

Return Again
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Unitarian Church of Montreal, 27 September 2009

Throughout the year there are holidays and holy days we mark. In truth, if we chose, we could let go of them all, leaving each week to our own whims. But then some of us would feel a great loss not to have a rhythm or shape to the year. We would miss the celebrations and the familiar rituals. We would miss the milestones that cause us to reflect on the year gone by. Our community life together would become continuous, shapeless, *plat*.

Tomorrow marks the final day of the Jewish High Holy Days. It is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and once again I will think about fasting, and perhaps even try to fast this year. As each year passes, I realize that this day matters very much to me. It is a day that I feel committed to observe in my own Unitarian-with-Jewish-roots fashion.

While my family was never particularly observant, even as a child I felt the power of dedicating one day a year to truly take stock, to make amends, and to start with a clean slate. How important and yet how easy to resist. I lived with the rejection and resistance for many years, and then one Yom Kippur I felt a great longing to return. Instead of finding my way to a temple, I found myself embraced by a loving, forgiving, and welcoming Unitarian Universalist community. I was home.

Atonement, repentance, sin, these are words that tend to make us squirm. As Unitarians, we choose to affirm the goodness of humanity. We reject teachings that say we are born as wretched sinners. We want to live in goodness, emphasize only goodness, and become better people. Sometimes we shy away from the really hard stuff. We'd rather look anywhere else for truth than in a mirror.

The Hebrew word *het* often gets mistranslated as "sin." But a more accurate translation is "missing the mark." On Yom Kippur Jews reflect on the ways in which they have missed the mark during the past year. They ask for forgiveness and they forgive. It is a tradition that affirms that humans are imperfect, that they make mistakes, and that they can start over and aim higher with each new year.

I missed the mark last month when I hastily chose the sermon title "At-one-ment" for today's service. It was a play on words penned by a colleague many years ago. It was her way to broach the subject of Yom Kippur without really going there. Instead of talking about atoning for our sins, why not take the Zen approach and become one with the universe? But the month has passed, and my thinking has evolved.

We translate the Hebrew word *Teshuvah* as "repentance" but once again, translation fails us. *Teshuvah* has several meanings, and differs greatly from a Christian understanding of repentance. It means returning back to God or to faith. It also means "response," a kind of waiting for someone or something to respond as you

turn back again. But *Teshuvah* can also mean quite simply “turning around” or “turning toward” another direction in your life.

Return again. Return to the home of your soul.

Return to who you are. Return to what you are.

In Jewish tradition, *Teshuvah* is a lifetime process. It means returning back to the centre when you have fallen out of balance. Can't that be true for each of us? With each moment that passes, we are turning slowly, finding our way back to meaning. We rarely return quickly. The turns are as slow and undramatic, as imperceptible to others as a woman finding forgiveness in the quiet of an ancient sanctuary. The response is gradual. We often don't know that we've found the answers until we stop and look back on our lives.

There's something that I read recently that intrigues me. There are sages in the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah who say that *Teshuvah* has existed since before the world itself. “It is embedded in the root structure of the world...” They say that it is the highest expression of our capacity to choose freely. We can extricate ourselves from the binding web of our lives, “from the chain of causality that otherwise compels us to follow a path of no return.”¹ They say we've always had the capacity to “break through the ordinary limits of the self.” We can always choose to take what we have done wrong and turn it into something good. This is called *Tikkun*.

The other side of *Teshuvah* is *Tikkun*. *Tikkun* is the action taken, the way in which you reform your life, the way in which you make good out of your wrongs. The danger is that we acknowledge our wrongs but we do nothing about them. When we do nothing, we become depressed, hopeless and helpless. To make meaning out of our regrets, we have to take action. “It is using the knowledge of the [wrong] of the past and transforming it into such an extraordinary thirst for good that it becomes a divine force,” writes Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.

What would it mean for us as Unitarians to take at least one day each year, to look back and to practice both *Teshuvah* and *Tikkun*? Could we practice such humility? We could easily list for ourselves all the ways in which we have missed the mark this past year. We know where we have been petty, where we have lost our tempers, where we have been silent when we should have spoken, where we have been self-centred, where we have been less than honest to ourselves or to others. We know when we have been less than humble, or too concerned with what others think to be true to ourselves. We know the times we have stood by and let others carry the load. We know when we have held grudges or had unreasonable expectations. We know when we have not found space in our hearts to forgive or ask for forgiveness.

¹ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*

This is the cost of being human, of being in relationship with others, of being in family, of being in community. Yet what would it take for us to practice more than regret? What if we could take what we regret and shape it into something as powerful as a divine force for good?

Return to what you are, return to where you are,

Return to where you are born and reborn again.

Writing of return, Herman Wouk tells this story:

[My grandfather] had in his Bronx apartment a lodger less learned than himself, and much fiercer in piety. One day when we were studying the laws of repentance together, the lodger burst from his room. "What!" he said. "The atheist guzzles whisky and eats pork and wallows with his women all his life long, and then repents the day before he dies and stands guiltless? While I spend a lifetime trying to please God!"

My grandfather pointed to the book. "So it is written," he said gently, -- "Written!" the lodger roared. "There are books and there are books," and he slammed back into his room.

The lodger's outrage seemed highly logical. My grandfather pointed out afterwards that cancelling the past does not turn it into a record of achievement. It leaves a blank, a waste of spilled years. A man had better return, he said, while time remains to write a life worth scanning. And since no man knows his death day, the time to get a grip on his life is the first hour when the impulse strikes him.

Cancelling the past does not turn it into a record of achievement. It leaves a blank, a waste of spilled years. What would it take for each of us to live a life worth living? To what would we each return?

Last week I told you about the Rosh Hashanah tradition of *Tashlich*. The tradition is so beautiful in its simplicity. You go to any body of water and you cast bread crumbs into the water, as a way of symbolically casting away the wrongs of the past year. In the act of casting away the bread, you express your intention to return to your true self in the year to come.

This morning I brought stones, rather than bread crumbs to cast into bowls of water. Perhaps there is a wrong you'd like to cast away from the past year. Perhaps there is something you need to release so that you can begin again, so that you can return again to your soul. Perhaps there is something you need to release on behalf of someone else, to forgive them or yourself. If so, I invite you to join me in this simple ceremony.

What would it take to return to your centre, to return to your soul, to that essence of who you were once called to be? Maybe it would mean a return to lost faith. Maybe

it would mean a return to lost connections, or a return to doing something you love. What would you need to do to take that small step and turn in a new direction? Only you can answer.

