

**Atonement**  
**September 19, 2010**  
**The Reverend Barbara Fast**

**Opening Words from Zusya of Hanipol, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic Rabbi.**

“When I am called to give a final account of my life before the heavenly throne, I am not afraid of being asked; Why were you not like Abraham for I answer, ‘Because I am not Abraham. And if I am asked why were you not like Moses, I can answer because I am not Moses. But if I am asked, Why were you not like Zusya? What will I say then?’”

**Reading**

Rabbi Larry Kushner tells this story of a children’s preschool class on a prayer hall tour. Before the class got to see behind the curtain where the contents of the Ark held the hand written Torah Scrolls of the five books of Moses [Gen/ Deut/Exodus/Numbers/Leviticus] the class ran out of time and they had to leave before were opened.

The Rabbi said that he would open the curtains the next visit. What ensued was an animated discussion by those children about what was behind the curtain.

Child number 1, cynic, proclaimed that it was empty. Child number 2, consumer, said it held a “brand new car”. Child number 3, the scholar, announced with accuracy that behind the curtain were the scrolls of the Torah. Child number 4, philosopher, said, “You are all wrong. When the rabbi opens that curtain next week, there will just be a big mirror”.

**What Will I Say Then? A Sermon on Atonement**  
**Reverend Barbara Fast**

It may be 11 days late, but “La Shanah Tovah, May you have a good year”. This is the Hebrew greeting at Rosh Hashanah.

Ten days later is Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement. The sun set on that holy day last night. This solemn Jewish High Holy Day is observed with fasting and prayer. It takes place on the 10th day of Tishri in accordance with rites described in Leviticus 16, prescribed thousands of years ago.

The ten days between those two days are called The Days of Awe. The ten days, when according to Jewish tradition the book of life is opened and God decides what will become of us this next year. The tradition says: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.”

They are days where religious Jews take time out of their day and hold up a mirror to their lives, look within themselves and around at their world and make an accounting.

Yom Kippur especially calls with the harsh sound of a ram's horn- the Shofar- to remind people that they can return and turn their lives around.

It is a practice intended to help human beings and communities take the long view of life, get our bearings and begin the new year repurposed, restored, repaired, reconnected and *at one* with the world, our lives, our conscience, and some say God.

They do not cook or eat – they reflect and pray and sing and think. And I was told this week, that the food that is not eaten is given in charity to those who do not have enough.

For New Year's some take crumbs of bread and throw them into the water, casting away their sins. Tashlick.

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I had trouble reaching my son this week. He usually responds when I call. I am not a helicopter parent. (Those parents who swoop into life of adult child, never severing the technological umbilicus with the help of email, texting, Facebook and cell phone.)

First I called and left a message. Then I emailed. Then I texted...then I went to his Facebook page and sent him a message. Nothing.

He has just begun a new job, in a new city after he graduated college. He teaches technology to middle schoolers in a new city. I got worried. I called his brother and sister- have you heard from him? "Not since last week."

I worried. The night after he moved into his apartment his car window was shattered and the GPS stolen. So- I was not sure about his safety. His city smarts.

He did call back, finally. He was fine. But tired and a bit burned out from the intense learning curve that is 1<sup>st</sup> year teaching. He talked to me about what he was learning. His struggles. The developmental differences between 6<sup>th</sup> graders and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. He talked about his feelings. I listened. It is a blessing to have your children talk to you.

I wished him a good new year. "La Shana Tovah." (His father's family is Jewish.) He said, "Oh yeah. This is the time I am supposed to confess my sins."

I said, "Well how about making "a fearless moral inventory." I prefer that. Where you repent your mistakes and affirm the parts of yourself that you are proud of."

I said that I was preaching about atonement because of Yom Kippur. That atonement is defined as reparation for an offense or injury in order to restore to friendship or harmony. The goal of any act of atonement is restoration. The reason we atone is so that we can help repair an injury.

