those incidents." "I believed it was consensual, despite the power difference." And my personal least favorite, the apology from Mario Batali after sexual assault allegations lost him some of his jobs. The apology contained a link to a recipe for cinnamon rolls. There is nothing about that that leads us to believe he actually repents, wants to make things right, or will turning to a new way of being.

³ Wylen, 123

Apologies are surprisingly difficult to do well, but the Jewish tradition offers us a simple recipe. "I did something wrong. I am truly sorry. I won't do it again. I will work to make it right. I ask for forgiveness." It is my hope that in the months and years ahead, some of the men who lost so much in this season will repent, will turn, will make it right. I'm not sure what that looks like, each of these men will have to find their own way toward integrity and right relations, if that is how they chose to turn. In my most hopeful imaginings, they give significant time and money over the long-term to efforts to support survivors of sexual violence and to stop violence. They engage in quiet, effective advocacy for pay equity or changing workplace cultures, especially in industries where harassment is rampant. They learn about consent and teach others. In short, they are transformed in some way. I hope that some of these men will show us a turning – and will show us all a path of repentance in the moments when we struggle to make things right after hurting someone. Perhaps such efforts will merit some sort of forgiveness by the people these men victimized. Perhaps that will never come.

These past months, as new sexual harassment and sexual assault allegations arose almost daily, I've been repeating a piece of the Unitarian Universalist Association first principle like a mantra "inherent worth and dignity, inherent worth and dignity, inherent worth and dignity." It has been a prayer and an aspiration. For the women, gender-nonconforming people, and men who are bravely telling their stories, I repeat, "inherent worth and dignity" in the hopes that they might know in their bones that their worth and dignity cannot be erased by the violation they have experienced, that they might always feel worthy of love and worthy of the justice that is their due and that they now courageously seek. For those accused of violence and harassment, I repeat "inherent worth and dignity, inherent worth and dignity" to remind myself that they are not monsters, but human, still worthy of love and care even though they have caused great pain. My repeated words remind me of our teaching that everyone is worthy, no matter what, no exceptions. None of us are disposable. None of us are defined by the worst thing we have done. When I hear details of the assaults that are alleged, I struggle to remember this. I do hope that they turn, that they repent, that they make amends and that they begin again in love. Our first principle is easy when it applies only to the people we like and respect, but that doesn't mean much. We are called to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people, no matter what, no exceptions. For me, I fear, this will be part of my spiritual work for my entire life. Yet, I know it is a life-giving, love-giving project. I invite you on this journey alongside me.

And as part of our journey of turning, of repentance, of beginning again. I invite you into our closing song. It is different than most of our music. There is a spoken and sung part. Gordon will be our narrator and after each short phrase, Jeanne will lead us in a sung response, "we forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love."

The words of this piece were written by Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, who is a mentor of mine and a Unitarian Universalist minister with Jewish roots. He leads his congregation in these words every year on the Sunday during the days of repentance – and invites them to look around the room, make eye contact with one another, offering forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. As you feel comfortable with the sung response, I invite you to let your eyes leave the words and look at one another.

Closing Words:

The Jewish tradition teaches – and we know – that rituals of repentance are not enough. Things are made right by our actions. If you have forgiveness to seek or to offer, I wish you courage. If you have repentance or turning to do, I wish you courage. May we all go out and make things right. Let us go in peace and go in love.