

SERMON

"INSCRIBED IN THE BOOK OF LIFE"

SPIRIT OF LIFE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP

Sunday 17 January 2021

"May you be inscribed for a good year in the Book of Life." This is the traditional greeting from Rosh Hashanah, which begins at sunset on the first day of Tishri, the seventh month of the Jewish year, and continues until Yom Kippur, ten days later.

During this time, the beginning of the Jewish new year, Jews around the world observe a season of fasting and penitence. These are the High Holy Days of the Jewish calendar. They provide an opportunity to seek atonement in the lives of individuals and in their relationships. Through fasting and penitence, observers focus on re-engaging their lives, getting on the right track, making a fresh start.

That is not to imply that the lives which people have lived so far are worthless. There is much to celebrate, and it is important that people do celebrate. However, this special time of assessment can provide a reminder that most people – Jew, Gentile, or anyone else – most of us – do not live perfect lives. It can provide a reminder of how people might go about making things better.

These High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah are an invitation for people to focus on atonement – which my late friend Rabbi George Ruben always said should be pronounced at-one-ment – to focus on achieving a greater balance in their lives and being more at one with the universe.

The Holy Days can encourage and enable people to remove the blinkers which they usually wear. They can advise people to reach beyond their , own sins and short-comings, beyond the kind of thinking that allows individuals to see themselves as somehow separate from others, over and above others, not at one with others. The Holy Days can help people to see and to accept their own lack of perfection.

They can also inspire people to approach anew the possibility of a greater participation in the richness of the good life that might yet be. Last September, Jews around the world observed Rosh Hashanah to begin the year 5780 on the Jewish calendar.

The question might be asked: If people have been engaged in this annual practice of introspection, of reflection and assessment, of penance and fasting, and of seeking atonement for all that time — 5780 years; if people have tried to be at one with the universe and the world around them; if, for all that long time, people have set out with religious zeal to get themselves right in their relationships with God, the world and each other: why, after nearly 5800 years, is the world so messed up?

One answer may be found in an old story about a rabbi and a member of the rabbi's congregation, who was a soap manufacturer. One day the two of them were out for a walk, and the soap manufacturer asked: 'What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery of the world. All the trouble and misery are still there, even after hundreds of years — thousands of years — of teaching about goodness and truth and peace. They are still there after all the prayers and sermons and teachings. If religion is good and true, how can this be?'

The rabbi said nothing, and they walked along in silence. They continued walking in silence, the soap maker's question unanswered, until the rabbi noticed a child playing in the gutter by the side of the road.

"Look at that child," said the rabbi. "You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, for all these years, that child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap really is, after all."

"But, Rabbi," protested the soap maker, "Soap can't do any good unless it is used."

"Exactly," said the rabbi. "Exactly!"

To atone is to mend our ways, to be in tune with other human beings — with humanity — and with the cosmos in which we have our being.

On Rosh Hashanah, according to the Jewish tradition, three ledgers or books are opened: one for the righteous, one for the wicked, one for the intermediates.

The righteous are inscribed in the Book of Life; the wicked are inscribed in the Book of Death; and the intermediates, in the third ledger, are examined in the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is the time for them to make changes in their lives. Before the ledgers are sealed at sunset on Yom Kippur, if the intermediates are found worthy, their names are inscribed in the Book of Life; if they are found unworthy, they are inscribed in the Book of Death.

The tradition of New Year Resolutions has a very old history in this Jewish tradition.

Sometimes our New Year Resolutions produce little successes along the way, but all too often we return to being the same as we were; we slide back to being very much like the character we used to be. We yearn for transformation; we want a better and more fulfilling life; we pray for serenity, strength and compassion. But nothing seems to happen.

If we really want to be changed, transformed, fulfilled, why are we still stuck, to a great extent, where our forebears were 5780 years ago? After all these years, why do we see so little good coming of this religious practice? Why have we made so little progress?

If you want to win the lottery, you at least have to buy a ticket. If you want to get clean, you at least have to make a lather of the soap. If you want to live a religious life, you at least have to want to live religiously.

We don't make the changes which we say we want to make in our lives perhaps because, in fact, we really don't want to make them after all.

