

Be Just and Kind
Sunday, September 24, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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In Kabbalah, a form of Jewish mysticism, a creation story is told in which light gets scattered across the world. Rachel Eisen of Mayyim Hayyim, a center for Jewish spirituality and learning in Massachusetts, says, “This creation story tells of a light that is so good and so powerful that when God tried to contain it in physical vessels, the light shattered the vessels, sending shards of light all across the world. So God created humans and gave them the task of gathering all the shards. This, according to the Kabbalists, is tikkun olam.”

She continues, “I always thought that tikkun olam meant putting the pieces exactly back as they were before. It turns out I was so wrong,” [In the Beginning - Mayyim Hayyim](#).

Eisen then tells a story of an art workshop at the center. As the artist leading the workshop read the story of creation from the book of Genesis, she had the participants paint the creation. When the artist stopped reading, she tore up the canvas on which the participants had painted.

Eisen says, “If you captured our faces at that moment, you would have seen a mix of panic and frustration. We just painted the story of creation! How could she rip up our artwork?!”

“But then, she reminded us of the Kabbalists’ story of creation. We were not tearing our artwork, rather we were continuing to portray the creation.

“She then tasked us with creating a portrait of someone else in the group using the shards of our original artwork.

“In that moment, I had a break-through. The task of tikkun olam is not to put the pieces back to the way they were before. The task is simply to gather them. What we do with them is up to us. To use the shards to create – or re-create – something completely new from something timeless is both an act of creation and an act of tikkun olam,” <https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/in-the-beginning/#>. Tikkun olam in Hebrew means repairing the world.

Tonight as Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement, begins we may think about how we may need to repair what we ourselves have broken, to ask forgiveness of a friend we have hurt by our words or our negligence, to return or make restitution for something we have taken or broken, to offer thanks for a gift we have not acknowledged. But that is not the end of Tikkun olam.

The American director, writer, performer, and teacher of theatre and music Shellen Lubin says, “It is not enough to go to a house of prayer and ask God for forgiveness. It is not enough that we forgive each other, not enough to forgive ourselves. We must extend effort to repair damage in which we have participated and/or from which we have received benefit...”

“We must do differently moving forward.”

We did not participate in the genocide of this continent’s native peoples. We did not enslave anyone. Maybe it was not even our blood ancestors who did those things. But, if we now claim to be Americans, it was our spiritual ancestors who did those things. We continue to reap the harms and the benefits of their actions. As Lubin says, “It is not enough to go to a house of prayer and ask God for forgiveness. It is not enough that we forgive each other, not enough to forgive ourselves. We must extend effort to repair damage in which we have participated and/or from which we have received benefit...”

“We must do differently moving forward.” It is our task to repair the world, tikkun olam.

In an article for [BBCTravel](#) in 2019 Elizabeth Apperly writes about one the makers of Stolpersteine. She writes, “For the last 14 years, Friedrichs-Friedländer has hand-engraved individual Holocaust fates onto small commemorative plaques called Stolpersteine, or ‘stumbling stones’. Each plaque is a 10cm brass square affixed on top of a cuboid concrete block that’s installed into the pavement directly before a Holocaust victim’s last known, voluntary residence.

“There are now more than 70,000 of these stones around the world, spanning 20 different languages. They can be found in 2,000-plus towns and cities across 24 countries, including Argentina, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Russia, Slovenia and Ukraine. Together, they constitute the world’s largest decentralised memorial.

“For all this international reach, the Stolpersteine are highly individual in form. The project’s motto is ‘one victim, one stone’, referencing a teaching in the Talmud, the book of Jewish law, that ‘a person is only forgotten when (their) name is forgotten’.

“Each plaque’s inscription begins ‘HERE LIVED’ in the local language, followed by the individual’s name, date of birth and fate. For some, this is exile to another country. For others, it is suicide. For a few, it is liberation from a concentration camp. But for the vast majority, it is deportation and murder.

“The project began in 1992, when Cologne-based artist Gunter Demnig first laid plaques in this format for Sinti and Roma victims of the Holocaust, who during that time were commonly referred to as ‘Gypsies’. He called the plaques ‘stumbling stones’ as a metaphor. ‘You won’t fall,’ he recently told CNN. ‘But if you stumble and look, you must bow down with your head and your heart,’” [The Holocaust memorial of 70,000 stones - BBC Travel](#).

