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Sunday Sermon: “For What Do You Atonement?”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement is the highest holiday in the Jewish calendar and ends the celebration of the Rosh Hashanah or the New Year. Yom Kippur ends Wednesday at nightfall. It is the time when the book of the year is closed and you must live with the ramifications of your actions of the past year. It is a time of personal responsibility. It is a day of prayers asking the divine to accept your sins and imperfections. It is only the divine who can forgive those transgressions against God. In Jewish thought before you can atone to God you must seek to gain forgiveness for those sins against other human beings. Oh’ if only our politicians could even admit their errors. Now I really like this concept. Our Buddhist friends would tell us it is to establish right relationships through accepting responsibility for our actions.

Another understanding I get from Yom Kippur is that it admits our fallibilities as humans. Now We UU’s don’t talk much about sin. Our nineteenth century theologians, especially the Universalists, dismissed the concept of original sin. That idea has become a foundation in most of our theologies, but we have not eliminated the idea of sin, we just don’t talk about it much. Maybe it is because of our supposed exceptionalism. Garrison Keillor satirizes us UU’s by saying our idea of sin is a failure to communicate. I like to think that sin is a loss or a degradation of a relationship with everything, animate or inanimate. Now I know I have many faults and if I don’t know what they are I’m sure my daughters will give me a complete list and I don’t have to even ask. Thinking about those we may have offended or hurt is a good exercise, if only in humility. It is one of the twelve steps in addiction recovery.

Yom Kippur has involved prayer for much of its history and has existed more or less in this form since the construction of Solomon’s temple. Early Judaism practiced it ritually as we heard in the passage I read.

Looking back to these roots and talking about the early ritual I find fascinating. While I will discuss the Jewish Holiday I feel the concepts we think about here today are applicable to every facet of our lives, our individual lives, our lives in families, and in communities like this congregation.

In the Hebrew book of Leviticus chapter 16 we heard the story about the early observance of atonement. This was a central part of the yearly Yom Kippur ritual when the Hebrews were a nomadic tribe prior to the building of the first Temple. Aaron, the son of Moses and the high priest, shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting; and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. (Azazel was the desert demon or the fallen angel of the desert, later got translated as wilderness.)

Aaron slaughtered the bull as a sin offering for himself, and made atonement for himself and for his house. His sacrifice of the first goat would symbolically cleanse the holy place for the people. When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he presented the live goat.

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the tribe of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. This goat that escaped became known as the scapegoat. It is also a wonderful example of how ritual is used by 'nomadic and presumed primitive' peoples to present complex psychological concepts. When we people of modernity talk psychology our primitive ancestors used ritual and ritual processes to understand deep psychological issues of mental health.

Here is the modern interpretation by Arthur Colman, an organization consultant and a Jungian Analyst, "The basis of the scapegoat myth (for groups) is this: the group is not to blame for its problems, its bad feelings, its pains, its defeats.

These are the responsibility of a particular individual or subgroup-the scapegoat-that is perceived as being fundamentally different from the rest of the group and must be excluded or sacrificed in order for the group to survive and remain whole.^[1]" This was very evident in some primitive societies that kept a leader or king only so long as nature was good to them. If a hunt went bad or a crop failed the community's reaction was that the leader was out of favor with the gods so he or she would then lose their position and many times more importantly their heads.

This early ceremony ritualized a psychological process that is practiced unconsciously in many venues today.

Let me give you some examples. On the first anniversary week of the 9-11 tragedy, while there was plenty of blame to go around the country's reaction to the failures went to national leadership but not all of the national leadership. George Tenet the CIA director and Louis Free the FBI chief at the time received much public criticism while the remainder of the Executive branch reaped very little.

When the system didn't work, the commission recommended another level of supervision rather than force the current system to work more properly and we ended up with Homeland Security and a financial bill we will probably never loose.

Fifteen years ago the nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, a naturalize Chinese from Taiwan was indicted for the offense of mishandling classified data, shortly after China was found to have the plans for one of our nuclear devices. For this infraction the man had been kept in prison in solitary confinement for nine months; the judge referred to the case as a great miscarriage of justice. Mr. Lee's crime was to take home some confidential classified data and place it on his own computer.

This was wrong, but the former CIA Director John Deutch lost his security clearance and was publicly reprimanded -- but not charged -- for keeping top secret documents on a computer at his home. While Mr. Lee's data that was originally called extremely sensitive to the national interest was later shown to only be classified confidential, much less significant than the data Deutch possessed.

The Energy Agency Laboratory had recently lost some significant information on a warhead called the W88 that they believed went to the Chinese program. During the government inquiry, investigators could not produce any link that implicated Lee with this loss of data.

There were also some other embarrassing security incidents discovered during the fire on the site that summer. By pursuing the case against Dr. Lee, the government, I believe were projecting their guilt unto him as a scapegoat.

I also believe Mr. Lee's ethnicity may have made him more of a candidate for choice as a scapegoat. Lee was being used to bear away the government's corporate guilt. I believe his trial is as much of a ritual cleansing as the early

Hebrew rite. It might be interesting to look sometime at the legal process from a ritual perspective but that might be even too cynical for the Fox news service.

