

A Time to Turn
Sunday October 6, 2019

Officially the season of fall arrived two weeks ago, but it felt like fall really arrived this week with the drop in temperatures, darker mornings, orange on the trees, and that slant of light different from the blaze of summer. Fall always feels more than just a new season to me; I feel it's the beginning of a new year as well. Our calendar may change on January 1 but it doesn't feel like a new year. It makes sense to me that more earth-based traditions begin their year in this season – in the Celtic tradition the new year begins after Samhain (sow-win) or Halloween, and in the Jewish calendar, the new year begins with Rosh Hashanah which falls in our calendar in September or October. The Celtic and Jewish new years come at the point in their cultures when the harvest was in and the people were getting ready to hunker down for winter.

Winter in times closer to the land than ours was a hard time, a time many people didn't survive, and so in both traditions the new year was a time to grapple with mortality. We see the vestiges of the Celtic tradition around us in the tombstones and ghouls of Halloween decorations. But in its ancient form, Samhain (sow-win) wasn't about getting candy. It was a time when the veil between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead thinned, and those among the dead who had unresolved matters might return to walk their old streets, warm themselves at their former hearth, and revisit the scenes of their losses and failures. To appease them and perhaps try to resolve their own issues with the dead, the living would set out a meal for their visitors and then hide themselves under their blankets during the hours of darkness.

Imagine yourself there, thinking about who might be at your table and why. Wouldn't you be looking over your own life and resolving to do what you could now to ensure that you wouldn't have to return to bewail your faults and failures after death?

Contemplating mortality isn't just about coming to terms with the fact that we and everyone we love will someday die. Contemplating mortality must focus us also on the question of how then we will live. As my mentor, the UU minister and writer Forest Church used to say, "Life is a gift, not a given, and the price we pay for it is death."

The Jewish New Year rituals make even clearer that connection. Rosh Hashanah ushers in a 10 day period known as the Days of Awe. It is a time for

teshuvah which literally means “turning” but is more often translated as “repentance.” It is a time to contemplate your life, recognize where you have fallen short and where you have gone wrong, ask for forgiveness from those you have harmed, and turn away from sin towards the fullness of life. As Abigail Pogrebin wrote in her exploration of Judaism, *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew*,

The focal point of Yom Kippur is death? I thought it was All-Atonement-All-the-Time. ... When I say the rabbis focus on death, I don't mean death in the sense of a morbid fixation...; it's death in the sense of a laser focus on life – how fragile it is, how unpredictable – which forces us to really ask ourselves, at any age: If you knew you might not get another year, who would you be today?

“If you knew you might not get another year, who would you be today?” This is the focus of new year celebrations at any time. But as the leaves blaze into death, this question blazes bright as well.

And the question doesn't address just “you” singular – it's “you” plural as well. The High Holy Days are a time for individual atonement and also for collective atonement. We fail and fall short on our own, but we also fail and fall short in the structures and institutions of which we are a part.

Ten times during the Yom Kippur services, Jews recite the *Al Cheyt* a communal confession of sin, or literally “missing the mark” (that's what “*cheyt*” means in Hebrew). The song we sang earlier, *We Begin Again in Love*, is based on this prayer, but very shortened. In its full form, it lists 44 ways people fall short, from betraying someone's trust to stealing, lying, gossiping, mocking, and participating in the oppression of others. Though the traditional words of the prayerbooks keep it general, more modern versions spell out in detail the ways our actions and inactions harm ourselves, others and the planet. I invite you to listen with your heart as well as your ears as I read this version of the *Al Cheyt* by Rabbi Michael Lerner. Here is the beginning of the prayers for personal mistakes:

For the sins we have committed ... by being so preoccupied with ourselves that we ignore the larger problems of the world;

And for the sins we have committed by being so directed toward outward realities that we have ignored our inner spiritual and psychological and ethical development;

...

