

## **9/20/09 Sermon**

“Days of Awe”

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The sound of the ram’s horn is sharp. It is like no other sound. It pierces the armor of the heart. It calls us to pay attention to who we are as a people in relationship with ourselves, each other and that which we call holy and transcendent. As we begin this new church year, this sacred season calls us to reflect and repent for our wrong doings.

We begin in joy as we wish each other, “Shanah T’ovah,” a good and sweet year. Shanah Tovah invites us to return to our truest and best selves. It is a journey of rediscovery calling for an inward reflective self-evaluation in much the same way Ramadan does for Muslims.

We are required to look at our sins of missing the mark as co-creator of a healthy relationship. To return then to right relationship is to be able to once again to pursue that which is good and true in us and others, and to see the holy live in its light, to see yourself more in touch with the transformative and transcendent in your life.

Rosh Hashanah calls us back to ourselves and community. In this holiday time, we grow nostalgic for a more innocent time of our childhood when we lived in safe and sacred congregations. This is a time of great emotion both joyous and painful for Jews all over the world. It certainly is for me. The sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah announces the dawning of the New Year and a rebirth of the world. With their sounds and smells, this holiday strikes the deepest cords of human feeling in Jews. We are called and pulled back to our roots of faith, best expressed, as we do here today in community. If Rosh Hashanah represents the intellectual understanding of what it means to be a Jew then Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the heart song.

Whatever Judaism has to say of God, Man and Duty is enshrined in the prayers and hymns of the ten “Days of Awe” between and including these Holy Days. This holy time is the spiritual epitome of devotion – we pray unceasingly and fast to focus our minds on forgiveness and repentance.

The core discipline is soul searching and repentance for wrongdoing. We recognize a need for the congregation to focus on the need to improve both as an individual and as a community. The cry for Atonement in the Days of Awe culminates in the granting of forgiveness on day of Yom Kippur. It is open to all who are sincere. God can only grant forgiveness to those who

sinned against God. Those who sinned against another person require us to beg forgiveness directly from the person harmed. This is very much in keeping with our Unitarian Universalist ways.

We are called to be mindful of our behavior year round, not just during these Days of Awe. The Jewish faith recognizes that people are only human and will fail at times to live up to the commandments. When a person of conscience has sinned, they may say, "I have kept none of the commandments." It is not the literal truth or false statement that concerns them, but rather the feeling of having betrayed their principles by having committed some sin, and thus given the lie to the notion of themselves as a virtuous person.

An old story is told of one aged rabbi who went to visit a colleague in a distant city before the High Holidays. They had a pleasant visit, and spent many hours talking. When it came time to leave, the visitor burst into tears. The other asked, what was wrong.

"I have committed so many sins," wailed the first. "I have done such wrong, I do not deserve your friendship, let alone God's forgiveness." At which the other began to sob, and he said, "I too am a terrible sinner. I have not kept the commandments one day of my life." And the two of them comforted one another, and gave each other strength for the days of repentance yet ahead.

Central to these holidays is "T'shuvah" – renewal, repentance and turning back to righteousness. It is a letting go of the past with its associated pain so that one can embrace a righteous hope-filled future. Our duty is to reflect on our lives, where we are in contrast to where we want to be. This is liminal sacred time, a time between what was and what might be; between summer and fall; between regret and repentance; guilt and renewal. It offers us the possibility to change the direction of our lives. We are called to commit ourselves to the greater good of something beyond ourselves. Our yearning for our better selves can be satisfied but only if we are willing to do the work of Tshuvah that connects us with the spirit that animates life that is both immanent and transcendent.

Not an easy task when we must enter the depth of our being filled with hope but blocked by the reality of our misdeeds. Our heart is pained by such an encounter. Karl Jung would say this is the meeting we must have with our shadow side, with our evil intentions. We must make this unconscious side of our being conscious if our ego is to gain any control over the untamed side of our natures, the place of offensive and hurtful behavior. The road back to right relationship goes through the repository of all our deeds.

Ironically, Tshuvah calls for self-acceptance, a coming to terms with our misdeeds, failings and frailties. It is our desire for renewal that empowers us to embrace a new self. The winds of change blow us through the gates of repentance that now stand open.

The gates are open only for a short time. The "Book of Life" is open but once a year and remains so only during the Days of Awe. This is the time for action and repentance, truth telling and forgiveness. Now is the time to confront ourselves if we intend to grow in spirit and relationship. When the Book of Life closes for another year, any remaining misdeeds not atoned for and forgiven, remain for another year to pull us down and we hold back from right relationships. This coming together for repentance and forgiveness creates a covenantal community. The universe waits with open arms, but we must enter with a redeemed heart.

This is an ageless and timeless story of humanities yearning for connection. It is our passage from brokenness into wholeness and blessing. It is said, the only whole heart is a broken one. Only when we know the road map of our own existence can we know another and be healed.

This road back to our authentic selves is stony and difficult to travel but we are reminded that Tshuvah is in every act we perform. It is a journey taken with the first truthful step within. It is a new devotion to living fully in right relationship. It is an ***At-One-Ment*** with humanity and the Holy.

It is through Tshuvah that we become as one with humankind in freedom, righteousness, and dignity. Let us say, "Shanah T'ovah" – May you have a Good and Sweet Year.