

## **A Soul Inventory on the High Holy Days**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Sept. 20, 2020**

It's midnight on the Saturday evening before the Jewish celebration of Rosh Hashanah. The velvety night sky is peppered with glittering stars as the crescent moon offers some light to the passersby. Despite the late hour, eager folks enter the synagogue in anticipation of the High Holy Days. As the synagogue fills, people prepare for the Selichot service – a service on forgiveness. Those in attendance enter the service at this midnight hour, a time that traditionally signified waking up early – an act made to demonstrate an eagerness for repentance. The service offers prayers of penance, preparing those in attendance for the imminent High Holy days – beginning with Rosh Hashanah and continuing on through Yom Kippur. The upcoming days will focus on the previous year, offering repentance for wrong doings and asking for forgiveness from God and people alike.<sup>1</sup> Rosh Hashanah begins with the familiar blessing, “Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this day”<sup>2</sup> With this prayer on their lips, the search for forgiveness and repentance begins. Judaism has much to teach us all about the power of repentance and forgiveness – of deep introspection of the soul. I invite us all into a journey of overlapping paths crisscrossing over various beliefs and truths of both Judaism and Unitarian Universalism as we pause to reflect on the High Holy Days, obtaining ancient Jewish wisdom.

These days mark a sacred way to repent for wrongdoings – to do deep internal work – and ask forgiveness from those who have been harmed, and to sincerely ask forgiveness from a merciful God.

Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick writes of these acts as a “soul inventory,” – a “path towards God.”<sup>3</sup> This path has

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<sup>1</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick pg 131

<sup>2</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson pg 96

<sup>3</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick pg 133

Biblical origins where promises are documented. Ezekiel promises in the Hebrew Bible that, in doing this introspective work and reckoning with others and with God, each person can attain “new heart and new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31)<sup>4</sup> This belief that through introspection, repentance, and a humble request for forgiveness, we can return to that which is higher than ourselves. – to return to our “true selves” – to “return to God.”<sup>5</sup>

We can explore this idea of a “soul inventory” - But what is a soul? The soul, in Judaism, is everlasting and eternal. In an origin myth, in creation the human body was but a lump of clay – the soul brought this clay to life – transforming this substance into a living, breathing human creature. Each individual soul is a spark of light from God – a spark of the divine.<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Dosick writes, “The source of life is the soul, and the source of the soul is God.”<sup>7</sup> So what does this mean as Unitarian Universalists? This articulates the belief that we each have in us a piece of the holy – whatever that may mean to each one of us. So when taking inventory of the soul we inventory the eternal – we inventory that spark that gives us life. We take a deep, introspective look at both the good we have done and the times we have fallen short. We look at those times we courageously acted on our values, and the times when we let our values fall by the wayside. Both our times of glory and our times of shame. We can inventory all of this – and bring it to our holy. For me, there is such a sense of awe in this. Something beautiful about getting closer to the holy when confronting our transgressions. A sacred opportunity for remorse, for renewal.

Rosh Hashanah is upon us and the shofar – an ancient musical instrument made of a rams horn – is sounded in an intricate series of short and long blasts. These sounds are sacred in this faith – and serve

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<sup>4</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson pg 134

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* pg 95

<sup>6</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick pg 2

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg 319

to begin the High Holy Days, preparing folks for the days ahead, the ancient sound serving to remind those of the Jewish faith of the work ahead. Rosh Hashanah begins.<sup>8</sup>

Rosh Hashanah is the “Head of the Year” – the Jewish New year. Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the “creation of the world.”<sup>9</sup> On this day, those of the Jewish faith ask for divine mercy, from a God who is not vengeful but a God who cares! The plea, “deal with us with love and kindness and help us.”<sup>10</sup> A humble ask for a forgiving God, a respectful request for mercy.

After Rosh Hashanah - after 8 more Days of Repentance - comes Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur begins as the sun dips below the horizon with the *Kol Nidre* service. The prayer, heard and spoken as a chant, serves to acknowledge transgressions, and to acknowledge that “God will hear the prayers of repentance and grant forgiveness.”<sup>11</sup> Again, this belief of a merciful God forgiving transgressions – transgressions each and every one of us will ultimately make, year in and year out.

It is tradition on this day, that tables are not laden with fruits, vegetables, and grains – instead, they are barren. Yom Kippur is a day of fasting, is as a day of rest, as mandated in the book of Leviticus “For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleans you; from all your sins before Adonai you shall be cleansed” (Leviticus 16:29-30).<sup>12</sup> In following these mandates, folks are cleansed, renewed – by engaging with God, transgressions are stripped away. Washed away to cleanse that spark.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid pg 133

<sup>99</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick 131

<sup>10</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 97

<sup>11</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick 135

<sup>12</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 99

These barren tables – this fasting – serves to show that forgiveness and repentance are more important than everyday needs – more important than feeding the body or quenching the thirst. Fasting demonstrates that time is better spent praying; that prayer supersedes other bodily needs.<sup>13</sup>

The plea we heard earlier, “deal with us with love and kindness and help us,” introduces the Jewish understanding of God. God, again, not as vengeful, but a God who forgives those who ask, who offers love and kindness. God does not wish death or punishment for those who have transgressed, instead, God asks for repentance.<sup>14</sup> And while these prayers seem somber, this creates a closer connection to God during this period of forgiveness and repentance and it is indeed a time of joy! This belief that humbly asking for forgiveness brings us closer to our God – to the sacred.

