



Temple Rodef Shalom

“At-One-Ment”

Cantor Allen Leider

Yom Kippur 5774/2013

## Introduction

Today is *Yom Kippur*/the Day of Atonement. It is also called *Yom Hadin*/the Day of Judgment. For me, the idea of God, sitting on the heavenly throne, judging each one of us and sealing our fate for the coming year is a frightening notion. We read in the morning liturgy, “Let us now relate the power of this day's holiness, for it is awesome and full of dread... Who shall live and who shall die... who by fire and who by water, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine...” Oy! I can hear the voice of Darth Vader in the background, “I find your lack of faith disturbing.”

What lies at the core of this day is not Jewish guilt and fear. Yom Kippur IS all about atonement. Part of atonement means making amends through *t'shuvah*/turning. The process includes reflecting on our words and actions, saying sorry to those we've hurt and to God, and changing our behavior.

But “atonement” also has a deeper meaning - “at-one-ment”. Our challenge on this day is to think about our own life transformation. And so, with short exercises for personal reflection, I'd like to offer some suggestions for becoming more “at one” with God, with others, and with yourself.



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## **CLOSER TO GOD**

How do we find at-one-ness with God?

Prayer is certainly helpful! Prayer makes the world less “me-centric”, giving us perspective. The Hebrew word for “pray” (*l’hitpallel*) is a reflexive verb, meaning that our prayers not only go out into the universe, but they come back to us.

In the worship service for example, when we praise God for Creation, we remind ourselves of the holiness of the world around us and our role as partners in Creation. When we praise God for Redemption we remember that we were once slaves, and have an obligation to free the oppressed in the world. When we say blessing before or after eating, we have greater appreciation for the Source of our food, and I’m not talking about Wegman’s. Making up your own prayers at special times of appreciation or need can be so meaningful, not only in acknowledging God, but in clarifying your own desires and needs.

Another way to become more at one with God is through our actions. But how do we know what God wants of us? Two prophetic messages give us direction. Let’s try our first reflection exercise! Take a moment to center yourself, and take a quiet slow breath. As I read these passages, imagine that the prophet is speaking directly to you. Consider



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how you might bring about the actions that the prophet suggests into your life.

First, the Prophet Micah explains, “What does God ask of you? Only to do what is just, and to act with loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” [Micah 6:8] What might change in your life if you were to act more justly... to bring more loving-kindness into your relationships... and to walk humbly with God?...

The second message is from the Prophet Isaiah. It is among my favorite verses from all of Jewish scripture. We read it tomorrow as part of the Haftarah portion. Consider how his suggested actions might become part of your life:

<sup>5</sup>Is this the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?

Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call that a fast, a day when God is favorable?

<sup>6</sup> No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.

<sup>7</sup> It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the poor that are cast out into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.

What might you do in your life to help the oppressed... feed the hungry... and help the homeless?... Isaiah continues, and explains that these actions will bring you to at-one-ness with God, saying:

<sup>8</sup> Then shall your light burst through like the dawn, and your healing spring up quickly; your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of God shall be your rear guard. <sup>9</sup> Then, when you call, God will answer; when you cry, God will say: *Hineini*, Here I am. [Isaiah 58:5-9]

## **CLOSER TO EACH OTHER**

How do we achieve greater at-one-ment with each other? I'd like to suggest several ways; through the deepening of relationship, through apology and forgiveness, and through letting go of the past.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram, author of Reclaiming Judaism as a Spiritual Practice wrote, “Too often people face the ark, the leader, the teacher, the television, the monitor, the game. Too little do we face each other. Or even know how.”

The deepening of relationship is an essential theme of these holy days. We live in a digital world that seems to mock intimacy. We are challenged to bring unity and intimacy to our family relationships. Our loving relationships require more attention than we often give. To bring meaning and caring to relationships with family, friends and to all our

daily interactions, we need to learn to live from the heart. We are taught that the greatest principle of the Torah is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, one way to become more at one with each other is through intention and acts of love and caring. Take a reflective moment now to think about a relationship or two in your life that you would like to deepen. What might you do to make that happen? ...

A second way to become more at one with each other is to say “I’m sorry” to those we’ve hurt and forgive those who have hurt us. This is an essential part of *t’shuvah* – turning. We cannot return to our best selves without finding a way to resolve issues in our relationships. Who do you need to apologize to? Who can you forgive? ...

