

*A Sermon for Yom Kippur*

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Over the past few weeks, if you have had the occasion to ride the subway, you may have noticed an interesting advertisement amongst the posters for surgeons, debt consultants and Swatch watches. These ads pop out at me ponder my day, observe humanity and try to meditate. This particular advertisement is for a show simply titled “Revenge,” featuring a young woman in a long black gown with a tangled, thorny train. “What goes around comes around,” boasts the advertisement, “This is not a story of forgiveness.” “Vengeance is forever.” It is an advertisement for a television adaptation of the Alexandre Dumas 19<sup>th</sup> century novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In this interpretation, *Revenge* is the story of an 18 year old girl as she tries to avenge the death of her father.

The show debuted one week prior to Rosh Hashanah, when we gathered here last Wednesday to observe the Jewish new year and to begin a process of *teshuvah*, of returning to our best selves once again. Each time I encountered this message in preparation for the Jewish holidays I could not help but find it striking, to say the least. Here we are, trying to be return to our best selves, attempting to let go of all that has been done and undone in our year. Here we are, reflecting on our own actions and how others actions have impacted our lives, trying on the complex and challenging practice of forgiveness. And here, wanted or unwanted, is a reminder of a story not about forgiveness and reconciliation, but about vengeance.

If truth be told, subway advertisements are not the only media distraction to our High Holiday reflections. It is easy to be distracted by media’s obsession with showcasing human pettiness, stubbornness and even cruelty. An empire of reality television has been built upon the fueding, bad behavior and a persistent refusal to take accountability that is so abundant in our culture. Looking at the news, we see places where justice was not served, and the criminal justice system seems more retributive than restorative.

Sometimes, however, these distractions are a welcome diversion from our own process of *teshuvah*, of returning to our best selves. Sometimes anything seems easier than facing our own shortcomings, where we've failed ourselves and others. Watching a television show about revenge seems the perfect escape from such challenging and intimate work. Stories of forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy and kindness surely are not always as newsworthy, flashy or as intoxicating. They are real, nonetheless, and they are happening all the time. As people of faith, we need to tell these stories- of when our kindness made a difference in another person's life, when a broken relationship was mended, when hatred was transformed into love. Proverbs 7 reminds us: "Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye, Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart." We need to tell stories of love and forgiveness that will companion us through this day and into the next year of our lives.

Yom Kippur, is, at its core, about Atonement. On the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, we enter into a spirit of respect and curiosity about the deepest human need for love and connection with each other-with others- and with God. Atonement: At-one-ment—communion-- reunion—oneness-- with our own true selves and with the source of beauty, love and justice many call God. After we strip away the many distractions of our minds and our world, what remains is most vulnerable and tender. We are called on Yom Kippur to a kind of spiritual honesty- Our truest selves, laid bare before our highest aspirations. Our deepest failures, mistakes, and foibles, laid bare before our selves and others. We hold up a mirror and take a good, hard look at what we see—what we love and what we'd like to let go of.

Each year, we give thanks for this opportunity to go deep—as cathartic—or as painful- as it may be. Each year, as much as we might want to bring a freshness to this process, our confessions may be familiar. Each year we may return to the same hard lessons about ourselves—the persistent patterns to which we cling, the difficult relationships that do not ease, the pain of grief that does not abate. Each year, with all of our dreams and disappointments, we have a new opportunity to return again to our highest aspirations. Our Unitarian Universalist heritage reminds us that revelation is not sealed—new truth and new possibility are waiting to break into our lives, at each moment. The path is always changing and shifting, and sometimes, even, looks the same.

The words of social ethicist Rebecca Todd Peters reminds us that we continue to live the story of our ancestors, each generation, each person in a new way. She writes:

One of the insights that we gain from the story of the Hebrew people is that there is no single “right” way or path of life. In different times and in different places, God calls out to the people with different messages of hope, challenge and faithfulness. While their moral calling to justice, integrity, and community may remain the same, the path toward achieving these goals shifts depending on their circumstances.

She continues:

In this sense, the task of faith can be understood to be the task of discerning what God is calling us to do—here and now. While God’s teleological vision for the human community remains consistently one of justice for the entire creation, the specific message or task at hand may shift as new expressions unfold in the life of the community. <sup>1</sup>

In this Jewish new year, as we let go into the unknown, let us be reminded of our task of faith: to listen carefully to our deepest self, to discerning the call of the holy in our lives. To close, the words of the author Alexander DuMas “All human wisdom is contained in these two words--Wait and Hope.” As we await the birth of the new year in our lives, may hope buoy us into new possibility for deeper communion with ourselves, with others, and with God. We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love. <sup>2</sup>

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters. *In Search of the Good Life: the Ethics of Globalization*. New York: Continuum Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> From *Litany of Atonement* Rob Eller Isaacs