

“Begin Again”
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Opening Reflection: Jaclyn Kottman, Fellowship Member

Fall is a season of invitation and ritual.

Trees are invited to change into glorious colors, and offer up crisp apples ready to be covered in caramel or dipped in honey.

Schools open their doors, inviting teachers and students back into classrooms.

Congregations shift back into regular schedules of services and RE classes; stadiums open their stands and invite people in for a whole different kind of worship :-)

And, for those observing the High / Holy / Days, the Fall season invites us to look inward, to let go, to begin again with renewed promise.

The bookends of the most important time of the Jewish calendar are Rosh Hashanah – the New Year – and Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. The Torah says that on Rosh Hashanah (which was last Monday), G-d opens the Book of Life and spends the next 10 days inscribing all your deeds from the past year before sealing it on Yom Kippur (which is this coming Wednesday).

So, given this very traditional significance, and as an agnostic Unitarian growing up in a UU household that observed both Christian and Jewish traditions, I was surprised to find that the High Holy Days were my favorite holiday of the year. They may not be as glamorous as Christmas or as delicious as Passover, but – even as a kid – there was something about setting aside time to think hard about who I had been and everything I had done – for better or worse – over the past year that made me feel ready to take on the year ahead. The timing for making resolutions made sense to me, since Fall felt more like the beginning of a “New Year” than the middle of winter. And the *intention* of the holiday never changed – it was always joyous, always serious, always difficult, and always felt really good.

As I got into Middle School, I found myself drawn more deeply into this time of year. I even started staying home from school on Yom Kippur to spend a day thinking, praying, and meditating, and trying out different traditions of the holiday to find the ones most meaningful to me –

- attending services at The Temple with my grandparents
- being part of a discussion group at our UU congregation
- making lists of the people I needed to apologize to (my younger brothers always seemed to play a prominent role...) and then challenging myself to do the scary thing of asking for their forgiveness
- going on a *Tashlich* walk with my mom where we walked with breadcrumbs in our pockets to a river near our house and threw them into the water to symbolize throwing out all of our bad words and actions and baggage from the past year
- and fasting – something Jewish people have done for thousands of years on Yom Kippur as a grumbly and even painful reminder of the hard spiritual work of the season.

I loved that the High Holy Days couldn't be commercialized (it's hard to send a greeting card for Yom Kippur – "Happy Atoning!"), and that – at their core – they still mean what they always have for generations.

I loved the sound of them – the piercing call of the ram's horn *shofar*, the beauty of the chants and songs, the mournful half-step at the beginning of the Kol Nidre that seemed like a musical apology that everyone who heard it was making together.

I loved the feeling of them – the way that, even though I didn't believe in the G-d mentioned in the Torah passages and readings, there was still room for me in these holidays to connect with that quiet, deep place at the core of who I am, to interpret this time of turning / as turning *in* toward myself.

At the heart of all of those traditions is a really tough assignment. The High Holy Days are a challenge to us to grapple with the spaces between who we have been in the past year, and who we hope to be in the year ahead. They are a time of atonement – of apology for words said and unsaid, things done and undone, promises kept and unkept to ourselves and others.

And they are a time of forgiveness and renewal – a promise to strive to better ourselves in the year ahead.

High Holy Days Candle Lighting

As we light the High Holy Day candles along with the chalice to open our service this afternoon/morning, we give thanks for being together in this place, for the invitation to look inward, to let go, and to allow ourselves to begin again in love.

*Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam
shehecheyanu, vekiyemanu, vehigiyanu, lazeman hazeh.*

Blessed are you, Spirit of Life, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season. Amen.

Sermon: “Begin Again” by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg

In my life, beginning again seems to get harder with each year that passes. It’s not because I have been particularly punished in this area. I have been forgiven before, sometimes for transgressions that are not minor. I have even been able to offer forgiveness to those close to me who asked me for it, and that is an unexpected gift.

Forgiving and being forgiven are both prominent themes of the Jewish High Holy Days. Yet that glorious feeling of having wiped the slate clean eludes me more and more as the pages of the calendars turn and turn again. The murkiness, I think, is not because I am souring with age—at least I hope not!

Rather, I think it’s harder to get that clean slate feeling because—whether for good or ill—I have become wise enough to understand that no matter how sorry I am or how much I’ve learned from a mistake that I will undoubtedly mess up again. And so will you. So will everyone.

Examples of the endless cycle of letting go and beginning again abound. I know that I will always be catching up and falling behind in reading and responding to email. I don’t feel good about this. I love the email I get at the Fellowship. It’s a main way I connect with friends, members and potential friends and members during the week, whether big life news is being reported, crucial congregational business is transacted or simply that friendly hellos are exchanged. I owe many of you a heartfelt apology for not being as prompt in my written replies as I am in my heart. Recently I got my inbox down to four messages but now I’m behind once more. I will catch up again. But when I get to that promised land of not owing anyone an urgent reply, instead of perfecting my victory dance I will probably sigh and shrug in recognition that my relief is as temporary as life itself, as fleeting as an empty email inbox.

What about the big stuff? Have you read the news lately?

I’m not proud to admit this but when news of the flood of Syrian refugees and their plight began making headlines this round I thought to myself very calmly, “This is horrible. These people are in my prayers yet I cannot keep company with every terror and tragedy. I’m busy at work and home, I’m more deeply involved than I sometimes wish in local matters, and I deserve protection from some of the worst.”

Then a Facebook friend posted a photograph of the migrant toddler who washed up dead on the beach in Turkey. Aylan was about the age of my littlest guy at home and there was his tiny body being carried by a soldier who averted his eyes as those sweet little toddler legs dangled lifelessly from his arms.