For the sin of withholding love and support;

And for the sin of doubting our ability to love and get love from others;

For the sin of insisting that everything we do have a payoff;

And for the sin of not allowing ourselves to play;

For the sin of always wanting to have it be our way,

And for the sin of not standing up for what was really, really, really, important to us and then later feeling resentful that we didn't get what we wanted[.]

Then the prayer moves on into our communal mistakes. This is a much longer list; here are a few:

For the sin of not taking the leaflets or not opening the emails of those who tried to inform us of what was going on in the world that required our moral attention and instead allowing ourselves to be too easily overwhelmed at the suffering on this planet so that we justified closing our ears to the cries of the oppressed;

And for the sin of not demanding that our elected representatives provide affordable health care and prescription drugs for everyone, and for not demanding dramatic changes that are needed to save the planet and lessen the power of big money to shape our democratic process so that it no longer primarily serves the interests of the corporations and the wealthy;

For the sin of allowing our elected leaders to continue to affirm the notion of economic growth as progress rather than repairing the damage economic growth has already done to our planet;

And for the sin of allowing military spending and tax cuts for the rich to undermine our society's capacity to take care of the poor, the powerless, the young, and the aging, both in the United States and around the world;

For the sin of being cynical about the possibility of building a world based on love;

And for the sin of dulling our outrage at the continuation of poverty, oppression, and violence in this world;

For the sin of being "realistic" when our tradition calls upon us to transform reality;

And for the sin of being too attached to our own picture of how our lives should be—and never taking the risks that could bring us a more fulfilling and meaningful life....

And the list continues, enumerating 25 more ways we have failed one another and our planet. It's overwhelming – Yes. Yet there's something healing in naming the guilt we carry when we try to blind ourselves to these failings. Paradoxically naming these ways we miss the mark, gives us hope that we can do something about them. For naming them brings them out of the darkness where we bury our fears that it is too late to do anything to help the planet, that we are powerless to assist refugees, that we can't change the system, that our vision of a realm of love and justice lived out here and now is merely a fairy tale. If we have fallen short of the mark, if we have not done what we could have done to alleviate suffering and make things better for our planet and ourselves that means that there are things we can do. It means that our turning is not just a turning away from our failings; our turning is a turning toward claiming the power which is ours. And the communal nature of this prayer reminds us that we are not in this alone. Together we have fallen short and together we can turn and start righting the wrongs around us.

Confessing our sins is not a “woe is me” action; it is not an act of self-flagellation. It is a clear-eyed assessment of our power to help and heal and make whole ourselves and the world, of the ways we have not taken up the power which is ours, and of the ways we will move into our power more fully in the new year ahead. Confessing our sins is an act of hope, promise, and strength. It demonstrates our faith in the power of life as we move through a season of death. As we turn towards taking up our power and our commitments, we say “yes” to life, to love, to the universe, to God.

So I invite you now to an exercise in turning. The ushers are passing out heart sticky notes. Unlike the apple stickies we've posted publicly the past two Sundays, these are for you to take home. Attach them to your order of service, so they stay sticky. First, take a minute to reflect on that question I asked earlier: “If you knew you might not get another year, who would you be today?” With that question in mind, how might you say “yes” this year to using your power to help and heal yourself and the world around you? Perhaps some of the words of the *Al Cheyt* connected with your life. Focus on two ways you are going to turn towards that power this year, one that cares better for yourself, and one that cares better for the world. Write them on the heart sticky and take it home with you. At home, take it

off the order of service and stick it somewhere where you'll see it – on the bathroom mirror while you're brushing your teeth, in the book of poems you use for meditation, over the kitchen sink while you wash dishes, in your workroom or craft area, and use it as a reminder this year to turn more fully to the power which is yours and ours, the power to be kind, the power to care, the power to act, the power to heal, the power to love. Let's take some silence now for this exercise.

As the exercise ends, the choir takes their place in silence. Beth begins to play softly as Pam speaks

525,600 minutes

525,000 moments so dear

525,600 minutes

How do you measure, measure a year?...

How do you measure a year in the life?....

How about love?...

Measure in love

Seasons of love

The choir takes up the song.

- Pamela M. Barz