*Atonement means to repay, repair, restore, to return a relationship to harmony- oneness.*

The purpose of atonement is to restore relationship and wholeness within oneself, between human beings, and among peoples, whether within a nation or between nations, even now, between human beings and the earth.

He asked me how I was. I said,  
“So so..” He asked me what was wrong.

“This past week. The news! The Media mirrors distorting truths, focusing us on anger. People who get rich fanning angers, exploiting resentments and injuries.

“Our greed! Did you know, I went on, that a billionaire died and the family is paying no taxes! (I was gathering steam.)

“And now the Census comes out with the new poverty rates! Over the past 30 years middle class wage earners did not get an increase in real earnings, what they got was an increase in illusory wealth through increased debt.. and two wage earner families...

“44 million Americans are living in poverty. That is 14% of Americans. That is the highest percentage of Americans in 15 years. The highest real numbers in 50 years. That is 21% of the children. And the number of uninsured is up because of lost jobs and the health care is not yet in place  
4 million more than last year. Millions are near the edge of poverty

“And did you read in the NY Times, that Lawrence Katz , Professor of Econ at Harvard, reported that this is the first time in memory that an entire decade has produced no economic growth for typical American households.

“We need to pay attention ferret out truth from fear. We need to return to our core American values, restore fairness, reform the laws to restore a fairer playing field, one that reflects fundamental principles necessary for a healthy Democracy.

“Your generation is stuck with this...My generation needs to atone”  
I caught my breath. The phone was quiet.

He finally said, “That is interesting but people don’t want to hear that!”  
I said well “I don’t preach repent sermons very much.”

I recalled that he hated to hear adults “catastrophizing”. That is when adults start their litanies of what is wrong with everything else, and everyone else. When we start telling young people how great things used to be and how the world is going to hell.

I think that he did not want to hear it from me. He reads the paper. He listens to the media mirrors. He is smart. He is tired too.

So turned myself around, because I was just so happy to hear he was OK. He is my youngest gone into the world.

I said, "I am sorry. My fear and anger is not making anything better. I am not being helpful. I am sorry"

*It seems to me that making apology has something to do with atonement.*

When we see something is broken, we look back to see the reasons why, make apology and then look to see what needs to be done to fix it and do that. Apology is not easy. If it were easy we would not need rituals and religions reminding us how important it is for human beings to do.

Sue Monk Kidd writes this in *A Secret Life of Bees*,  
*People would rather die than forgive... "if god said in plain language "I am giving you a choice, forgive or die, a lot of people would go ahead and order their coffin."*

It is important to forgive ( others and self) because human beings get weighed down with guilt and shame and punish themselves and cannot return ...to oneness. Like stones, we are weighed down with remorse and regret, resentment and bitterness.

That is why religions have customs, practices, prayers, chants, meditations, hours of reconciliation, Holy Days and holidays, fasting and feasting, that call us to return...and empty our souls of those stones, cast them out, empty them, throw them away- so they don't shut our spirits down before the book of our life shuts close.

Return the song calls: *Return to who you are. Return to the home of your soul*

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I said, " I am so sorry. You are exhausted from a long day...and really, I am just so happy to talk to you."

He said, " It is good to talk to you."

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I hung up and realized again that I cannot preach out of that place of anger and fear. Fear is a distorting mirror.

I know that I comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.  
Sometimes I preach out of my affliction because you may be feeling it too.

I am not preaching this sermon out of fear. I am preaching it to encourage us – me and you- to be fearless living out our values or at least a little less timid.

I recall an African American minister talking about his grandmother. How she had taken a friend to her church. Her friend exclaimed that the people there were so heavenly. His grandmother replied, “Yes- they are heavenly. So heavenly they are no earthly good to anybody.”

That is a healthy critique for any community. Fear diminishes our ethical impulses and anger divides us from one another and our higher powers, our courage, compassion and conscience.

I must hold up a mirror that affirms everyone’s inherent worth and calls us to live with the dignity that is a universal birthright. We UUs are concerned more with what happens to us after we are born, than with what happens after we die.

