

“Changing Ourselves, Making Amends”

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel ©
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This morning, I invite you to imagine a future with me.

Imagine a society where people gather every year-
religious people and secular people, old and young people-
gathering in peace, in city squares and village greens,
on hilltops and soccer fields, in cathedrals and temples,
even on ocean shores next to burned out towns,
in clearings amidst earthquake rubble, in the mudflats of receding floods.

Now imagine that without pointing fingers,
all together they admit the choices they’ve made
that have damaged the earth or her creatures.
They brainstorm the next steps they can take together.
They commit to change and repairing the world.
We don’t live in that society- not yet.
But maybe today’s March to End Fossil Fuels is a start.

Imagine a society dedicated to telling the truth about its history,
one where people understand that public apology
and making restitution to help repair historic wrongs
is to be expected, is seen as necessary and just.
Imagine one in which perpetrators of harm are not let off the hook
with half-hearted self-serving apologies, but are expected to make amends.
We don’t live in that society- not yet.
But maybe one day our nation will have its own
Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Would it make a difference if we did?
Would we be less likely to repeat mistakes and perpetuate trauma?
Would there be less hurt in the world,
more healing in personal and social relationships?

Imagine that families and congregations like ours
began every year with a re-set,
a time to reflect on ways we may have hurt each other,
a time to say “I’m sorry,” “we’re sorry”,
a time to commit to making new choices,
to taking care of ourselves so we can do better.
Jewish families and congregations are doing that right now,
and one can see the wisdom in it.

Sometimes I wonder who may have left North Parish
due to some hurt that we don’t even know about, one I don’t know about?
Who knows how many rifts among family members
could be healed if those at fault took responsibility for harm done?
Who knows how many lives could be changed, freed up, could become happier?!

We live in an unapologetic nation.
This is one premise of Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg in her book
called *“On Repentance and Repair: making Amends in an Unapologetic World”*,
this year’s Unitarian Universalist “Common Read”.

Now before someone walks out,
I just want to acknowledge that for some of you,
the word “repentance” might be a loaded word!
It might trigger images of stern religious leaders
thundering “Repent of your sins!” or telling you to say ten “Hail Marys” or some such thing.
Does it?

As a person who was raised Unitarian Universalist,
“repentance” is not a religious word I grew up with
so I can be just be curious about it...
but I know that’s not true for everyone.
If it gives you the willies, then I encourage you to put on
your UU translation headphones
and when you hear the word “repentance” just think “**making amends**” instead.

If you’re feeling nervous no matter *what* its called, you’re not alone.
Most of us in the U.S. aren’t really *into* repentance
outside of the Recovery Movement and Jewish congregations.
Our society prefers speedy forgiveness.
You might be able to think immediately of a number of high profile hate incidents
where those whose communities were brutalized
offered forgiveness very soon after, even if the perpetrator exhibited no remorse
or lifelong commitment to restitution and change.

Maybe you admired these forgiving people,
or maybe you felt discomfort or disbelief
that a doer of evil deeds could be “forgiven” so easily.

Rabbi Ruttenberg identifies reasons for this U.S. bias towards forgiveness.
These include our nation’s excessive individualism, self-interest,
and the ways that lack of accountability keeps the powerful in power.
She also names what she calls
a “*watered down, secularized distortion of Protestant thinking*”:
namely the idea that God’s mercy and forgiveness
are available to all who simply believe.

Sound familiar?
Take the “belief” part out and you have a simplification of historical Universalism.
“God’s mercy and forgiveness are available to all.”
This simplification says *nothing* about our congregational practices

of trying to live moral lives, follow ethical principles,
and express our faith in “deeds not creeds”.

Taken alone and out of context,
the Protestant idea of salvation by faith or belief alone
emphasizes one’s inner state instead of outward actions,
redemption instead of repentance or making amends.

Judaism takes a different approach.
Its greatest emphasis is about the work of repentance.
Rabbi Ruttenberg calls on the wisdom of a famous Jewish 12th century philosopher,
doctor and scholar named Moses ben Maimon, known as Maimonides.
He was born in Cordoba, current day Spain, around 1135,
but eventually settled in Egypt.
He wrote a masterwork, the *Mishneh Torah*,
and another called *The Guide for the Perplexed*.
(Now *that’s* a book I’d like to read.
Best. Title. Ever. Even if it is 800 years old!)

Ruttenberg says, “According to Maimonides,
a person doesn’t just get to mess up, mumble ‘Sorry,’ and get on with it.
They’re not entitled to forgiveness if they haven’t done the work of repair.”
And for that, Maimonides offers a clear and systematic step by step guide.

It might sound familiar to those of us who are in 12 step programs.
12 step Recovery is *one* place in our society outside of Jewish congregations
where making meaningful amends is a regular practice.
That’s what 5 of the 12 steps are all about!

In AA and other 12 step programs, there’s:

Step #4: We have made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
Step #5: We have admitted to our Higher Power, to ourselves,
and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step #8: We have made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step #9: We have made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step #10. We have continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

That's a pretty good road map to making amends!

The process outlined by Maimonides *also* has five steps.

Step One: Owning it. Naming and FULLY owning the harm done, out loud, And to do so where appropriate in a public space.

