

*Days of Awe*  
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*Last year's confession came easily to the lips.  
Will this year's come deeper than the skin?*  
- Chaim Stern -

**Reflection on Rosh Hashanah**

On its voyage through the stellar ocean, our earthly blue boat home is tilting on its axis, angling the northern half its body away from the heat of our closest star. In a delicate annual balance between wobbling ritual and galactic chaos, our planet nods just far enough to cool the northern surface, but not far enough to freeze and destroy its inhabitants. In cooler climates, frenzied squirrels, shaggy bears and hairless humans prepare for slow sleep, hibernation and introspection. This is the season, celebrated in both primitive cultures and advanced societies, when the life passages of our earth are honored in the rituals of human experience.

Some cultures celebrate the New Year in spring, with the rejuvenation of the natural world; other cultures celebrate the New Year after the winter solstice, when the days begin to grow longer. In the Jewish tradition the New Year is celebrated each fall, shortly after the autumnal equinox, with Rosh Hashanah. Tradition holds that this is the anniversary of God's creation of Adam and Eve. Rosh Hashanah begins tomorrow night, at sundown. A week and a half from now begins the holy day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The ten days connecting these two holidays are known as "The Days of Awe."

Rosh Hashanah, New Year's Day, is the Day of Remembrance, when humans remember the beginning of the world, God remembers human deeds, and the gathered community remembers the successes and failures of its mission over the previous year. Central to this celebration is the power of memory. Memory breaks the bonds of the present, establishes the continuity of the generations, and rescues human life and effort from futility. Memory also makes possible the only true resurrection of the dead. Because memory offers both chastening shame and comforting reassurance, New Year's Day provides the opportunity for both judgment of past behavior as well as a rededication to God, to others, and to new beginnings.

In Judaism, New Year's Day is seen as a renewal of creation. The world is reborn from year to year, and in an extended sense, from day to day and from minute to minute. The primary message is that creation is a process; it is continuous. No moment is self-contained; each emerges from the previous moment. In this way, our present actions and interactions are the raw materials of the future.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of humans being created in the image of God. Most often, this is taken to mean simply that our physical appearance is the same as God's physical appearance. But other windows exist for us to look in on this story. God is a creator and, as the story goes, we are made in that image. Each one of us is an artist in our own way, birthing, evolving, pursuing, creating a new life where none has existed, a new way of engaging the world. Some of us are involved in more obvious and well-known acts of creation, like painting or writing or dancing. Others of us create families, or create connections between people or ideas, or create laughter. Even the cells of our bodies create new cells that multiply and die off, moment-by-moment, until we are not even the same physical being as when we were children. The act of remembering is what connects us to the acts of creation that came before us.

Too often we experience only violence or brokenness: with our earth, with other countries, with the poor and homeless, with our congregations, our children, a spouse or

partner...and maybe especially with ourselves. But during this time of introspection and celebration of a New Year, it is important to remember that each one of us is a creator. Based on our memory of the past and our experience of the present, we are called to the task of creating a world that sustains creation. As we look to the past to discover how we were shaped in order to better understand how we may shape the future, the question is not just “Who am I?” but “*Whose* am I?” To whom do I belong? To what, or to whom am I accountable? How will this larger question make us behave differently in the coming year? As we honor our own creation and our own calling, what will we do to sustain creation in the rest of the world?

### ***Candle Ritual of Birth and Creation***

To honor and remember our origins,

To celebrate creation,

To understand better where we come from and how we were shaped

So that we may better shape the future,

I invite people to come forward and light a candle,

To name your maternal grandmother and name where she was born.

### **Reflection on Yom Kippur**

It is a common human instinct to want to begin the New Year with a clean slate. Based on Roman and Christian heritage, we have New Year’s resolutions, the 12 days of Christmas, and even Spring Cleaning as remnants of ancient rites of purification. In Judaism, throughout the Days of Awe, a similar 10-day period of penitence begins on Rosh Hashanah, and ends on Yom Kippur. Similar to the Christian season of lent, these ten days are dedicated to inner spiritual cleansing. Jews are required to abstain during this time from a wide variety of earthly pleasures and focus instead on self-scrutiny and introspection. In the Jewish tradition, however, penitence is more than mere negative regret. It is positive reform. This is the time for straying souls to actively return to the Torah, the teachings in which originally came from God.