There is a Christian understanding of repenting for sins. Judaism does not have a word for “sin.” Instead, a concept that there are times when mistakes are made, when one “misses the mark.” When one has transgressed from perfect morals and ethics. But this is not to sin. Unlike Christianity, where Jesus atoned for our sins, each and every one of us is responsible for our own transgressions, our own wrongdoings. As such, only we can seek forgiveness.<sup>15</sup>

And these transgressions? They are universal! Everyone does this. Each and every one of us falls short at different times. During Yom Kippur, no matter how grave one’s transgressions may have been, no one is estranged from the community, no one is excluded.<sup>16</sup> We are all on a journey, no one is perfect. Instead of achieving perfection, we can aim to do better – year after year. Folks acknowledge, accept, work with God, and move forward to make next year a better one. The Days of Atonement

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<sup>13</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick 135

<sup>14</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 97

<sup>15</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick 139

<sup>16</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 100

begin with an acknowledgement of moral failings. The next step is to repent. To make a commitment to oneself and others not to make the same mistake again.<sup>17</sup>

Transgressions are universal. And so is forgiveness, for those who repent. The Book of Jonah raises the question, “is repentance available to all peoples?” The answer? A resounding “Yes!”<sup>18</sup> Every person, no matter what their transgressions, can repent, and in repenting, be forgiven. This Jewish belief that God does not seek to punish, but instead implores people to repent. And when they do, they are met with mercy. In Unitarian Universalism, I see repentance as a sense of deep remorse, a regret for wrongdoing that we can bring to our own individual understanding of the holy. Bring to our holy, whatever that holy may be, in an act of repentance to be forgiven – we can be forgiven.

Amongst the solemn nature of prayers of forgiveness and repentance, Rabbi Noah Weinberg writes, “The entire world is God’s message of love to us. Yom Kippur is the time when we are most open to receive this message.” What a stunning juxtaposition! These prayers are filled with remorse and yet what results is an openness to the true beauty of God and the natural world. During this time of remorse we are even closer to the holy and to all the beauty that the holy provides us with – birds, sunsets, the power of a lightning bolt – because we open our souls in the most vulnerable of fashions – admitting our wrongs and imploring ourselves to do better. This belief that during these times of asking for forgiveness and seeking repentance we meet with a God – not vengeful, but merciful. We meet with a God prepared to forgive us! To forgive all of those who sincerely repent.<sup>19</sup>

This headfirst dive into ideas of forgiveness and repentance shows parallels into a woman’s response to her own alcoholism – a woman we’ll call Sue. Sue struggled with her addiction and, at her lowest, when

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid 98

<sup>18</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 102

<sup>19</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick 134

her adult children cut off all contact with her, found Alcoholics Anonymous. In those rooms she formed a deep connection with her God – her higher power. Entering the program, she felt lost, separated from her true self. Sue came to believe that her “higher power” could restore her soul if only she asked for it. So she asked for it! She prayed to her God – her high power, for forgiveness. She repented! She admitted to others and to her higher power all of her wrong doings. She repented, not only to her God, but first and foremost to every person she had hurt while in the throes of addiction – every lie she told or insult she recklessly threw at those she loved. In moving forward, she made this act of repentance every time she wronged someone. Sue made mistakes, noticed them, and brought this to those she had harmed. Sue asked her holy for forgiveness and received it, and forgave herself. And in this process – which took time – she formed a beautiful relationship with God – a God who did not punish but forgave – a relationship that modeled the love she would find in all the relationships she repaired and made along the way. Eventually, she reconnected with her children. She remains sober to this day. Sue suffered, came to terms with all of the tragedies in her life, brought them to God, repented, forgave herself, and healed.

This journey laid out in the High Holy Days can help all of us return to our true selves. Through the lens of Unitarian Universalism, we are inherently good. This is what our first principle tells us: We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person – including ourselves. When we take a soul inventory we can acknowledge those things which do not hold true to us – when we fall short of our values, when our actions inevitably digress from our understanding of the holy, when we mess up. In bringing this to our holy with true remorse and a commitment not to repeat our transgressions, we return to our core – our inherent goodness. Admitting, not sins, but a missing of the mark. Mistakes that we, as individuals, are responsible for. A sacred act of cleansing.

As lifted up in a Jewish creation story, humans were all lumps of clay until a flicker of light from God entered each one, creating an everlasting soul. On these holy days, those of the Jewish faith delve deep into this spark – contemplate on wrongdoings, transgressions, and yet in this work grow ever closer to God and to one’s true self. Those of the Jewish tradition do not ask for forgiveness or repent only on the High Holy Days, but every day, just like Sue. This is a soul inventory each person can engage with every day. Constantly stripping away the pain of those inevitable transgressions to return to one’s true self, and to be closer to God. “The entire world is God’s message of love to us. Yom Kippur is the time when we are most open to receive this message.” So let us receive this love, as we strive each day to cleanse our souls and move closer to our holy.

May it be so, and Amen