This said, there are times in our lives when we can’t forgive. Sometimes, the hurt has been profound and the other person may not reconcile. But carrying around resentment and ill will only serves to hold YOU back. You may even feel that the other person should suffer. Yet people do suffer when they consciously know that they’ve hurt another. And even when it’s unconscious, there is usually some kind of fallout that resulted. I don’t know if you believe in karma, but I do believe that all our words, thoughts and actions have consequences.



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For those you cannot forgive, there is a middle path that can help you move beyond negative preoccupation. The key is to focus on your own desire to change and to let go of grudges and the desire for retaliation. The Torah wisely teaches us not to carry hatred for others in our hearts. We are obligated to do the right thing. Of course this is easier said than done, but Judaism teaches us that behavior should precede feeling – doing the right thing, even when the feelings don’t match, can lead us to healing. The other important step is to know that you have the ability to define your own relationship boundaries, and that you will not allow this to happen to you again.

So, let’s try this this kind of letting go. Take a deep breath and center yourself... Take a moment and think of someone whom you haven’t yet forgiven. It may be painful to face, but this is a safe and holy place. You are surrounded here by love, friendship and good will. This exercise is not about forgiving but finding that middle path – to let go of ill will, assure yourself that you are in control of your relationships and begin to move on.

Identify that moment, those words or that behavior that you haven’t been able to move past... Acknowledge to yourself that this is a behavior that you will no longer tolerate in your life... Now, from a place of self-love, imagine how you might assert your boundary so that this cannot



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ever happen again... How you would behave or what you would say if now confronted by that behavior?... Because you have the strength to never allow this to happen again, try giving yourself permission to release the fear or anger surrounding it...

Try to do this now, knowing that you are only giving yourself the permission to let go of those pent up feelings... They don't hurt the other person and only serve to hurt you... Know that you have the power, ability and imperative to define your relationships for yourself... So now, just for a moment, see what it might feel like to let go of whatever you're holding on to... Try saying to yourself: I let go of fear... I let go of anger... I can let go because I will not allow this to happen again... I can let go of these emotions without forgetting... I know that this allows me to live fully in the present and shape my own life and relationships...

Maya Angelou, poet and civil rights leader teaches us: "We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear out arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate --- thereby, making the present comfortable and the future promising."

## **CLOSER TO OURSELVES**

Above all, Yom Kippur is a day of introspection and self-examination. How do we achieve “at-one-ment” with ourselves?



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We certainly can't do it once a year on Yom Kippur. We need to find the time on a regular basis for self-reflection. We get so caught up in the routine of everyday life moving from activity to activity. We need to look at the big picture of our lives and be clear about our intentions. I try to wake up every morning with a short prayer thanking God for the opportunities of the new day and for the blessings that fill my life. Part of my prayer includes thinking about the day and what I'd like to happen.

Shabbat can provide us with the opportunity to look back at our week and to plan course corrections for the coming week where we need to. We can ask deeper questions of ourselves. Am I happy? Am I taking care of myself? Do I celebrate my successes? Do I forgive myself for the mistakes I've made and the wrongs I've done? This kind of reflection doesn't have to take a lot of time, only a few quiet moments. John Dewey taught at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience.”

Personally, I find meditation to be extremely helpful in reducing stress, helping me to gain perspective, connecting me to the spiritual, and bringing a greater sense of at-one-ness to my life. If you haven't tried meditation, I'd be happy to meet with you and tell you how meditation helped me to lessen the amount of fear in my life and live from the heart.

Here’s a little commercial: I lead a monthly Jewish meditation group at Rodef Shalom. You’re welcome to join us, regardless of membership.

We all have different gifts to bring to the world. Part of achieving at-one-ment with yourself is clarifying what guides your life. Take a brief moment now to begin to answer these questions: What is one gift that you bring to the world?... What are some of the values that you try to live by?... What does it take to walk the path of integrity and be the best you?...

## **CONCLUSION**

On this Yom Kippur eve, a time of profound self-reflection, I pray that we each find ways towards living with greater wholeness and meaning. May our plans on this Day of Atonement move us towards at-one-ment with God, with others, and with ourselves. And may our actions lead us to being sealed for a year of blessing. *Amein!*