

Of Friends, Families and Forgiveness

*a reflection by Rev. Dr. Lynn Ashley
with meditation from Sharon Salzburg
delivered at Schenectady, October 16, 2016*

At sundown this past Wednesday evening, at services that took place around the world, the sound of shofars marked the ending of the holiest day of the Jewish religious year. Ten days comprise the High Holy Days: from Rosh Hashanah, the day of remembrance and first day of the Jewish new year, through Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, a day of fasting and prayer.

During the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur our Jewish neighbors are invited to slow down and take time out to think deeply about questions we all might well consider *at least once* each year: how have we lived our lives during this past year? how have we treated others? how might we behave differently that we may be better persons during the coming year — that we might engage more deeply in the work of *Tikkun Olum*, the repair of the world.

Among other things, the sound of the shofar at the end of the Yom Kippur service signifies that the faithful have been freed of wrongdoings. It serves as an invitation to celebrate for the rest of the day forgiveness that has been secured.¹

In accordance with our Unitarian Universalist tradition we look to ‘wisdom from the world’s religions to inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life.’ And so this morning in the spirit of love, and with deep respect, we draw from the wisdom of the High Holy Days and the practice of our Jewish neighbors.

Reflection “Of Friends, Families and Forgiveness”

I was seven or eight years old when I had one of those aha moments regarding the sexual differences between boys and girls. And I decided to share that newfound insight with my little sister, Franki, but before telling her, I insisted that she not tell anyone else, especially a parent - or grandparent, the subject being taboo in those days among us children in the early elementary grades.

I can still see Franki and me huddled together on the floor of my grandparents sleeping porch as she promised she would not tell. And I can still see her jumping up within moments of my sharing, and running off to tell our grandmother. Although my grandmother was not at all shocked by the news, nor was she upset, I was. I had been betrayed. A promise made had been broken. No matter how incidental, no matter how much I may look back and laugh at my naïveté, the consequence was that *never* again would I *naively* trust my sister as I had before that day. That’s one of the truths associated with any wrong done, no matter how great or small. Forgiving does not mean we forget; nor does it mean things will ever be the same again as they were before the transgression. There can, however, be a mending of relationship. There can, paradoxically, be a deepening of intimacy, a deepening of compassion for another.

¹paraphrase from chabad.org

I was nine years old the day that my best friend, Patti, threatened to hit me as we walked home together after school. So afraid was I of her threat that as soon as it was voiced, I began running away from her. When I reached the front door of our house, I raced in, slammed the door shut and locked it just as Patti reached the top step of the porch. I can still see her pounding on the glass door and yelling at me as I, exhausted, hurried across the living room, my goal to reach the back door and lock it before Patti got there. Just as I reached the door into the kitchen, my mother entered through the back door. Patti turned quietly and walked away.

While I have absolutely no recollection of what Patti and I were fighting about, I do recall tears of pain and anger as I told Mom what had happened. Her response offered one of the most important lessons of my life, not one simply associated with letting go — with forgiveness — but a quality at the heart of empathy and compassion. In the context of whatever was our conflict, Mom suggested that Patti may have been acting out of a deep hurt that I had nothing to do with me, a hurt that Patti herself might not be conscious of, a hurt so deep that it sometimes might cause her to act out of anger rather than to feel a great sadness within. Patti, you see, had been adopted five years before by our neighbors, her aunt and uncle, after her parents had been killed in a car accident.

Whether a hurt is inflicted upon us by another or our own hurtful behavior is aimed toward another, often there has been a deep underlying wound through which another has acted toward us, through which we interpret the harmful act of another, or from which we lash out. If we can understand that, perhaps it becomes easier to forgive or to ask for forgiveness. Empathy and compassion may be borne of our wounds. And so may our closest relationships be deepened when we risk sharing the source of pain that may lead us to act out.

From our childhood experiences, our experiences in family and friendship — and those I've just shared admittedly are gentle in comparison with some ... from wounds that occur throughout our lifetime — from abuse, physical or emotional; neglect; betrayals; the breaking of vows; the deaths of those we love — wounds inflicted throughout our lives often by those to whom we are closest, we can learn so much about forgiving and being forgiven.

I must admit as I recalled my sister's childish betrayal, I found myself asking, had I ever forgiven her? I thought so, but wondered what had that been like? There was never a particular moment, no apology expressed... no dramatic moment of reconciliation, no time in our lives when I said (or thought) "I forgive you." No time when she asked me to forgive her. And so it is so often with forgiveness. Time simply passes, family and friends come together to celebrate birthdays and holidays and rites of passage: babies are born and elders die. Then one day we just may wake up and realize there has been a change. We are no longer carrying the weight of an old wound.

