

Reflections on Yom Kippur, Embracing the Possibility of Reconciliation

- Introduction
 - *G'mar chatima tova.* This is the traditional greeting on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), the holiest of Jewish holydays, which extended from sundown last Wednesday through sundown Thursday. It means, “May you be sealed in the Book of Life.”
 - At the outset, a disclaimer: I am not Jewish, although my neighborhood in Detroit was half Irish, half Italian, half Jewish and the math worked—and the Rabbi lived down the street from me. So I am not to the level of an Observant, nor even of a culturally assimilated Jew—I’m more of a neighborhood friend who knows a handful of Yiddish phrases.
 - I also want to recall several points Sue Chambers made at her service in the end of August on “Connections (and Conflict).”
 - I loved her phrase, “the little toads that come out of our mouths....” More often than I like, I hear things come from my mouth that I know I am going to regret.
 - She also reminded us that “all are part of the web, even those we don’t agree with.” This thought keeps weaving itself into my own meditations on the Day of Atonement.
 - To make connections, she recommended to us Jonathan Haidt’s suggestion to find a common point, begin with some sort of agreement. I like William Ury’s phrase in *Getting Past No*—“Pull them to your side,” so you can look together in the same direction.
 - She encouraged us to recognize that “it is what it is”—release our expectations. As Sumedho says, we can always imagine more perfect conditions but our task is to live in the world that is given to us.
 - And, to build connections, get to know *their world* better—why do they believe differently than you. Sue’s service was a great preparation for Yom Kippur.

- Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, focuses on repentance, which precedes reconciliation. As Rita reminded us last week, worship is a talisman to help us remember what we *do* know; and at some level we already know what Yom Kippur reminds us.
 - There are three elements to this day: purification, repentance, and good deeds.
 - On Yom Kippur, one fasts from sundown to sundown. The purpose of purification/ cleansing (*tahara* in Hebrew) is to reinforce sympathy for others. As Judith Adams explains, “By making the body uncomfortable, one’s soul is uncomfortable. By feeling pain one can feel how others are when they are in pain.” (*Yom Kippur: A Family Service*, 1990).
 - Repentance (*teshuva*) is a mental shift which precedes reconciliation. It has three parts. First, I must regret what I have done. Then resolve not to do it again. Finally, admit it (before God, at minimum).
 - The third element is doing good (*tzedakah*). This is often translated as “giving” or “charity,” but the meaning of it is reconciliation, making amends in some way

- The Yom Kippur ritual begins with the chanting of the *Kol Nidre*, the freeing from vows. The words are in Aramaic (not Hebrew—Aramaic is the language common to the Israelites and the others who lived in the area). In English, the words mean:
 - “By the permission of One Who Is Everywhere and by the permission of this congregation, we hold it lawful to pray with sinners.” In other words, everyone, Jewish or not, Observant or not, is invited to this service—come as you are.
 - Then the cantor goes on, “All personal vows we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.”
 - And the cantor concludes with a quote from the book of Numbers (15:26): “May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are in fault.”
 - A bit of explanation—*Kol Nidre* refers to “personal vows” (not public contracts)—essentially, expressions of anger, rupturing relationship. This means expressions like “as God is my witness” (while one is shading the truth), or “May your enemies sprain their ankles dancing on your grave” (Yiddish, like Irish, has a great tradition of colorful curses), or that most final of Yiddish vows, “You are dead to me.”
 - In a way, the *kol nidre* calls to mind the declaration at Mankato’s Reconciliation Park—“Forgive everyone everything.”
- For me, Yom Kippur enacts a principle that William Bridges discusses in his book, *Transitions*. Certain events open a chasm between “before” and “after.” When that occurs, one must go down into the valley before climbing to the other side. If one leaps across the chasm, the transition will be weak (and even misdirected) because time was not taken to absorb the lesson and consider the possible directions out.
 - Reconciliation is a two-way street; it requires *both* to be willing. Repentance is the preparation on each side, the readiness to reconcile when possible. It is the personal learning, the personal transformation that must be traversed in order to arrive at the other side.
 - A few weeks ago, Macey read Kathryn Otoshi’s *Draw the Line*. As the boys turn away from each other across the gulf, one turns around and sees the other’s back, and waits until the other stoops down and begins to smudge the line on his side of the gulf.
 - In *The Giving Tree*, the tree waits patiently for the boy to return, even though he goes away again each time until the very end. BTW, this book has been criticized for encouraging people to stay in an abusive relationship. Which it does. And yet, every parent understands and identifies to some extent with it. My 42-year-old daughter, now raising a 13-year-old stepdaughter, calls from time to time to apologize to us for *her* adolescence.
 - Even if you are completely blameless in the breach (and how often does *that* happen?), you still feel anger at the other for *their* breach (after all, we’re only human). And that is cause for regret.

