

## **Become Awestruck**

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I once found myself in a small Hindu temple in a remote village in India. At the center of the temple was an altar with a god robed in crimson and saffron. Hanging beside the god was a mask of a human face painted stark white with blood red lips. I came to find out that this small temple was quite old and had roots that pre-dated Hinduism. In the past, once a year, the local people brought their grievances to the temple and offered them up to the God, who in turn received all the village's complaints by way of a human sacrifice. When the English arrived to occupy this land, they frowned on the practice. So, the people made the stark white mask with blood red lips. And every year they place the mask upon a goat. They sacrifice the goat instead of a person and the goat, literally, becomes a scapegoat for all the mistakes and errors, angers and hatred in the community. The Grudge Keeper goat takes all grudges away and the community can begin again in love. Or at least begin again politely cleansed, until the next time someone makes a mistake. I suspect the ghosts of Grudge Keeper Goats continue to haunt the community without mercy.

“Sin” is one of those words we Unitarian Universalists tend to shy away from. It feels all judgmental like, and we don't like being judged, and we sure as heck don't like feeling guilty. Many of us left the church of our birth to get away from feeling guilty. I've heard over and over that our church “doesn't do guilt.” Well, I will tell you this, our church will never intentionally make you feel guilty in order to manipulate you; and we will not generate guilt for you to take home in a “spend a night in the doghouse” doggie-bag. Although we don't offer guilt in this church, you bring boat loads of guilt in here all on your own. I know this because

people come to my office, clearly distraught, aching to mend their broken relationships, yearning to have a second chance after they made a mistake, longing to heal what they have set asunder. So, let us put aside the trigger words of “sin” and “guilt” and instead set our hearts upon healing that which is broken. What is broken is often our own hearts.

The great gift of Judaism to the world is the concept of covenant, the idea that we can live best together if we make promises to each other, do our best to abide by those promises, and forgive each other when we break the promises. We bring each other back into covenant as we work toward forgiveness. Jews are not fazed by the concept of sin. Usually they think of it more in terms of “missing the mark,” as if all our promises and aspirations are a bull’s eye target and the action we shot out of our quiver of all possible actions just “missed the mark” of our promises and aspirations. In other words, we often need to admit to ourselves that we tried something and we can do better.

Last week we read a responsive reading from our hymnal which begins to touch on our need to admit that we can do better. The reading listed all kinds of profound mistakes we all make every day, from not speaking up when a single voice would make a difference, to all our actions which fuel the illusion of separateness. We were asked to respond to each of these everyday errors: “We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.”

I love this reading and I find it lacking. I love it because it asks us to admit our failings, admit all the profound ways we miss the mark of our promises and hopes. I love it because it reminds us not only to forgive ourselves and each other, but it also reminds us that the universe can be a forgiving place. I love it because it offers the possibility of beginning again in love.

Yet, I find this reading lacking because it implies that all we have to do is read this little call and response ritual and everything will be better, as if beginning again in love was that easy. As if forgiveness is that easy. As if we can forgive and forget. As if any kind of Cornelius scapegoat works. Or as if old Cornelius, the “Don’t worry I will take care of your grudge for you so you can continue to be polite but never confront your issues and find creative healing solutions to your conflicts,” works.

I find that responsive reading lacking because forgiveness is not easy and easy healing does not work. What the Jewish tradition gets is that forgiveness is hard. It is the hard work of real healing in which the burden is not laid upon a scapegoat nor is the injured party expected to take on the burden of martyred sainthood. *“Oh I forgive you for yelling at me, I know you are just tired.”*

Let’s face it, you will never forgive and forget, nor should you; but you can heal with scars. You can heal and change and love the world differently, more wisely and more deeply.

Today we are sitting in the middle of the High Holy Days of Judaism. Rosh Hashanah, the New Year Festival, started last Sunday night. Families gathered with apples dipped in honey, and wished each other a sweet new year and new beginning. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, will start this Tuesday evening. The observant will pray and fast until the next day ends. What the Jewish tradition teaches is that we cannot begin a New Year in covenant, in right relationship with the Divine, with our community, and with ourselves, we cannot begin again in love, unless we spend a little time in serious self-examination, atonement, and forgiveness.

This is not a simple, two-minute responsive reading. These ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are so intense, and require such powerful soul searching, that they are called the Days of Awe. Some observe the deepest prayers of atonement wrapped in the shrouds in which they will eventually be buried, driving home their humility before the Most High, and before their most fundamental connection to all that is earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. In comparison to that, all other disagreements are tempests in teapots which must not be allowed to stand between us. Anything that stands between us, stands between us and all that is Holy, all that is love, all that is justice.

Do not understand me too quickly. Some betrayals and injuries are beyond a simple apology. Sometimes you deserve an apology someone is incapable of giving you. You will never find peace barking up that tree. But you can move on, you can live on, finding peace and worth within yourself. And begin to love the world differently, more wisely and more deeply than before.

Listen, sometimes I find a poem which is a gift. The poet sends it out to the world and I receive it desiring only to pass it on, for such a gift should not be contained, but given and given again. Listen,

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

~ Naomi Shihab Nye, from "Kindness"

You will never receive the apologies you want or deserve for some injuries. The sorrow is real. Don't deny it. Know it. Know that, without a doubt, you have passed some sorrow on to others. Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside you, before you can greet the day in compassion, before we begin again in Love, before you know that you are good to the core, you also need to know that kindness is not the only true thing in your heart. The other true thing inside you is sorrow. Aching, yearning, longing. And that sorrow connects your precious, sweet self to all that is, all that was, and all that may be.

During these Days of Awe, let us be willing to be changed. Let us be willing to learn to love the world differently. More wisely and more deeply. Let us sit in the howling, whistling, groaning wind, with no gaudy candle to distract us in our reflection, no mask to hide our true being. Let us face, in fear and trembling, our own mistakes and errors, our own anger, hatred, our terror, our own sorrow, with a deep and utter honesty, humility and kindness. Let us rest in the sorrow until we catch the thread of all sorrows, until we see the size of the cloth that blankets the world with pain and connects us to all that is, all that was, and all that may be. Let us become awestruck with the sorrows of the world, for out of that place of overwhelming agony, out of that place of soulful connection, out of that death of

self, out of that astonishing awareness, the only thing that makes any sense is compassion. Then we can begin again in love, a different, wiser, deeper love. Then we can begin to heal ourselves and each other and the world itself.

### **For Further Study**

Eller-Isaacs, Robert. "A Litany of Atonement," #637 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, 1993.

Rockliff, Mara. *The Grudge Keeper*, Peachtree Publishers, 2014

Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Kindness" in *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*, The Eighth Mountain Press; 1994