And if you bow down with your head and your heart you are more likely to make a commitment to tikkun olam. Will you make a commitment to actively fight against prejudice, against anti-Semitism, against racism, against homophobia? Will you become a peace activist? Surely, you will do something if your head and heart have been bowed.

Regularly I join online with the Buddhist community, the Florida Community of Mindfulness in Tampa, for their 7-8am meditation. Always it ends with bowing to the Buddha in thanks for his teaching, then bowing to each other in the sangha, the congregation who has gathered to practice together, and then finally on the third bow the leader for the day says, “May we share any merit or benefit that arises from our practice. May the effects ripple continuously to aid in the healing and the transformation of the

world.” Tikkun Olam in another tradition. In whatever way we bow our heads and our hearts the practice should make a difference in our own lives and in how we move through the world.

As Eisen said, “The task of tikkun olam is not to put the pieces back to the way they were before. The task is simply to gather them. What we do with them is up to us. To use the shards to create – or re-create – something completely new from something timeless is both an act of creation and an act of tikkun olam.”

In the blurb for today’s service I quoted from the Jewish prophet Micah, “And what does the Eternal ask of you but to be just and kind and live in quiet fellowship with your God?” and I titled this sermon, “Be just and kind.” Being kind is a commitment to a personal way of moving in this world. Being just is making a commitment to tikkun olam, repairing the world.

As we move into Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement, it is fitting to reflect on where we have failed at both and to make a renewed commitment to do better at both in this new year.

The English Orthodox rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, “If the history of the Day of Atonement has anything to say to us now it is: never relieve individuals of moral responsibility. The more we have, the more we grow.”

In the [UU Kids Book](#) by Barbara Marshman, Charlene Brotman, and Ann Fields they offer a Bedtime Ritual for UU Kids. “Think about things you are thankful for today. Think of something you feel sorry that you said or did and any way you can make it right. Think about something you hope will happen, and any way you can help it to happen. Think about being in a place of beauty or a favorite place where you feel safe and good. Think about the people you love and their love for you. See each person’s face in your mind. Give them a goodnight smile!”

Marshman, Brotman and Fields suggest this as a daily ritual for children, and certainly we could also use such a daily ritual as adults, but at the Jewish High Holy Days’ end with Yom Kippur it could also be a good ritual to use as we look back over the past year and into a new one. Be kind. Think of something you feel sorry that you said or did and any way you can make it right. Be just. Think about something you hope will happen, and any way you can help it happen.

In the Talmud, a collection of writing on Jewish law and traditions from the third through sixth centuries of the Common Era it says, “three books are opened in heaven on Rosh Ha-Shanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are forthwith inscribed in the Book of Life, the thoroughly wicked in the Book of Death, while the fate of the intermediate is suspended until the Day of Atonement,” Yom Kippur.

A poem, Unetanneh Tokef is recited in the High Holy Days services in some Jewish traditions. In English translation it says in part, “Let us now relate the power of this day’s holiness, for it is awesome and frightening. On it Your Kingship will be exalted; Your throne will be firm with kindness and You will sit upon it in truth. It is true that You alone are the One Who judges, proves, knows, and bears witness; Who writes and seats, (counts and calculates); Who remembers all that was forgotten. You will open the Book of Chronicles – it will read itself, and everyone’s signature is in it. The great shofar will be sounded and a still, thin sound will be heard. Angels will hasten, a trembling and terror will seize them – and they will say, ‘Behold, it is the Day of Judgment, to muster the heavenly host for judgment!’- for they cannot be vindicated in Your eyes in judgment.

“All (hu)mankind will pass before You like members of the flock. Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the fixed needs of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict.

“On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed....” [Full Text of U'Netaneh Tokef - Jewish Holidays \(ou.org\)](http://www.ou.org).

That prayer poem reminded me that a Unitarian Universalist from another congregation told me that his favorite passage from the Bible was a Christian apocalyptic story of a Day of Judgment. I was surprised at first, a UU's favorite scripture was a passage about a Judgment Day? But then I looked up the passage and read it. Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these (siblings) of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Most of us in this room may not believe literally in a heavenly Book of Life or in a Final Judgement or even in a God who will judge us, but that does not mean that the tradition of these High Holy Days cannot give us a reason to review our lives, to repent of what we need to, to make amends, and to make commitments to ourselves, to each other, and to our world as we go forward into this new year. As the Jewish prophet Micah said, “And what does the Eternal ask of you but to be just and kind...?”