Step Two: Changing. Starting to change ourselves. We might make an action plan, change our self-concept, make meaningful financial sacrifices, go into therapy or rehab, or educate ourselves about an issue we've been ignorant of.

Step three: Paying it back. Accepting consequences and offering restitution. According to Maimonides and the Jewish tradition, those who have suffered MUST receive justice, remedy, redress, compensation, reparations, restitution. No cutting corners.

It is not until we get to **Step four** that we finally get to **apology-** a sincere expression of regret and sorrow.

As my kids say, "With no buts." (Not "I'm sorry but..."; just "I'm sorry".)

The final step, **step 5, Keep it going.** Continuing to make different choices, just like in AA, so no further harm is done to others. It often takes making serious changes in our environment, habits and ways of being. The goal? To become more of the person we want to be, the kind of person who doesn't cause harm to others.

All of these steps are hard work.

No wonder the Jews and folks in recovery do this together, to support each other!

Left to our own devices, when we're told we've hurt someone,
our first reaction is often to get defensive instead of curious.

(Or maybe that's just my problem! Anyone else ever get defensive?)

A trauma psychologist named Jennifer Freyd sees this a lot.

She has come up with an acronym to summarize
how perpetrators often respond to being held accountable.

The acronym is **DARVO**, which stands for

"Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender."

Deny, attack, reverse victim and offender.

I don't know if any of you can think of someone-
maybe a public figure- who acts that way.

But if you **can**, it's a dead give-away
that they are trying to avoid accountability for bad behavior.

In fact, maybe DARVO should become a new word in the lexicon,
so while watching the TV news you can say *"Bingo! It's DARVO time!"*

Or *"There he goes DARVO-ing again!"*

Denying, attacking and reversing victim and offender is nothing new.

If you read the stories of the Biblical prophets,
they are continually confronted with leaders who are DARVO experts.
But not always.

Take the story of Jonah, which is retold by Jews on Yom Kippur every year.
It's a great story- there's an escape, a big storm,
being swallowed and spit up by a big fish- all of that.
We've done dramatic enactments over the years
and I've preached sermons about it.
But I've always focused on the journey of the grumpy prophet Jonah

who simply refuses to let go of some very old grudges.

I get that! Anyone here ever hold on to old grudges?

I find Jonah to be both a sympathetic and very annoying character.

Here's a quick review of what happens:

Jonah is sent on a mission by God to warn the Jews' former enemies- Assyrians who live in the city of Nineveh.

Jonah can't forgive them, so he gets angry at God for sending him there, angry at God for making him the instrument of their salvation, angry at God for forgiving the Ninevites.

Reading Jonah, I've always meditated on forgiveness.

But that's not the focus of the High Holy days, or the focus in Judaism. The focus is repentance, not forgiveness. Not on being the victim, but on what we do when we've unwittingly or purposefully caused harm.

There *is* another pivotal character in the story: the king of Nineveh. This is the guy in charge. He holds all the power, has LOTS of money, an army and a publicity team, no doubt. What does he do? The story goes like this:

"Nineveh was an enormously large city, a three days walk across. Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'

The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king on Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: 'By decree of the king and his nobles:

No man or beast- of flock or herd- shall taste anything!
They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water!
They shall be covered in sackcloth- man and beast- and shall cry mightily to God.
Let everyone turn back from his evil ways
and from the injustice of which he is guilty.
Who knows but that God may turn and relent?
He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish.”

Now I'm not a fan of the king telling folks not to feed or water their animals-
that's just adding more injustice on top of everything else.
But setting that aside, one must admit that this “bad guy”,
the king of a corrupt city state, becomes a model of repentance.

He doesn't do the DARVO routine.
He doesn't deny responsibility for injustice.
He doesn't attack by changing the topic to banning books
or prosecuting Jonah's problematic relatives.

He doesn't reverse Victim and Offender
by saying that Jews are responsible for all the problems in Nineveh.
Nor does he abuse his privilege by deserting his people to their fate,
while running away to his country palace, a yacht or royal bunker.

He immediately takes responsibility.
He makes a visible public confession by putting on sackcloth and ashes.
He demands change his kingdom, and we presume, for himself.
He knows it may be too late; there are no guarantees
that changing their ways *now* will prevent God's wrath
and the destruction of the city.
It doesn't matter. He still repents, makes amends, changes.

Repentance is such an old fashioned religious term.
It might give you the willies or make you feel uneasy.
But imagine someone who hurt you coming to you to make amends.
Imagine them doing so in exactly the way that would appease you best,
make you feel most loved and respected, cared for and seen.
Imagine being able to do that for those you have hurt.

If any of you are interested in reading and discussing
Ruttenberg's book this fall, let me know.
And more importantly, if I have harmed any of you somehow
in the past 24 years and you never let me know,
or if you are holding onto a hurt from another member of the congregation,
I hope you will be brave enough to be honest with us about all that.

It's time to re-set, to start a new year, to say "I'm sorry",
to change our ways, and *to take care of ourselves* so we can be better.
As Rabbi Rutten berg says,
we all hurt people, but that doesn't make us "bad" people,
just fallible, imperfect, like every other human alive.
So let's agree to simply *be* human, together.

Shana Tovah- a happy and peaceful new year to us all.