

Last month in Philadelphia hundreds of people who had previously been on the run from the law turned themselves in. These folks did not surrender randomly. The program that made this possible brings together various respected community leaders including police, judges and clergy. The accused can come and take responsibility for crimes committed. The gatherings happen at churches, where as the holy text says people can “stand on holy ground, between the day that was and the one that must be<sup>1</sup>.” These efforts are part of a Federal program called Fugitive Safe Surrender designed to inject more common sense in the process. The program reduces court backlogs and prison overcrowding. Many times when folks turn themselves in through this program they are assigned community service and probation, instead of jail time. It wouldn’t have happened in our beloved city without the leadership of Pastor Ernest McNear. When Rev. McNear heard about this program happening in other cities his spirit became alive with the idea of making it work here. Pastor McNear knows the wisdom of the book of Ezekiel – specifically the text often cited as a basis for Yom Kippur. God promises that through cycles of atonement each person can attain a new heart and a new spirit. From serving in parish and prison ministries McNear knows about people’s needs for new beginnings. He told the Philadelphia Inquirer that he also knows about the need for a fresh start because of his own life. “From the ages of 17-27” he said he felt like he was “drowning in drugs. He routinely broke the law, but escaped incarceration<sup>2</sup>.” He feels blessed that he found new beginnings and now he tries to help others to find a new path themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Singing the Living Tradition, #633 Atonement Day, Chaim Stern

<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer, Sep. 23, 2008, Karen Heller

Fugitive Safe Surrender is not explicitly designed as a Jewish program. However, the program is imbued with many of the spiritual principles of the Jewish High Holy Days.

In some communities around the world atonement is not so counter cultural. In the country of Malaysia there is an indigenous group called the Semai. Various studies of the Semai people have shown how little they “fight or hate.” Rush Dozier is an internationally acclaimed journalist who wrote about how the Semai people handle conflict. *If two clan members have a disagreement....a village elder will call a meeting where everyone is invited and anyone can venture an opinion – and most people do. The meetings can go on for days. When the participants have all spoken their minds, the elder will make a ruling and then order that the matter never be spoken of again. That is the end of the dispute.*<sup>3</sup>

The Samai people of Malaysia are not Jewish. However, their culture is imbued with many of the spiritual principles found in the Jewish High Holy Days.

I am grateful and proud that our congregation has become quite effective in the practices of forgiveness. This is not because we have more conflict than average in our personal lives or in the congregation. The Unitarian Society of Germantown values atonement because we know that conflict is natural. And we know that resolving disagreements or mending damage requires dedication and hard work. We have the willingness because most of the time we want to get the heavy packs off of our backs.

Over the centuries our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition has been salvific in proclaiming the redemptive qualities of the divine and human beings. It is also true that at times Unitarian Universalism has been religion-light in not lifting up the need for

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<sup>3</sup> Why We Hate, Rush Dozier p. 275

admitting when we are wrong. We certainly don't have to invent theological or liturgical traditions in order to meet our needs for self-reflection and atonement. The roots of our religious movement run directly from the Judeo traditions, where repentance can be as regular as a 3,000-mile oil change.

At this time of year with the Jewish High Holy Days we emphasize the need for each individual to intentionally stop for a personal check-up on how he or she is living life. (Leviticus, 23:24-5) During this time each person focuses on doing *mitzvah*, or the commandments of God. The Torah contains 613 *mitzvot*, the most famous being the Ten Commandments. *Mitzvah* is often defined as doing good deeds. But many rabbis teach that "good deed" this doesn't capture the true meaning, because good deed implies free choice or going beyond the call of duty. (Wayne Dosick) *Mitzvah*, however, is an obligation, or a law. Unitarian Universalist *mitzvah* is a commitment to living out our principles, such as freedom, peace and justice.<sup>4</sup>

We are not perfect. Because we are imperfect human beings we benefit from community-supported processes for identifying mistakes and letting go when we don't do *mitzvah*. At this time of year many Jewish folks literally examine their checkbooks and calendars in review of how their financial and time expenditures matched up with their moral values. Am I being kind, or positive, or contributing to the common good in my daily habits? At this time of year I would love for this congregation to develop the habit where we take the time and talk with each other about how we are doing embodying peace and justice. How are you doing? Are you engaging in activities to bring spiritual growth and democracy to the world? Are you engaging in activities to bring spiritual

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism* p. 33

growth and democracy to your family? How are you treating yourself in terms of living out these UU principles?

For the Semai people, one of the key cultural norms, which helps them to resolve conflict, is that they have a strong sense of being a part of the greater human family. For a Semai person it almost doesn't make sense to talk about being a member of one group, vs. being a member of a different group<sup>5</sup>. They don't do identity politics. They think of the human family in terms of "we" and "us." Thinking of yourself as a full member of the human family is key to atonement. We are trying to achieve "at one ment" with each other.

We are all transgressors who are being granted permission to take part. We have all been harmed. And we all have inherent dignity and worth and thus are called to play a role in community court.<sup>6</sup> When the Jewish High Holy days are truly working each person understands him or herself as playing three roles in one. It is unhealthy to think of oneself as only in one group. In many situations we play more than one role. Quite often when in conflict you have done wrong and have been wronged

And just like the people of Grudge Ville have learned so well we don't need a lot of big complicated words. For me everything I needed to learn about atonement I learned in second grade. My second grade teacher, Ms. Samp kept sending my best friend and me to the Principal's office for misbehavior. Ms. Samp taught us "It takes a big man to admit when he is wrong." It is good to be ready to say I'm sorry and I forgive you.

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<sup>5</sup> Why We Hate, Rush Dozier, p. 276

<sup>6</sup> *The Tapestry of Jewish Time*, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, p. 72

Atonement is a simple concept, but it can be very difficult to achieve, especially when we isolate. We can hide behind our walls of greed and fear. Gandhi said that, “Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” We often gain strength from one another.

During the high holy days many Jewish communities go together to a river and throw breadcrumbs, which the rushing water carries away. The breadcrumbs symbolize our patterns of wrongdoing and the rushing water symbolizes God or Life’s capacity to carry away the bad and bring the new. One of the biggest obstacles for people stuck in resentments and struggle with hating is an inability to let go of past wrongs. Let’s go to the river together and throw the breadcrumbs.

At the beginning of Rosh Hashanah it is customary people pray out loud, “May it be your will, O Lord our God, that we may be renewed for a good and a sweet new year.” May it be your will, O Spirit of Life, that we may be renewed for a good and a sweet new year. Take off your backpack. Lay down your burdens and stand tall. Look up to the sky and feel awe and wonder. Look into the face of another and wish blessings to that person. May the lives of all people be filled with beginnings filled with grace, hope and love.