- Reconciliation requires forgiveness, and forgiveness begins with oneself. The compassionate meditation begins with oneself, and only then ripples out. If we don't wish ourselves well, how can we extend it to others?
- It is a commonplace that wisdom comes from experience, and experience comes from mistakes. Or, as Nietzsche calls it, "*Amor Fati*" (Embrace Your Fate)—all your past, the good and the bad, have brought you to where you are today. Embracing it is the path forward. Leonard Cohen's "Bird on a Wire" does not shrink from the pain he has caused, but turns it to something better—"I swear by this song/ And by all that I have done wrong/ That I will make it all up to thee."
- This leads me to a second strand, reconciliation among ourselves as a nation. We have been going through an explosion of incivility, not to mention growing violence.
 - In part this is due to the COVID lockdowns, which have driven us inward and isolated us from each other.
 - In part it is due calling out the racism and misogyny that is embedded in all our lives.
 - In part, it is due to the toxic polarization of our politics, in which we presume to elect people not to represent everyone in their district but only those who voted for them.
 - But, as Jefferson put it after surviving a bruising campaign in the first partisan political campaign in the young nation's history, "Let us then ... unite with one heart and one mind, let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty, and even life itself, are but dreary things Not every difference of opinion is a difference of principle."
 - That's part of the reason for the cartoon at the beginning of the service. Often, where you sit is what you see.
 - It reminds me of the story about a rabbi who was famous for his pastoral counseling. The beadle (a lay leader in the synagogue) wanted to learn how the rabbi did it, so he eavesdropped when a woman came in complaining about her husband. The rabbi told her, "You're right!" Then the husband came in later, complaining about his wife, and the rabbi said, "You know, you're right." Confused, the beadle went to the rabbi and said "I overheard you telling Mrs. X that she was right, and then you told her husband that he was right. But they were contradicting each other, they can't both be right." The rabbi scratched his beard and looked up at the beadle from under his eyebrows and said, "You know, you're right, too!"
 - Ours is a pluralist, secular democracy—Unlike the Queen of Hearts who declares "All ways are *my* ways!" in a democracy there is no one right way, but a balancing of the many ways among us. No single perspective is privileged over the others.
- Which leads to a third strand, recommitting to our own religious community.
 - This is the time of year when we traditionally celebrate coming back together again after the vacations of Summer. And this year, we were all looking forward to coming back together in a body after the long COVID quarantine, only to get hit up the side of the head with the Delta Surge.

- And it is a time to renew our covenant to each other, which ends with the words “Because each and every one of us is imperfect and will occasionally break covenant, we will forgive ourselves, each other and begin again in love.”
- Change is hard. Even when the change is not our fault and beyond our control.
 - Anticipating the unknown is stressful.
 - The familiar is comfortable. My great-aunt kept a picture on her desk of a cat looking out the window at dusk, and the words “Oh God, put the world back the way it was and make me happy.”
 - And, even maybe in spite of ourselves, it makes us cranky.
- The *Kol Nidre* ends with “May all be forgiven, for all are at fault...” (Although that may have to be reconfigured to reflect a Universalist slant—less a matter of sin, more a matter reconciliation)
 - “Fault” comes from the French “*Faute*,” as in “*faute de mieux*” (“for lack of better”). It is not necessarily a moral failing, but a lack, a coming up short for what the situation demanded.
 - Reconciliation begins with reconciling oneself—forgiving oneself for insufficiency—accepting the shortcoming while laying aside the guilt.
- Our theme for this month is “Embracing possibility.”
 - Recall the story of the Rabbi and “You’re right!”—and the cartoon.
 - Finding the possible lies in curiosity and relationship—don’t assume.
 - Doubt is your friend, in private relationships, in civil society, in our religious community. Let Socrates be your guide, who said “Know yourself, and nothing too well.”
 - As we come back together after COVID, perhaps the better greeting will be “Hello. Who are you now?” (Instead of “How are you?”)
 - “Embracing possibility” does not necessarily mean future orientation. The present is also pregnant with possibility. As TS Eliot says in *Little Gidding*
 - “We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
 - Roy Cook (former president) had a favorite chalice extinguishing, “May the little that we know be enough to guide us as we seek the truth that no one lives without and no one completely comprehends.”
 - The possibility is already there, if we only recognize it—and, as Sumedho says, accept it for what it is.
 - So, what *are* we to do? Hear now this final reading, from Walt Whitman’s “Preface” to *The Leaves of Grass*.