

## **“On This New Year”**

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This year, Yom Kippur was on September 16th, exactly ten days ago. Yom Kippur is the final day of the days of awe, or high holy days for Jews all over the world. This period of reflection between Rosh Hashanah, or the new year, and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, lasts for ten days. This year the high holidays fell about as early as is possible in the Jewish calendar.

During Yom Kippur there is an old tradition of beating one’s chest. There is a prayer that is chanted called the Vidui, or confession. It includes an acrostic in which each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is assigned a sin, and with each confession, the community thumps their fist over their heart.

aleph, A, is ashamnoo “we have transgressed”

bah-gahd-noo

We have betrayed

gah-zahl-noo

We have stolen; We have slandered

The prayer goes on.

You’ll notice that each person says “we” not “I” for it is taught that our fates are intertwined and so we pray as a collective. It is an expression of our interdependence.

I find it to be a particularly powerful moment during the service. The collective chanting combined with a gentle collective thump of hand on chest, it’s cathartic in a way that is felt both in one’s own body and in that collective body of voices chanting together.

And the catharsis, the letting go, is the point of this ritual. As the Jewish organization Aish teaches, this ritual isn’t about self harm, beating oneself for doing so much wrong. Like the dust cloud that’s made by clapping chalkboard erasers or thumping an old beloved rug against the porch railing, the point is

releasing the old residue so that more becomes possible, things become clearer. The point is not shame, but cleansing so that our inherent goodness has room to move.

This is something that takes practice. Yom Kippur is considered by many to be the single most important holy day in the Jewish calendar, other than Shabbat. This practice of making amends, of clearing out old grievances and making space for a new year, it's a collective practice that is held in highest regard, something that Jewish communities do every year.

Rabbi Daniel Kohn writes, "The daytime services of Yom Kippur are characterized by their emphasis on the two major themes of forgiveness and *teshuvah*, or repentance. According to the traditional Jewish prayers, God forgives us for the sins that affect no one else other than our relationship with God. For sins that affect and harm others, we must first apologize and seek forgiveness from those whom we have hurt. Only then are the prayers of Yom Kippur considered effective in absolving our sins," Rabbi Kohn says.

Forgiveness and repentance. Both in relationship with others and in relationship with ourselves and our sense of ultimacy.

Yom Kippur was the first Jewish holiday I experienced and I was completely taken by it. The idea that time and structure is given to this collective renewal felt poignant and potent to me. It's so easy to go years, decades, generations, holding on to guilt or grudge - the idea that Jewish people and communities stop every year and make space for the letting go, thumping their chests to the same rhythmic litany - it remains one of my favorite holidays.

And the fact that this day comes every year feels so kind and honest, as if to say: perfection is never the goal, we're all practicing, you have time to tend these wounds.

I remember one of my friends making a list before Yom Kippur - we were in college, hanging out in the Hillel kitchen where we all cooked Shabbat dinner - and she'd made a list for Yom Kippur. She said very little about it, except that the things on that list couldn't be forgiven yet, not that year. Maybe someday, but not yet. It was clear how much courage there was in her making that list that no one would see, how much pain there was in whatever harm had been done to her. It's an act of faith to imagine that forgiveness is possible, to speak the unspeakable and wonder if some day there might be peace.

It's worth pausing to take note:

Is there some harm that still afflicts you, something someone else did that you don't know how to forgive?

Is there anything you need to apologize for? Any harm you've caused that needs to be named?

Is there a behavior that you need to change to treat those around you with more care?

It takes practice, beating out the dust, peeling away the cynicism, releasing the protective residue of "it's not my fault" that has grown so comfortable. Because this kind of catharsis, this kind of newness and honesty, it requires vulnerability, even if only with ourselves. It takes practice.

And still, there is a limit to the goodness of letting go.

So-called "forgiveness" can be used as a crowbar to dislodge others' boundaries, to insist on one's own innocence because we deem the other "too sensitive" or "too controlling." We must be forgiven, because we haven't actually done anything wrong.

That is not atonement, it's spiritual abuse. Yom Kippur is about introspection and soul-searching, not coercion or victim blaming. Apologizing for our mistakes requires that we take ownership of our actions and their impact. It is taught that Yom Kippur prayers of repentance are rejected by God if the perpetrator has not first apologized to whoever they harmed and asked for forgiveness. That's not an easy kind of honesty.

Rabbi Kohn adds, "Teshuvah, repentance, is the process by which we recognize our sins, feel regret for having committed them, and then resolve not to do them again and make restitution for any harm we may have caused."

See, this release of old residue is not about the removal of boundaries, it's not about "getting over it" when we're still hurting. This practice of repentance is about reestablishing boundaries, acknowledging how interpersonal harm has occurred and making a plan to prevent causing that harm again.

Forgiveness can not be compelled, it can only be given freely.

But what of those things that don't affect others, that are really about our own

grudges or self-judgement, our lack of self-compassion or abundance of cynicism? Yom Kippur teaches that we need only let them go, or at least try.

This is an interior kind of forgiveness, that which needs to be made right between us and our sense of ultimacy. Maybe you call that God, maybe you call it hope or integrity or that spirit of aliveness that dwells within you. This practice is for returning to center, forgiving ourselves for your own errors, releasing whatever stories are dimming our own brightness.

Last week, we heard Sharon, Scott, and Meredith's reflections on what gives them hope. Much of what they expressed was the challenge of finding hope, but also the possibility of it. It was clear in all of their reflections, that hope is something we have to make space for, carving out time, casting off some cynicism, turning our attention so that we might notice all that remains good and kind and possible.

And so I ask you this:

Is there anything you need to release or address in order to show up fully?

Is there a story you keep telling yourself that's holding you back?

Is there anything you need to pause or re-engage with to treat yourself with kindness and integrity?

Pausing to take stock and to let go is a worthy spiritual practice.

And so, at the start of this new year, this new season, what do you need to change or clarify, what amends do you need to seek, so that you might receive the blessing of this new day?

May it be so

Amen.