Here is another example that occurred in the church I served in New York. The church had a called minister who was there for seven years until he retired. During this time many of the founders of the congregation died. This group had lived successful business lives and subsequently spent much of their personal wealth to keep the congregation alive and growing. As they succumbed to their age, the pledge income decreased significantly. At the same time the financial crisis of 2008 took significant retirement monies from the retired community in the church and their subsequent ability to support the church decreased.

At the annual meeting before I arrived the congregation voted to increase the budget to increase the support of church programs without having the pledge base to justify the increases. The entire year the Board of Trustees were under pressure to find other sources of income. In other words, the congregation had sent their “goat” onto the board of trustees rather than the desert – instead of accepting the reality of their situation. The implied problem became the Board of Trustees and the congregation became blameless. This was scapegoating. We know from looking at systems theory that while problems within families or organizations may appear around the acting-out associated with an individual, it might well be the system that needs revamping.

A third example I remember occurred in a church where the minister was under review, being looked at for replacement.

I was a member of the congregation and once again there was a faction who supported the minister and one that supported change. On the change side one particularly strong advocate wanted the minister replaced because there had been no appreciable numerical growth in the society during the year and growth was one of the important issues the congregation wanted addressed when they chose this minister.

Further investigation revealed that the primary advocate for change based on the lack of membership growth was also the chair of the membership committee and had not scheduled a meeting of her committee for at least six months. This demonstrates another important characteristic of scapegoating, projecting onto the goat our own deficiencies, what Jung would call our shadow. Said another way, we

project onto people (especially people with some sort of authority) more power than they really have.

We see similar dynamics within the structures of families. Within a family an individual child many times the eldest will be designated as a problem and the focus of the family will be to “help” the problem. What family systems theory tells us is that we should look to the whole family as a system. The designated problem is in fact reacting to a system that is in some way unhealthy.

Now I think in all five of my examples, no one felt they were being unfair. One organizational consultant put it this way, “The scapegoat and the scapegoating process often hold the unconscious problem of the organization that must sooner or later be confronted and reintegrated if change is to occur.^[2]” I believe we are all were unaware of the extent to which we would appear to make someone a scapegoat. That is the nature of designating a scapegoat.

The chosen will carry a greater portion of the corporate or family guilt. In family situations the scapegoat becomes the family’s “black sheep.” One person who self-identified themselves as the family goat remembered as a child someone saying something about world war starting and then piping up that she didn’t start it. Now as I may have told you before, I was raised by Lutheran parents. Garrison Keillor would probably say that Lutheran kids are raised believing not so much as being born into Original sin as born into Original guilt. This is what can occur in scapegoating families, and the black sheep develop a primary feeling of guilt, of unworthiness.

The present practice of Yom Kippur, which makes use of prayer rather than sacrifice developed with the destruction of the first Temple about 3000 years ago. This change made the primary issue personal responsibility rather than scapegoating.

This is a lesson about not scapegoating. If we can be introspective enough to be able to see those logs in our own eyes and take credit for our faults, then we can seek to reestablish our relationships again.

This is the lesson of Yom Kippur, to take personal responsibility for our actions and find ways to atone for these errors with the people we have wronged. This is one of the problems I have with Christian Theology that states that to be renewed or reborn to use the Christian Metaphor is through seeking acceptance and

forgiving from only Divine sources. I believe to be able to start again we must atone by seeking to right the relationships that we have here and now. This is consistent with the idea of Yom Kippur.

A right relationship first and foremost involves recognition of our own responsibility within those relationships. I find this difficult because many of those acts that tend to alienate me from others are those of which I am least conscious.

So once more I am brought back to my Lutheran model- if a relationship becomes strained, I am guilty of something. Not an easy conundrum is it? This is why I believe a time of personal introspection (or organizational or governmental introspection) is so important. We all have those tasks and jobs and relationships in our lives that we have varying control over. But of these the only acts we can really control are our own and without a time for really looking at ourselves can we really say we can control that.

When I was a stock broker and advisor I got to meet many mutual fund wholesalers, one was Mike Guman. Not being a football follower, I didn't know that Mike was a bit of a Penn State legend. As a running back he led the 1979 Penn State football team to the NCAA finals for the top team for that year.

But what he is remembered for is not his 9 seasons with the Rams or the phenomenal year at Penn State, but by college football fans for being on the receiving end of a goal line stand and hit by Alabama linebacker Barry Krauss, in the Sugar Bowl on January 1, 1979 that kept Penn State from winning. This game was ranked by ESPN as the greatest Bowl Game ever, and determining the NCAA national Football champion for the year, Alabama. The picture was featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated the following week, and is one of the "100 Moments That Define College Football. In other words, that single play defined the entire Penn State season, and Mike became the scapegoat.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, a Boston Rabbi, the author of the popular book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, says "Yom Kippur is an opening, a "window of Opportunity" to look at ourselves without pretense and find ways in which we would like to be different to make the next Yom Kippur confrontation with Judaism's standards a less embarrassing one."

These last twelve months have been a year of trials. Each of us probably said some things or did some things that we now regret or said our truth in a way that was offensive.

Now is the time to atone for our own action. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes; that is a necessary human quality. Yom Kippur teaches us to take personal responsibility for these and atone so we may start the year anew. May we all do likewise.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen.

^[1] Arthur D. Colman, Up from Scapegoating, (Wilmette, Ill: Chiron Publications, 1995). 81.

^[2] IBID, 104.