

# *At-one-ment*

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## **A Sermon for the Jewish High Holy Days**

This is the eve of the Day of Atonement, the climax of the Jewish High Holy Days, the "Days of Awe." Perhaps you know the name of Rabbi Michael Lerner, the founder and editor of Tikkun magazine. In his book *Jewish Renewal*, he has written:

Built into the High Holy Days is a deep psychological wisdom. ... In the ten days of repentance that extend from the first day of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, through the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, we ... participate in an individual and a collective reassessment of our lives.

Remembering is step one -- looking at what we have done and what we have become during the past year. Rosh Hashanah is called Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance." [But remember, it takes time, set apart, to let your memory speak to you, to count your blessings, and your stumbles.]

The second step is to measure what we have done and what we have become against our own highest visions of who we should and could be. This step is facilitated when we collectively ... reaffirm the vision of ... what we could be individually and together.

This envisioning, Lerner says, is partly effected through prayer. I like this idea of prayer - prayer as invitation to a larger, a less constricted, and a more authentic life.

Lerner continues:

The third step is called *teshuvah* or repentance. This does not mean merely a re-commitment to 'good values' that are so abstract that they function only to make us feel good when we espouse them. Real *teshuvah* means [deciding] what we are going to do differently in our lives, taking into account the things that will likely throw us off, or undermine our resolve.

Sounds tough. But Lerner has some how-to suggestions for self-examination -- this three-step process of remembering our year's journey, envisioning new possibilities, and *real* re-commitment. He suggests undertaking this spiritual exercise in partnership with another person, perhaps one who is already your life partner, or perhaps a friend chosen just for this. As aids to remembering, review your calendar, or a journal you may keep. I'd suggest simply asking your memory to "speak to you" and then writing down what memory calls up. Finally, ask what has kept you from laying hold of these hopes and making them your own: what evasions, what denials, what self-pity, what unresolved conflicts, and resolve to be done with them all.

Lerner also says:

Self-scrutiny is not meant for individuals only. The religious community as a whole needs to meet during the ten days of repentance and to discuss its own functioning and direction. Has the community really embodied its highest values? Has it been sensitive to the pains of its members, and to the pain and suffering ... in the larger world?

The theme is reconciliation, and reconciliation must be struggled for and won, if new life is to be given. The theme is atonement, a word that literally derives from its three syllables: at-one-ment. For at-one-ment to come, for new life to be given, old grievances, old fears, old angers must be given up. And for this to happen, there must be forgiveness. This is why the journey to a Day of Atonement cannot be a solitary journey; it must join person to person, and join together the many persons of a community, and finally join whole communities to each other. *This* community is no exception. But let me tell you a story about another religious community, a fictional synagogue situated in a small, run-down town in the Catskills.

You have already heard a passage from the middle of "The Rabbi in the Attic." The story is both humorous and serious. It is also both symbolic and humanly real. Eileen Pollack begins her story thus:

The rabbi wouldn't move out. The house he wouldn't leave was for the use only of the spiritual leader of Emmes Yisroel, which he was no longer. [That's because the male troika of lay leaders has absolutely refused to renew his contract.] But how could we ask the burly police to break in with axes, to browbeat and handcuff a tiny old man, to cart off our rabbi to a black paddy wagon under the gaze of the town's gentle Christians?

So in the attic he stayed. His name is Rabbi Heckler, and he has been living up to his name. He is ultra-orthodox, and although his congregation is formally Orthodox, he now presses (for instance) to separate the sexes not only by an aisle but by a wall; he thwacks the children with his pen when they do not know their Hebrew lessons; he insults his congregants by sneaking around to catch them at any compromise with the sacred laws. Many are offended (especially the leaders), and attendance at services falls steadily off. Unitarians come in for one dishonorable mention, in this complaint that the leaders voice against the rabbi:

He shamed us in front of our liberal neighbors. ... He would not even take part in the yearly meeting of the town's clergy, ... merely because he wouldn't enter a church -- as if a Unitarian Social Hall could be mistaken for a church!

Rabbi Heckler has only one redeeming virtue, it seems: a golden voice. The members swoon to hear him speak and sing.

So the three leading laymen of the congregation -- Messrs. Zlotkin, Abromovitz and Pipchuck -- let his contract expire. That is, they fire him. His response is a crude threat: "You'll regret it; I won't go." He barricades himself in the third floor of the rabbi's

house, with a cot and a few books and a supply of tinned food, replenished by friends, including a Miss Able who gives him her utterly unrequited love.