Can we even talk about beginning again in light of the inexcusably preventable death of a child for whom there will be no more beginnings, no more agains? This is not a rhetorical question for me or for Judaism. Later I'll share a profound story of someone who believes that being present with the hardships of others will help her to turn over a new leaf in her own life.

This isn't easy. It's not supposed to be. At the High Holy Days, Jews are instructed to approach these huge, aching questions by going deep within. We are encouraged to focus on who we have been, who we are and who we are called to be. We are asked to repent for having missed the mark and to atone for the sins of our hearts and minds, community, race, country and species.

There is a progression to this ritual: Only after we look inward, do we apologize. Only when we complete that process of self-reflection and making interpersonal amends do we turn to community-wide promises, actually spoken aloud by the whole synagogue in unison. Only then do Jews consider themselves spiritually renewed, ready to be sealed or inscribed for the year ahead. But again, is it possible to do this (let alone, with joy and relief) when the suffering of the world has not ceased or even slowed? I think it is but it takes a very wide perspective.

Like Jaclyn, I too grew up in a Unitarian Universalist and Jewish family. It has given me the feeling of straddling two unique histories, cultures and worldviews. The blessing of being positioned in this way is glimpsing a larger view. Here is what I have noticed:

Unitarian Universalism is often concerned with whether the big themes in life (sin, salvation, responsibility) are supposed to be worked out individually or communally. Do people experience these themes as single self-contained units, sharing them with no one outside the self? Or should we view life's overarching questions in connection with our fellows and with an understanding about shared ownership and mutual impact? This worthy debate has been so present in our theological ancestry that it has become part of our identity, fused into our very DNA as a religious movement. I honor that. I have been formed by it.

Here's the real talk: Judaism is ahead of us here in key ways. It has progressed further than Unitarian Universalism in working out some of the very questions and themes on which Unitarian Universalism flounders. We don't have to feel badly about this. Remember, Judaism has been contemplating life and its meanings for millennia longer.

So what might we learn? I think Jewish wisdom has this to say to our Unitarian Universalist dilemma: Philosophical issues like sin, moral authority and God are experienced both personally and collectively. Both are important lenses. But stopping there (as we

sometimes do in Unitarian Universalism) is incomplete. The personal or individual reckoning must always be nestled within the collective or communal understanding. They need each other or neither will ever truly be possible. Forgiveness can't only be generated individually because an individual hurt or harm wasn't hatched or expressed in a vacuum. It is always in relationship with the group, the culture, the collective. By linking the personal with the group in our spiritual practice at this time of year, we understand enough about the world and our place within it to be able to begin again.

These ideas are consistent with Unitarian Universalism. There's nothing here that doesn't fit with our principles or purposes. Yet in my experience we aren't always quite mature enough to get all the way there. It is simpler to argue about whether the personal or communal matters more because understanding the way the personal and communal need each other is a big job! That's why Judaism developed the High Holy Days. It's why the tradition created a process of figuring out how to honor this complex truth in ways that allow us to come to terms with the past and then begin again.

As Unitarian Universalist observers, we might want to note this is not a one-day event. It's a highly involved process, requiring extensive time and awesome effort. And thus the High Holy Days are often called the Days of Awe.

I haven't forgotten Aylan but I am plagued with that Unitarian Universalist confusion. Is the meaning of life collective or individual? How do I understand my connection to this dead child, to Syria and her people? Can I live my life without facing, in some way, these people in peril? Can a High Holy Days practice of beginning again help us in this situation?

Judaism reassures us that the personal and the communal are not so far apart as we might think at first glance. It encourages us to understand that the individual and collective fit together so completely that they cannot exist alone. This simple framework can be enough to help us begin again by bringing along the whole community, whether that community is a family, a congregation, a culture, a globe.

I alluded earlier to a source of inspiration and now we've come to it. Recently, an Icelandic citizen shared publicly about her personal reasons for welcoming the presence of Syrian migrants in her country. I have no idea if this woman is Jewish. It is statistically unlikely that she is. Yet her statement sums up so perfectly the Jewish understanding that I recommend to Unitarian Universalism about seeing one's own capacity to start afresh as fused with the beginning again of others. About total strangers she says:

"They are our future spouses, best friends, the next soul mate, a drummer for our children's band, the next colleague, Miss Iceland in 2022, the carpenter who finally finishes the bathroom, the cook in the cafeteria, a fireman and television host...People of whom we'll never be able to say in the future: 'Your life is worth less than my life.'"¹

¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/more-than-11000-icelanders-offer-to-house-syrian-refugees-to-help-european-crisis-10480505.html>

I find myself moved practically to tears by her invitation, issued not out of charity but because of mutuality. She herself is ready to turn over a fresh leaf with these newcomers, as their partners in marriage or band practice, home improvement or culinary adventure. All with people of whom we'll never be able to say in the future: 'Your life is worth less than my life.'

Maybe beginning again is bound to get harder as the years go by. I don't know. At the very least it probably gets more complicated because our lives become more complex as we experience more of the world. At this time of the year or not, Jewish or not, the spirit of the High Holy Days call us to plug into the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Our own impulse to start over is not separate from those same desires of someone (everyone) else. Who among us has never longed to start anew? We are all people who have erred; we are all people who have been damaged by circumstance. We are all people of whom we'll never be able to say in the future: 'Your life is worth less than my life.'

We begin again by turning inward, sure, but also by turning to each other to help make that possible. In this way, we are sometimes able to forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love. What more can we do?

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