For some the injuries may have been so harmful that the notion of forgiving is inconceivable. Wayne Muller, a minister, writer and therapist, argues however that forgiving in such circumstances is still important. "What we are forgiving is not the act, not the violence or the neglect, the incest, the divorce or the abuse. We are forgiving the actors, the people who could not manage to honor and cherish their own children, their own spouse, or their own lives in a

loving and gentle way. We are forgiving their suffering, their confusion, their unskillfulness, their desperation and their humanity... We step toward freedom..."²

There is a deep emotional cost associated with not-forgiving. The point was made clear one afternoon when I was in seminary. We had been asked the question, what is not-forgiving. Within a very short time eight or ten of us had generated a long list that included words such as angry, resentful, controlling, blaming, vengeful, bitter, judgmental, condemning, self-righteous, sad, hateful, silent, withdrawn, disconnected, empty. Words/ Feelings that twist our guts, feelings that can lead to despair. Ways of being that prevent us from wholeness and happiness. To be not-forgiving reveals that the one who suffers most may well be the injured one, hurt first by another's cruelty, meanness or unkindness... But then there is a deeper hurt: the deeper hurt is the harm done to oneself by holding on to the anger, the pain, the resentment. And so we need not only to forgive others but also we need to forgive ourselves.

Jack Kornfeld, a Buddhist who has written extensively on spiritual healing, confirms the importance of forgiveness as "one of the greatest gifts of the spiritual life, an act of the heart, and a valuable release from our sorrows of the past."³ "Rarely achievable in a fairy tale way" according to one rabbi; another asserts forgiveness is "a by-product of an on-going healing process..."⁴ a by-product of an *on-going healing process* grounded in reflection, acknowledgment of the wrong, and a demonstrable change in behavior. Glib apologies do not easily open doors to forgiveness.

Many, many years ago, I did organizing with a community action agency in southern Illinois. The people served were urban blacks and rural whites. One day, my colleague, Mac, an African-American, invited me to join him for lunch at a little cafe in the black community. We had just settled into a booth when two men sat in the booth adjacent to ours. The one with whom I was back to back leaned around and began talking to Mac. Then he saw me. "What you doin' in here, white girl?" he asked. Not waiting for an answer, he said, "You get out of here, whitey." Mac and I looked at each other, got up and left. My heart raced as we walked toward the door... and as I thought, "This is what happens to black people all the time, and this is the first time it's happened to me. I need to pay attention to how this feels."

Two years later, I was working in the office for community relations at the University. It was my last day and I ran into Mac in the hallway. We stopped to talk... and to say good-bye. A young man came up behind me, greeted Mac, then looked at me and said cordially as he offered his hand, "I don't think we've met." Mac looked at him, then me, and then with a sardonic smile, nodded, "Oh yes, you have." Nothing more need have been said; we three knew. "I am so glad to see you again," said Mac's friend whose name I never learned. "That day was one of the

² Wayne Muller, *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood*, p. 11. Simon & Schuster, 1992.

³ Jack Kornfeld, *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*. Bantam Books, 1993.

⁴ Harold S. Kushner, *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*. Knopf, 2006.

worst in my life. I'd just lost my job that morning, and the night before my girlfriend broke up with me. You were there and I took it out on you.”

So often the hurts we inflict upon others are related to deep wounds within. How sad it is that there are those who hold on to an unkind word spoken at a family dinner, a cocktail party ... or perhaps at a church board meeting. How often might we offend someone and have not a clue what we said or did? “So often,” writes one rabbi, “we stand on ceremony with loved ones and friends, waiting for them to apologize first; to humble themselves so that we can feel bigger. And then the resentments only congeal; and weeks, months, years go by without speaking — even after the cause of the fight may be forgotten and irrelevant. Every so often,” he adds, “it is a good exercise, to ask oneself: If one of us died before we made up, would I really want to have held that grudge, to have not spoken, to have it all end without an attempt at reconciliation...”⁵

And so, once again, what is forgiving? Robin Casarjian has summarized well the wisdom of many who have written about forgiveness, and I paraphrase her:

Forgiveness involves *a commitment to experience each moment* uncluttered by past perceptions ... to accept responsibility for our perceptions ... to recognize that our perceptions are not (necessarily) objective facts. With the practice of forgiveness, we open the way for a fading away of the perceptions that cloud our ability to love.

Forgiveness is *a decision* to see beyond the limits of another... beyond fears, idiosyncrasies, neuroses, and mistakes – to see a pure essence unconditioned by personal history... always worthy of respect and love.