And you and I are getting to know each other. **How will each one of us make things better? How will we work together as a congregation?** These are the questions we will answer with our shared lives this year.

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I called my son back!

I told him to register to vote. He just moved to Delaware. I said, “Be sure you register before that window closes.”

He laughed because I had reminded him to register in Massachusetts when he was in college and I gave him a voter registration form when he turned 18. FYI -It is a great Birthday present and it is free.

Our UU Principles and Purposes affirm the Democratic process as a core value for us and so we are called to live it out, not just here when you voted for me to be minister, but in the community.

Register and then vote your largest values. And if you have turned your back on the “system”, because of the negative campaigning and meanness of it all, *turn back*.

Don’t turn away from the process just because it is imperfect or perfectly frustrating!  
Turn back again and engage!

*Atonement* means being engaged in the process even if it turns out a different result than the one you want.

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Each of us passes through those four lens like the preschoolers. Sometimes we are cynic, sometimes consumer. Some days scholar, other days philosopher. Maybe we see ourselves though all four lens. What is behind the curtain does not change. We do.

We have the capacity to see past the mirrors that distort, that play to our fears and our vanities. We need to see into the larger truth about who we are and what in us is true. What we want our community, even this nation or the world to be. We need to make sure we are not the only face in the mirror.

That is what Days of Awe are really meant to be. A time to look into the mirror: not only to see self and world but to **see past the surface of things into the soul of life, into the heart of creation...**

It is called Teshuvah.

That time of meditation, that time for turning, some say a returning to God, to our true self, to our higher power, however you name it: whether conscience or creator. A returning to starting fresh, with clean school notebooks, emptied of stones that drag us down, old baggage that gets in the way of the return. Religious holy days should be paths to letting go of the ache and the pain of falling short, and provide us with ways back.

Go within, past all worldly mirrors: close the door to your closet, sit in the dark, Search your heart in silence,

Go beyond, open the door, go into the night, look up at the stars and see the vastness of creation.

*Psychic pain is the distance between what I say I believe and the way I live.*

Atonement ..calls us to return to our wholeness, our unified natures: body and spirit: Calls us to unify our vales with our actions, live our lives as a whole cloth. Be one within and without. Calls us to return, lighten up, live again, live into the fullness of our shared humanity. There is so much more that unites us than divides us.

Whether you believe in a higher power out there, or within your conscience or heart. Return, reflect, repair, repay, re boot, restore, reform, renew.

*When we are asked by our grandchildren, what shall we say then?*

Will we tell them it was our greed, our narcissism, our self centered illusions, our failure of historical perspective or common sense, our inaction, inattention and irresponsibility. Our fear?

The sin I cast off with this year's sermon is fear.

I am not like Zusya, but when I am called to give an account and I am asked why were you not like Barbara? *What shall I say then?*

I shared the Zusya Story at the Board meeting. The beauty of congregational life is that one of us shares something and it is picked up and enlarged. One of you added we are trying to be UUCD!

It is clear to me that the world will always need places like UUCD. That welcome theists, atheists, agnostics, humanists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews and Muslims. Where we worship together, seek and speak truth in love, repay, repair, renew, return, reconcile, live into the possibility there is spirit of love and the light of justice within ...you...and me...and everyone.

I fervently hope that this community gives you both comfort and courage.

Let us practice living a faith that calls us to the larger oneness of all humanity and this world.

Let us pledge ourselves anew to the high cause of greater understanding of who we are and what in us is true. Individually and as a congregation.

Be encouraged to make the world a nobler place than it is today, even when we are not Moses or Abraham we are ourselves, that must be enough.

We cannot choose the times in which we live –  
We **can** only choose how to live the lifetime we have been given..

We do not know what the will be written this year- so we must live a life worthy of the gift we have been given...in the span that has been given to us.

I may be saying it ten days late...but it is never too late to say

**May you have a good year.**

Shalom. Peace.

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