The leaders think: Well, time is on our side! But as the summer passes and the High Holy Days approach, finding a new rabbi becomes imperative. The congregation is poor, and its reputation worse, but they go to the city anyway. Perhaps some fellow just out of seminary ... With the Orthodox and the Conservative placement offices they get nowhere; Emmes Yisroel has treated its rabbis badly for years, and now has cast out a pious old man for being overly observant. Get out of here!

Finally, one of them proposes they try the Reform placement office. Another says, "If the price is so much for Conservative, should we even bother with Reform...?" And the third: "And what will the Board say if we should return with a young rabbi who wears blue jeans, strums a guitar and eats roast pork in public, a man who goes further than even we are willing to go?" "Gentlemen," says Zlotkin, "we must recall" -- and he hitches up his trousers -- "that we have no choice." The director of placement for Reform rabbis at first says he has no one, but then says that, " 'Well, he did have one rabbi ... a good heart, not brainless, but well, no head for study. Not ignorant, just ... fuzzy. And yes, to be frank, the singing was atrocious. But then again, she...' In chorus ... there issued a wailing that sounded as if it had reached the present after a long and tear-stained journey from the Middle Ages, a prolonged lamentation of a three-letter pronoun." S-h-e.

So, bowing to necessity (this too is an act of faith), they take Marion Bloomgarten. She is unmarried, unemployed since graduation, and beginning to feel at a loss for her unfulfilled vocation:

When Marion was summoned by the Director of Placements and told she had been given a trial position, no application or interview needed, then handed a ticket for a bus to the Catskills, she was ecstatic. True, the congregation to which she was going had been led until now by Orthodox rabbis. But this gave her visions of blowing the shofar and causing the wall between the sexes to crumble. She saw Jew and gentile sharing grapes beneath the viney roof of the *succah*; began to plan outings on which the children would open themselves to I-thou encounters with deer, sparrows, bushes. ... Under her guidance, Emmes Yisroel would become a synonym in the minds of people of all faiths for justice, peace, caring.

Now, you know from the passage I took for a reading that things did not go quite as she had imagined, nor as Zlotkin, Abromovitz and Pipchuck had hoped. When she arrives in town, they take her to the house provided for the rabbi, and she is met with a hail of empty cans and angry shouts from the rabbi in the attic. He is not only reactionary; he is borderline insane, or so it seems. They retreat and she is put up in a cheap motel nearby. It is on the first Sabbath eve, shortly thereafter, when Marion is having a hard time getting her sermon together, that she kicks off her sandals and climbs the tree to see what Heckler is doing in the attic. The autumn leaves, lighted by the setting sun, recall the burning bush from which Moses heard the voice of God: Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground! They engage in debate, like rabbis of old.

Who wins the debate? She, because he is reduced to hurling insults? Or he, because when he challenges her, over the steadfast observance in lighting the candles, she cannot answer? It is a life-or-death struggle for both. But we see, finally, that it is not a question of "who wins." It is a question of how both are changed through their encounter. And it is a question of redeeming life from mutual destruction.

Marion could not answer because of the laughter that echoed in her head, the laughter that had greeted her first, proud announcement that she would be a rabbi. "Each time she tried to light the candles, ... she was stabbed by cruel laughter." Told by her own mother that her voice sounds "like fishbones," she weakens and doubts herself. Only now, in her encounter with Heckler in this harsh moment within the flaming tree, she is transformed. His unyielding voice stands for something she cannot change, and therefore must change her. "A silver flash lit up the clouds that raced overhead," we are told. It is a veritable "signal of transcendence." Marion will go on to affirm herself, her calling, her faith. She goes home, ready to finish the sermon that had stymied her.

Heckler is an utterly unsympathetic figure. We would pity him if he weren't so crude and cruel. And yet he is blessed with a beautiful voice, and many in the congregation revere him for his absolute piety. We are told that his wife had kept things together for him, for years; but then she died, and thereafter, he has lost his positions in synagogue after synagogue. Emmes Yisroel is the end of the line for him. To lose the house of the rabbi would be to lose his last hold on his calling. So we feel for Heckler after all. And beyond pity, we see that he represents something -- infinitely more than himself. (Does not every person? Is this not the essence of the religious imagination, to see that we are not only what we are but that we are representatives of Something More?) Heckler represents a holiness that will not be moved, that when encountered, can wound us but also can bless us. Faith evolves, said Whitehead, from a sense of God as the stranger, to God as the enemy, to God as the friend.

