

A Place of New Beginnings

Rev. Mark Hayes
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“We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.”
Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs

A place of new beginnings. If you have any question about what “place” I am referring to, check the cover of your Order of Service, and there it is. That’s right; this is the place. A place we gather regularly as a religious community to celebrate our lives together, to reflect, individually and collectively, on where we have been and on where we are going. And yes, to mark new beginnings, especially when there are aspects of our lives we would just as soon leave behind so as to get a fresh start. What better place than our religious community to recommit ourselves to the task of forgiving ourselves and each other and beginning again in love?

Just as there are places particularly suited to new beginnings, there are also some special times so suited. Yom Kippur is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. And while most of us are not Jewish or of Jewish background, our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism does include Jewish teachings as one of its sources of religious wisdom. Judaism is a part of our religious heritage. And so, since Yom Kippur begins this evening, we reflect today on some of the wisdom and lessons we may draw from this sacred Jewish observance.

The name “Yom Kippur” means “Day of Atonement.” It is a day set aside to atone for the sins of the past year; that is, to demonstrate repentance and make amends. To make a fresh start, a new beginning. One salient feature of Judaism, evident from a reading of the Hebrew scriptures, is an honest acknowledgment of the weakness and fallibility that are inherent in human nature. The characters of the Old Testament are no idealized saintly role models. They have the same kinds of vices and foibles as we and all people have. They’re human. This acknowledgment of normal human fallibility leads to religious observances and practices addressing that situation and seeking a path toward wholeness despite human limitations and imperfection.

This basic sense of humility is one gift we can appreciate from the Jewish side of our religious heritage. Another is the annual reminder provided by these High Holy Days. Certainly we could benefit by keeping such issues as repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the foreground of our thoughts and actions year-round. But, hey, we’re human too. It can’t hurt to have a periodic reminder of the liberating effect of letting go of our guilt, our resentments, and our grudges and giving ourselves and our neighbors a fresh start.

That is what these Jewish High Holy Days are all about. They began nine days ago with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and end tonight and tomorrow with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The beginning of a new year brings with it the idea of new beginnings, of getting a fresh start. And the Day of Atonement complements that with the notion of becoming once again at one with ourselves, our God, and with the human community of which we are a part.

The period between the two festivals, known as the Days of Awe, remind us that there is more involved than simply sweeping the past under the rug and declaring a new start. The Days of Awe are devoted to a careful examination of who we are and how we have failed – failed others, failed our own selves, and failed God, or our highest ideals. This introspection presumably leads to regret and remorse for any harm we have done.

But that's not enough. As author Elizabeth Cullinan notes: "The danger with *feelings* of penitence is that we allow them to take the place of those actions that are its true manifestation." Indeed, our regret and remorse should lead to attempts at restitution, when possible, and to turning away from our past selves to better selves. Selves who will act differently in the coming new year. This is the meaning of repentance – turning back, forswearing our foolish ways, as we sang earlier this morning.

On this day of atonement, as a first step toward making amends for injuries or wrongs we may have done this year – large or small – I invite us to reflect for a moment. Where are our regrets? Whether or not we are prepared to confess to someone else and ask forgiveness and make amends, what are we ready to confess to ourselves? Where have we fallen short of the aims set forth in our moments of high resolve? Let's take a few moments to reflect on that now. . .

May forgiveness, atonement, and wholeness come together in this place as we become one gathered community once again seeking a new beginning.

Yom Kippur is a time well-suited to efforts to make a new beginning, but it is by no means the only such time. The reading I shared with you this morning was actually focused on New Years Day, our annual January 1 celebration. And of course we often use that opportunity to make resolutions. To commit ourselves to behaviors and attitudes that will make the coming year better than the one just past. Once again, a time of new beginnings.

And we don't stop there. Just two weeks ago, we celebrated our re-gathering for the start of a new church year, with its implicit fresh start. In the spring, we often acknowledge and celebrate the metaphorical concept of resurrection, as manifested in rebirth and renewal in the world of nature, and symbolizing rebirth and renewal in our lives. New beginnings.

And you won't be surprised when I tell you that this focus on new beginnings needn't be limited to once, twice, even a dozen times a year. Indeed, every new day presents each of us with an opportunity to start anew. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could." What is implied by that statement is that a new day will give you another opportunity to do what you can without being dragged down by yesterday's failures or shortcomings.

