

**(Atonement)**

**Opening Words:**

Come into this place of peace  
And let its silence heal your spirit.  
Come into this place of memory  
And let its history warm your soul.  
Come into this place of prophecy  
And power.  
And let its vision change your heart.

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**“At-Onement”**

A Sermon by Rev. Betty Kornitzer  
September 26, 2004

Yesterday marked the observance of Yom Kippur,  
recognized as the most sacred day in the Jewish calendar.  
For it is on Yom Kippur  
that the gates of heaven are opened,  
and the people of the Jewish faith  
gain unfettered access to ears and heart of God.  
It is a Day of Atonement. It is a Day of Forgiveness.

This morning, with deep respect,  
we acknowledge the high holy day of Yom Kippur,  
and seek enlightenment in its teachings.

We open with words adapted from the Yom Kippur writings of Rabbi Jack Riemer:

“Now is the time for turning.

And for us-

Turning does not come easily.

It takes an act of will for us to make a turn.

It means admitting that we have been wrong,

And this is never easy.

It means losing face,

and starting all over again.

It means saying I am sorry.

These things are hard to do.

But unless we turn,

We will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways.

(The Rabbi prays:)

God, help us to turn

From callousness to sensitivity,

From hostility to love,

From envy to contentment

From fear to faith.

Turn us around, oh God,

bring us back to You.

And turn us toward each other,

For in isolation there is no life.”

Friends, it seems to me that the lesson of Yom Kippur is expressed in the plea:

*And turn us toward each other,  
for in isolation there is no life.*

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I see this turning toward each other  
as the very purpose of Yom Kippur.

The turning is a personal transformation  
and that is the Atonement itself.

For too long have people been divided  
by fear and hatred, greed and envy.

Yom Kippur offers a time of transformation,  
a time to return to the wholeness of human connection and love.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine puts it this way:

*“At Yom Kippur, Jews around the world will meet  
to assess how close we have come  
to actualizing our potential as partners with God,  
and to discern in what ways we have missed the mark.  
We are not stuck in our negative patterns,  
but can fundamentally change ourselves and our world.  
On Yom Kippur we realize  
that it is a wonderful blessing  
to be able to participate  
in the transformation of the universe  
by transforming ourselves.”*

It has taken some time for me  
to come to this understanding of Yom Kippur  
as a time of transformation

and of turning towards one another.

I was raised in a non-observant Jewish family.  
Growing up, I always thought of Yom Kippur  
as the Day of Atonement –  
that day when sins are confessed  
and judgment is meted out  
by a less than sympathetic God.  
I learned this lesson at an early age.

As a child, I lived in Manhattan,  
on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor of an old building  
over looking Third Avenue.  
The streets were cobbled stone,  
and gave rise to a bouncy sort of music  
under the traffic of heavy rubber tires.  
Our neighbors were the Josephs, and Orthodox Jewish family, we were all good close  
friends. We *did* for each other like good neighbors do.  
Billy Joseph, the son, was an absolute doll!  
He was about 15 years older than me, handsome, bright and kind. I was in love, pure and  
simple.

And then one day, when I was ten,  
Billy got married and broke my heart.  
But that was only the beginning of my disillusionment.

Billy had married a Korean woman.  
I learned that marrying outside the faith  
was a sin under Jewish Law.  
What followed was inconceivable to a ten year old child.

The Joseph family excommunicated  
their beloved Billy from their lives.

In their hearts he was dead.

They had a funeral, observed the mourning ritual of shivah,  
and never saw him again.

I witnessed people whom I had known as warm and loving parents eradicate their son in  
the name of God.

My young spirit was traumatized

by the specter of a wrathful God

who commanded parents to figuratively bury their children alive. It is no wonder that my  
understanding of Yom Kippur revolved around images of trembling confession and cruel  
judgment.

The Josephs suffered the agonies of grieving parents for the rest of their days. Their  
hearts were broken,

yet they remained closed,

and like the God of their understanding,

they never forgave their Billy.

Eleven years later, I came to a new understanding of the God of the Hebrew Bible. My  
first husband, George, was a holocaust survivor; he grew up in a profoundly orthodox  
family in Budapest. His parents remained deeply devoted and observant people of faith.  
When George and I adopted our son, Michael, in Korea, we anticipated some staunch  
resistance from his orthodox parents.

They took the question to the most eminent orthodox Rebbe in New York. His response  
was immediate and unequivocal.