Forgiveness is *a process*...

Forgiveness is *a way of life* that gradually transforms us from being ... victims of our circumstances to being ... loving co-creators of our reality.

Forgiveness is *to let go, to release, and to cease harboring the past*... and may be experienced as a feeling of joyfulness, peacefulness, love and open-heartedness, ease, expansiveness, confidence, freedom, lightness, and a sense of rightness.⁶

I am touched deeply by the intentions of these great holy days. Profound intentions learned thousands of years ago, I suspect, by human beings seeking to live together in community. There is good reason that our Jewish ancestors determined that every year there “would be [a time] devoted to contemplation, to a time for clearing the heart....” They understood that we humans need to engage again and again in times of introspection. They understood that repentance and forgiveness were/are primary spiritual tools at the heart of being in community -- in blessed, beloved community. They understood that forgiving does not excuse wrongs or deny that they have happened; nor does it mean that one need to or will ever forget. They understood that forgiveness was not a one time thing, that it is a practice in which we fallible mortals must engage over and over and over again.

⁵ Irwin Kula, *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*, p. 177. Hyperion, 2006.

⁶ Casarjian, Robin. *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*. Bantam Books, 1992.

Meditation

One of the great lessons that I as a Unitarian Universalist take from my understanding of the Jewish High Holy Days is that we are responsible for our own atonement, that sense of becoming at one with ourselves, with others, and with the universe. In the spirit of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I offer a Buddhist forgiveness meditation, which I introduce with these abbreviated comments from Sharon Salsberg.⁷

The intention of forgiveness meditation is not to force anything or to pretend to anything or to forget about ourselves in utter deference to the needs of others... (It) does not mean condoning a harmful action or denying injustice or suffering..... It is a type of dying (in which) we must be able to say, "I am not that person anymore, and you are not that person anymore."

It is an inner relinquishment of guilt or resentment (that) may take an outward form: we may seek to make amends, demand justice, resolve to be treated better, or simply leave a situation behind.

Forgiveness is a process. That means that when we join in this morning's meditation, (if you will allow yourself to go with it), some conflicted emotions may arise: shame, anger, a sense of betrayal, confusion, or doubt. Let your feelings arise without judging them. Recognize them -- and then gently return your attention to the forgiveness reflection. The reflection is done in three parts: we will ask forgiveness from those we have harmed, offer forgiveness to those who have harmed us, and offer forgiveness to ourselves.

*...First, we seek forgiveness from those we may have hurt. Let the following words become a silent recitation: **If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask their forgiveness.** If different people images or scenarios come up, release the burden of guilt and ask for forgiveness: "I ask your forgiveness."*

*...Next we offer forgiveness to those who have harmed us. Do not worry if there is not a great rush of loving feeling; simply honor the powerful force of intention. Respect your ultimate ability to let go and begin again. Let the following words become a silent recitation. **If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive them.** As different thoughts or images come to mind, offer forgiveness: "I forgive you."*

*...Finally, we turn our attention to forgiveness of ourselves. Consider ways you have harmed yourself, or not loved yourself, or not lived up to your own expectations. This is the time to let go of unkindness toward yourself. Here, you may wish to include any inability to forgive others that you became aware of a moment ago; that is not a reason to be unkind to yourself. Speak silently the recitation, **For all of the ways I have hurt or harmed myself, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer forgiveness.***

⁷ adapted from Sharon Salsberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, pp.75-77. Shambhala Press, 1995.

Closing Words

There is a story about the Israelites receiving the second set of the Ten Commandments on Yom Kippur. The story goes like this. After forty days atop Mt. Sinai, Moses came down with the tablets (that had been ‘incised by God.’) But contrary to popular belief, these are not the set the Israelites received. When Moses saw the people worshiping the golden calf (a blatant defiance of the first three commandments), he did the unthinkable. He smashed the tablets in rage. Then he returned to the mountain for another forty days. When he returned to the people, he brought new tablets that he himself had created. These were the commandments the people received, and this is the event Yom Kippur remembers.

There is no great moment of healing or repair in this story. Of course the people show regret but, as in our own lives, the slate is not clean. Something even more amazing happens. Moses places the old smashed tablets into the Holy Ark — the Ark of the Covenant — with the new, intact ones. The relationship continues; the covenant — the relationship, in this case of the people with God — is renewed with the brokenness inside. There is no perfect reconciliation, no permanent forgiveness, no forgetting. But betrayal is not the last word. There is a larger context: Love and betrayal can merge into and out of one another. There is always a more enveloping pattern — and forgiveness is the most enveloping of all. — *adapted from Rabbi Irwin Kula*