If we want to take seriously the quest for atonement; if we are going to take seriously the pursuit of transformation: then we need to think about our approach to prayer. Our prayers must not simply be that we might be changed. Our prayers must be that we might find the desire, courage, strength, determination, will and way to change.

Our prayers must not be to have it done for us by some supreme being. If we are to embark upon a significant difference in our lives, then we will need to pray for the passion to become change itself.

There may be psychological reasons for not wanting to change. It is more comfortable to continue to be the person we have always been. When we begin to let go of old ways of being, and start to incorporate new characteristics into our personalities, we may feel real anguish. It can be hard to let parts of ourselves go, even when we recognise how detrimental the old patterns of our behaviour have been.

Spiritually, change can also be hard. There are many definitions and understandings of spirituality, but we might at least agree that spirituality has to do with the deeper meanings of life. It has to do with that realm of human understanding in which we experience ourselves in connection with that which is larger than ourselves, with that which binds us to life itself.

When we talk about spirituality, we are talking about some of our most basic understandings of what it means to be alive. When we talk about seeking true transformation or change, we are talking about altering those very basic tenets of life. That can be difficult.

The devout humanist who appreciates the universe in very human or scientific terms will not easily embrace the concept of a loving god, even in order to cope with sudden or tragic crisis. The devout theist, who appreciates the world as the gift of an omnipotent creator, is unlikely to accept that things-sometime just happen in this world, without design, without purpose. There are times when the underpinnings of any theology will not stand the test of our experience.

There are times when we are forced either to retreat behind the safe boundaries of orthodoxy, or to expand our understandings of things.

People rarely want to change their spiritual understanding of things. Such changes are usually the result of more unpleasant experiences.

It's not really surprising that, when we make our New Year Resolutions, we usually don't really want to change at all. It can be threatening, both psychologically and spiritually.

So why, after 5780 years of attempting the impossible, do we still claim the need for atonement, the need to wipe the slate clean and start again? Perhaps it is because, much as we don't want to change and much as we find change threatening and frightening, we also know that we must change, or perish.

Change is what is demanded of us if we are indeed going to wipe the slate clean and start again to live in right relationship with our world and with each other,. We may often fail, but sometimes we do get it right.

Something like three quarters of a century ago, Preston Bradley wrote: "I've never met a person, I don't care what his condition, in whom I could not see possibilities. I don't care how much a man may consider himself a failure, I believe in him, for he can change the thing that is wrong in his life any time he is ready and prepared to do it. Whenever he develops the desire, he can take away from his life the thing that is defeating it. The capacity for reformation and change lies within."

So: What are the changes that challenge you — challenge your soul — as we start this new year, this new decade? What are the things that you might strive to have wiped clean off your slate? What are the changes that would enable you to be inscribed for this year in the Book of Life? What is it in your life that you don't want to do, but which you know that you must do if you are going to proceed in life and expand to meet life's demands?

N C Richards wrote:

"Let no one think that the birth of humankind is to be felt without terror. The transformations that await us cost everything in the way of courage and sacrifice. Let no one be deluded that a knowledge of the path can substitute for putting one foot in front of the other."

Do you want transformation more than you do not want it?

Change can be a scary prospect. It does not feel natural or comfortable. It does not feel holy, because its holiness is newly defined in its making.

Little by little, over the 5780 years of the Jewish calendar, the world has seen changes. Little by little, over the 2020 years of the Christian calendar, the world has seen changes. When those changes have been for the better, it has been because of a deep resolve to allow things to be different from what they had been before. People have been capable of moving through changes that have faced them. We are capable of moving through the changes that demand our notice now.

The holy days - the start of a new year - provide an opportunity for our attention to be drawn toward seeing and accepting our own lack of perfection; and then they provide an opportunity for us to find the inspiration to approach anew the possibilities of a greater participation in the richness of the good life that might yet be.

We need only truly to want to change. We need only to be willing to live for change. We need only the faith to believe in ourselves, to believe in each other, and to believe in the abundant possibilities of goodness in the universe that supports our being.

May each of us be inscribed for this new year in the Book of Life.

We need only the courage and the faith to see it through. Amen.

Based on "Wiping Clean the Slate" by Charles Blustein Ortman: CLF Quest, September 1999