The Rebbe's eyes beamed with joy as he said:

“it’s a mitzvah, my children, this is a good thing.”

The Josephs had severed family bonds in the name of God. The New York Rebbe had celebrated the mitzvah of human connection in the name of the same God.

In preparation for Yom Kippur,  
the Jewish peoples review the year  
and take stock of their lives.

They bring their brokenness before their God.

Call these sins, or mistakes, shortcomings or weaknesses –  
the labels do not matter.

What matters is the interior pain that each of us endures  
because of our imperfections –  
because very simply - we are human,  
and we find that so difficult  
to accept, in ourselves and in one another.

Our brokenness then lies  
in our creating separations within the family of humanity.  
And it starts with ourselves.

Have you noticed? How many of you fully and deeply love and accept yourselves –raise  
your hands- no, no I'm kidding.

Yom Kippur is the day of Forgiveness.  
I beg of you, and of myself,  
if there is one turning we make today,  
one act of transformation, one atonement,  
may it be that we forgive ourselves  
for being human.

In the words of our reading earlier this morning  
May we affirm that

*We forgive ourselves and each other,  
We begin again in Love.*

That, then is the Atonement of Yom Kippur:  
It is a commitment to recognizing our At-Onement –  
to forgiving ourselves and each other  
and to begin again in love.  
And this is how we transform the world.

The Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert writes poignantly about our essential oneness.

*The human race is a vast rainbow, white black, red, yellow and brown  
Bursting into view.  
Yet for all blood is red  
The sky is blue,  
The earth brown, the night dark.  
In size and shape we are a varied pattern of  
Tall and short  
Slim and stout,  
Elegant and plain,  
Yet for all  
There are fingers to touch  
Hearts to break,  
Eyes to cry,  
Ears to hear,  
Mouths to speak.*

*In tongue we are a tower of Babel,  
A great jumble of voices grasping for words,  
Groping for ways to say love, peace, pity and hope.*

*Boundaries divide us,  
Lines drawn to mark our diversity,  
Maps charted to separate the human race from itself.*

*Yet a mother's grief,  
A father's love,  
A child's happy cry,  
A musician's sound,  
An artist's stroke  
Batter the boundaries and shatter the walls.*

*Strength and weakness,  
Arrogance and humility,  
Confidence and fear  
Live together in each one,  
Reminding us that we share a common humanity.  
We are all more human than otherwise.*

And so friends,  
being all more human than otherwise,  
can we learn to  
Forgive ourselves and each other  
and begin again in love?

These are the formative seeds of our Universalist heritage,  
may we cultivate them now,  
and reap their healing fruit.

In reflecting on these questions of transformation and forgiveness I wondered about the limits of human potential in these matters. I looked to the experience of South Africa, where the white apartheid regime had imposed a violent and racist tyranny over the black majority. When the government was restructure under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, the new leadership led the people in an amazing journey of transformation and reconciliation.

In May of 1994, Archbishop Desmond Tutu led a service entitled “An Act of Reconciliation and Sharing of the Peace.”

He said on that day:

*“Throughout the land we stand on a new threshold of national unity. We are a people composed of many races, many languages, many religious and political traditions, many cultures. We are poor and rich, women and men, young and old. We have emerged from a history of strife and death to seek a future of life and health.*

*We struggled against one another, now we are reconciled to struggle for one another.*

*We believed it was right to withstand one another, now we are reconciled to understand one another.*

*We endured the power of violence, now we are reconciled to the power of tolerance.*

*We built irreconcilable barrier between us, now we seek to build a society of reconciliation.*

*We suffered a separateness that did not work, now we are reconciled to make togetherness work.*

*We tried to frighten one another into submission, now we are reconciled to lift one another into fulfillment.”*

In South Africa, under the auspices of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the perpetrators of violence confessed their acts and asked forgiveness. Transformation happened.

In her stirring book A Human Being Died That Night, Truth & Reconciliation Commission member Pulma Go Bo Do Mad- i- kiz- ela ponders the power of forgiveness. During hearings in 1988, Eugene de Kock, the architect of apartheid’s deadly operations, asked to meet with widows of some of the men whom he had murdered. There he confessed his actions. After the meeting, one wife, a Mrs. Faku, reported:

*“I was overwhelmed by emotion, and I was just nodding, as a way of saying yes- I forgive you. I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well.”*

My friends, the potential for human connection and forgiveness seems to be limitless. The wells of our unity run deep, and its waters are sweet.

May we drink of the waters,  
May we quench our thirsty souls.