During this ten-day period, it is said that God opens three books: the first contains the names of the pious and virtuous; the second contains the names of the wicked and impious; and the third contains the “betwixt-and-between.” These souls are given a chance to determine their own fates, for the record is not sealed until twilight on Yom Kippur. “Prayers of Forgiveness” are said, and God’s grace is asked, by virtue of the assurance from God to Moses, recorded in the book of Exodus, that God is “merciful and gracious...forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and ready to acquit the guilty.”

I find it remarkable how forgiving and benevolent God is portrayed. The violent, angry God of earthquakes and famine portrayed in other passages is described here in a very intimate, personal manner. This season is designed to be an intimate assessment of our lives in the presence of both the gathered spiritual community and the entire universe. But because each person’s behaviors also affect the community, and affect the community’s covenant with God, Yom Kippur is both a private experience and a public worship. For this reason, the entire community offers confessions and asks for prayers of forgiveness.

I wonder what transgressions we Unitarian Universalists, as a gathered spiritual community, could confess and for which we could ask forgiveness? If the current mortgage crisis is a manifestation of human fallibility, I wonder where these same flaws might be manifest here, among us? As a colleague asks, where are the wild, unregulated places where Unitarian Universalists go to exploit our movement, our memberships, and our religious and spiritual capital in service to personal gain? Where are the places in our religious world where unaccountability becomes an abuse of freedom?

This is the season in the Jewish year to atone for sins, to make amends for hurt we caused in others. Part of the ritual of Yom Kippur is to recognize and remember the connection each Jew has with every other Jew, with the entire “House of Israel.” Part of the work of atonement is to recognize and admit that the hurt we caused someone else was not just personal, but that it affects an entire people. As I look at the world through the Jewish lens of Yom Kippur, I can’t help but see the whole of humanity in relation to a larger universal calling. How would we view the world and act in it if we believed we were all various branches of one religion, and that we all must make amends to each other for the hurt we have caused each other?

What transgressions might we, the United States, have visited upon others? Our own CIA trained Osama bin Laden in terrorist tactics some 20 years ago, when we covertly fought to keep the Soviets out of Afghanistan. We turned our back on him years later, and in response, he turned his back on us. Who is responsible for the state of the world, the creators, or those who are created? Who is responsible for peace in the land of Israel: the Palestinians, who shred both trust and bodies with their homemade visions of paradise? The Israelites, who bulldoze homes and annihilate their enemies with tanks and helicopter gun ships? The United States, which declares itself a neutral party in peace talks but then supplies every conventional weapon of mass destruction to the Israelis?

Responsibility for compassion and peace in our world rests not on any one person or society, but on all of us. No one escapes judgment and no one escapes responsibility. But we are not on our own. The ritual of Yom Kippur, a communal ritual practiced for the good of the community, provides us with guidance. When we hurt others, confession and repentance are the first steps toward healing. Confession may be to a priest or a rabbi or minister, or it may be to a friend or in front of international news cameras, or it may be to a therapist or to God. It is confession made with the intention of living in and practicing right relationship with our human community. A later step in this process is forgiveness, for both our selves and for others.

Confession and forgiveness have survived so many centuries in so many faiths because it is a ritual that provides us with the channel and the opportunity to name chaos and falsehood with the telling of the truth. Truth telling is inherently healing because it unites who we say we want to be with who we are. May we continue our work of remembering, confession and forgiveness, as we strive to make our world and ourselves peaceful and whole.

### ***Ritual of Confession and Atonement***

In the Jewish tradition, one practice during the Days of Awe is to go to a body of water and empty the pockets in a ritual of cleansing and purification. Other stories are told of how the community ritually placed their sins and regrets on the head of a goat, and then sent the goat into the wilderness to cleanse and purify the community (which is where we get our term “scapegoat”).

This morning I invite you to hold the rock you took from the basket, and place upon it – in whatever way is meaningful for you – your sins or regrets from this past year. Then, if you feel comfortable, bring those to the front and drop them in the clay bowl of water in a ritual of cleansing and purification, so that we may move forward as a community with renewed faith and commitment.