

Making Amends in the River of Life

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

October 2, 2022

Unitarian Universalists have a long history rooted in positive theology and constructive social change. We didn't accept the concepts of original sin or predestination, the belief that it was determined at birth whether people would go to heaven and hell after they died. We built a faith based on the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Unitarian Universalists are skilled and accomplished at working for justice and equity and speaking out against the systemic flaws all around us. We are perhaps less skilled or schooled in making the time and space in our personal lives to reflect on how we are doing as individuals.

Do we look at the records of our lives and the choices we are making and acknowledge where, when, and how we have fallen short of our ideals? Do we honestly reflect on how we have hurt others or betrayed trust, actions which are true of all humans?

Do we look back to learn, enabling ourselves to create the future we desire? Can we do this, with the intention of freeing ourselves from what burdens our minds and hearts and the intention of making room for inner peace? In my experience, it has been essential that I be willing to try to strip away the things that block me from feelings of love, compassion, and gratitude. Those obstructions include resentment, unsettled disputes, and holding blame and judgement toward self and others. These skew our ability to feel the beauty all around us and shut the doorway to our inner sanctum of peace.

I learned how to do this well into my adulthood when I began participating in twelve-step programs. I learned I had to review my life and make amends wherever possible if I wanted to be free from alcohol. The thought of doing that was terrifying and overwhelming. What I didn't realize then but have come to understand is that not taking regular stock of my life, not naming where the resentments and lack of resolution were in my life and self, and not doing whatever I could to extend forgiveness was hurting me far more than anyone else. There is no guarantee that others will accept our olive branches. And yet the process itself allows us to be free of these

burdens, regardless of what the other person does as long as we let go of expectations of how the process *must* turn out. Amends are our willingness to own our part in a situation and do what is appropriate to make it better. You do not have to condone what the other person or persons did. You do not have to be in relationship with them or even like them. You are doing this to set yourself free and be open to what may occur.

This process of self-review and making amends is likely to be overwhelming at first. What if people don't accept our amends? And, what about all the wrongs in the world and the people who hurt *us*? Are you telling me I have to forgive the "unforgiveable"? No, I am not promoting denial or asking you to forgive reprehensible harms, certainly not without a tremendous amount of effort and work. This is also not what some call spiritual bypass. This is making space for inner peace and choosing it. We can start small. We can start right where we are and not review our entire lifetime. Perhaps you have a colleague who gets under your skin or a family member to whom you spoke in a way that was unnecessarily harsh. Maybe you know you have been cutting a corner where you ought better to take responsibility. These things may, of course, be longstanding or quite large. You know where to start.

Following the Jewish calendar, we are currently in the Ten Days of Awe, also called the Days of Repentance. These holy days begin each year on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and end on Yom Kippur, the Holiest day in the Jewish calendar, and a time also filled with repentance and atonement.

Bari Weiss describes the Days of Awe like this. "The Book of Life is open before us. It tells stories of sadness and happiness, despair and hope, stagnation and change, and a peaceful stillness that transcends both."¹ I cherish that image. The books of our lives open before us, with tales, images, and memories of things large and small. In the book of Life, each of our days is significant. They are the flour that combined with the yeast of time make up the bread of our life.

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/opinion/rosh-hashana-jewish-celebrate.html>

Making Amends in the River of Life

October 2, 2022 page 2

Each year during the Days of Awe, Jews look back over the past year and conduct a self-review. They check themselves against promises they made to God the year before. They ask who they have injured and who they need to ask for their forgiveness. They look for where they fell short of their values. Though it is a solitary self-reflection, they do this in community.

In the afternoon after Rosh Hashana service, Jews go together to a body of flowing water. Once there, they hold a ceremony called Tashlich, "which literally translates to 'casting off,'... During this ceremony, Jews symbolically cast off the sins of the previous year by tossing pebbles or bread crumbs into flowing water."²

This annual tradition is a sacred act, an invitation to slow down and look with honesty and humility at what transpired over the past year. It is not about pointing blame. Every one of us falls short of our ideals. Everyone could be more kind and more loving. All are given the opportunity to *forgive themselves and each other and to begin again in love.*

What a freeing experience! It is one of the best ways to make room for change or discontinue behaviors that are out of line with our values. It is an invitation to say three of the most powerful words in the English language: *I am sorry.* It is a way forward and back to our true self, our original goodness.

This is not a quick fix or an overnight reconciliation of everything in our lives. It is simply a pause, a review, and a reminder to right what we can, when we can, and let go of the rest. So, we may be free.

This Jewish parable says it well.

Some Jewish scholars and rabbis were debating what happens after we die, and what that means about how we should live and what models to emulate. Rabbi Zoya, who was elderly and nearing the end of his life, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why

*were you not Zusi?"*³

Let's take some time, right now, to practice this. There is a blank piece of paper in your Order of Service. I invite you to use it to write notes to yourself. It is also special paper that dissolves in water. You may want to take it to the ocean or a lake or river and hold your private ritual of release.

I'll be asking you five questions which are also printed in your Order of Service. Take some time to reflect on each question and make notes. You can write more later. Please reach out to me or a Pastoral Care Associate if you would like a listening body or loving ear to help you consider what you learn from this ritual. We will return to this ritual next year and revisit some of the promises you make to yourself today, as well as review your Book of Life again for the year coming.

(very short embodiment – massage scalp – look outside)

To begin, bring to mind someone or something that embodies goodness to you, someone or something you trust. It may be a grandparent or ancestor, a teacher of yours, a tree, God, a powerful animal. Connect to that as we start.

Now, let's reflect on the past year. I'll read the questions through once and then go through them one at a time again with time in between for reflection.

Remember that this is designed to be healing, cathartic. We do not have to do it perfectly. Please don't push yourself. Use this as a chance to open to more space in your mind and heart, as an invitation for beauty, peace, and grace to enter. Use it to say Yes to the life you are given.

2 <https://pjlibrary.org/beyond-books/pjblog/august-2018>

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/opinion/rosh-hashana-jewish-celebrate.html>