Donald Latumahina, a life coach and student of personal development, agrees. He writes:

Sometimes we start a day with the previous day still in mind. We think about the mistakes we made in the previous day, how things went wrong, and how we felt bad about it. No wonder it becomes difficult to focus on the current day. And since we cannot fully focus on the day, our performance may drop and things may once again go wrong. This pattern could repeat again and again, where the burden from the previous day is taken to the current day and makes it bad, which will then be a burden for the following day. The chain may be hard to break and your overall performance may drop, not to mention the difficulty to have a peaceful mind.

So it's important leave the past day behind. Always start your new day fresh, without thinking about yesterday. This way you will be able to fully concentrate, do your best, and improve your performance.

And there are some specific recommended steps to help with that. One is to take time at the end of a day to evaluate, and to extract the lessons of that day. This means not only reflecting on what went wrong, but what went right. Building on strengths is often more

productive than trying to correct weaknesses. Then, the idea is to take the lessons of the day, and nothing more, into the next day, along with a commitment to apply them in the new day. And then when you wake up in the morning, “Instead of thinking about the past, focus on applying the lessons to the present. This way you will be able to start your day fresh without the burden of yesterday.”

So we have the seasonal religious and cultural reminders to make fresh starts in our lives. And we have the admonitions to do the same on a daily basis for ourselves. But in between those two extremes, there is another role to be played by this or any religious community – this place of new beginnings. And that is as a weekly reminder, as we gather for communal worship, to renew our commitment to our aspirations and our highest values.

Regardless of the particular topic or theme of any given Sunday service, there is always the opportunity to speak and hear joys and sorrows, highs and lows of our lives. And there is always the opportunity to pause and reflect on the current state of our minds, our hearts, our souls. And we can, if we so desire, choose to make another fresh start as we set out on another week of our lives.

One of the ways we express some of our common aspirations as members of this community is through our congregational Covenant. That Covenant is an expression of how we want to be, together, as a community. Our Covenant appears each Sunday in the Order of Service, and I think it’s a good idea to take a look at it now and then to remind ourselves of the promises we make to one another. Will you turn now to the middle of your Order of Service and find the Covenant down below the weekly calendar? And will you read its seven lines aloud, with me?

We, the members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County, covenant to:

Come together in a spirit of trust and respect; to love, listen, cry, and laugh;

Shaping a mutually supportive community that nurtures our minds and spirits, and celebrates the worth and dignity of us all.

We commit ourselves to do this with caring, compassion, and understanding through open, honest communication.

There’s a lot in there. A lot to live up to: trust and respect; loving, listening, crying, laughing; mutual support; nurturing minds and spirits; worth and dignity of all; open, honest communication with caring, compassion, and understanding. It’s important for us to make those kinds of promises to one another. But what about when we fall short? We, like the ancient Jews, understand that we will, at least occasionally, fail.

But such a covenant is not designed to justify expulsion of those who violate it. On the contrary, the spirit of such a covenant is to set high, even unreachable, standards. And then, to remind us, when we do fall short, of those high aspirations, so that we can make yet another new beginning toward meeting them.

Humanity has been described as the promise-making animal, and as the promise-breaking animal. Under the guidance of our covenant, I believe we become promise re-making animals, choosing over and over to forgive ourselves and each other, and to begin again in love.

There’s a poem by the Sufi mystic Rumi set to music in our hymnal. We occasionally sing it as a gathering song on Sunday mornings. It goes:

Come, come whoever you are
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving
Ours is no caravan of despair
Come, yet again come

Not printed in the hymnal is another line of the poem, which some of us add as a repetitive drone as the verse is sung. It goes, “Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times . . . come, yet again, come”

If you’ve broken your vows a thousand times; if you’ve fallen short in upholding our congregational covenant, or your own personal standards of conduct, that’s okay. Come, yet again, come.

Come to this place of new beginnings. Come to this place of renewal. Come here to renew your affirmation of your values and aspirations. Come here to renew your commitment to live up to those aspirations, to act out of love and hope, not out of fear, resentment, and despair.

We acknowledge, along with the wise elders of Judaism, and Sufism – of every faith tradition – that we are human, and will inevitably fall short.

Indeed, that is why we need a regular time and place to make a new beginning.

And so, here we are. Here we have come, yet again, acknowledging our human failings, but choosing to forgive ourselves and each other, and to begin again in love.

So may it be.