The names in this story are obviously emblematic: Heckler, and Bloomgarten -- and then comes Masha Stonehammer, the "Sabbath goy." As a gentile, her job is "to do what the Jews will not do for themselves"-- lest they violate Sabbath. The author depicts her as "an ogre," guarding the synagogue door, taking the tickets for the High Holy Days services. " 'The biggest crowd in years,' she informed [Marion]. 'Curiosity, no doubt.' "

For all that, the story is no farce. The human reality it reflects goes straight to the heart. A confrontation between the two rabbis is coming. They may represent spiritual opposites, but they are also unique, flesh-and-blood, vulnerable human beings. That is why we care about them. We want to know how fair Marion fares against stone-hearted Heckler. Will he succeed in humiliating her and driving her utterly away, or will she take her courage in her hands and get him out of the attic, and out of her life?

He comes to her first service of the High Holy Days, and sure enough, in the midst of her sermon stands up and challenges her. She does not speak the truth, he says. The laws of God are all sacred simply because the tradition, all the way back to Moses at Sinai, attests to them; it is the laws which judge us and bless us, not we who judge them.

Marion answers: "It doesn't take Moses to realize that the commandment to give charity is still worth obeying, while the commandment not to mix wool and linen in one cloth is trivial, silly, it means nothing to me. Each generation must listen to God with its own ears"-- exactly what Emerson said to the Unitarians of his generation: "Acquaint thyself at first hand with deity."

He fires back: "God gives commandments to sanctify our lives. No commandment is silly if it comes from Him." If. The "if" reveals the chink in his armor. Who is to decide "if" a particular commandment comes from God, but the people? The only difference between conservative and liberal becomes, then, how much weight do you give to tradition, to ancient voices, and how much to the present generation and present needs? Here and now Heckler and Marion are struggling for the minds of the people, the final arbiters in their contest -- and they know it. But in principle he has lost, and can only resort to force.

Marion will not be drawn deeper into debate. She takes the sacred scroll, the Torah, from the ark and hugs it to her chest. She will read the Rosh Hashanah text, and not even Heckler will dare interrupt. But suddenly he is there, wresting the scroll from her arms. "The Torah might rip," she whispered. 'It might drop to the floor.' And so she let it go."

Well, Heckler heads for the exit, but is headed off by Marion's allies, and the scroll is returned to its rightful place while Heckler runs off. He is defeated. In fact, now he is excluded from his attic, too, for Masha Stonehammer has been instructed to lock him out, should he ever leave. Marion concludes the service, shakily, with a congregation that is still not quite sure about her, but knows she is their spiritual leader. Now the house too is hers, and she promptly lays claim to it. But that night, in the rain, Heckler comes to the door and begs to be let in. At first she will not, but then relents. They talk, and then she says, Okay, he can retrieve his things from the attic ... knowing that once she lets him go upstairs, he will not leave. He will remain the rabbi in the attic, the immovable if slightly crazy voice. She knows, now, that she needs him there, to reassure the ultra-pious of the congregation that the ancient faith is honored, and mercy has been observed.

Most poignantly of all, Heckler acknowledges that, when she had let the Torah go for fear that it be torn or trampled and desecrated, he knew that he was in the wrong. Tacitly, he begs her forgiveness. Tacitly, she gives it, letting him return to the only shelter he has left in the world. There he remains, and she too takes her place, and her calling, among her people. And while she loses most of her struggles to change them, still, she does win a few. Life goes on. Reconciliation lets it go on. At-one-ment happens, and new life is given.

The story is a parable, as real as the people who populate it. When we form and reform a religious community, when we struggle for what is most precious to us, and find ourselves wounded in our struggles, we are enacting the very story of our lives. And if *ours, too*, is a story of triumph, and not defeat, we are learning that even what we hold most precious cannot be held -- even what we hold sacred cannot be revered -- even what we cherish cannot be sustained unless it allows, unless it invites, unless it even demands

reconciliation with our enemy. Unless it calls us to forgive one another, for the sake of a new beginning. Unless it signals at-one-ment. So be it, friends. *Amen.*