

Yom Kippur: Does a Nation Ever Need to Ask for Forgiveness?

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October 5, 2003

Today at sundown, the highest of holy days in the Jewish calendar begins -- Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Atonement, as many of you know, is about reconciling with those around you, tearing down the barriers of hurt, anger, disappointment, broken promises. It is about apologizing for where we have gone wrong and promising not to do it again, then doing the hard work of changing our habits and patterns of behavior so we don't create those same barriers again in the new year. One word to describe a central piece of what is supposed to be practiced this day is *Teshuva*, or turning. *Teshuva* is about finding those places where we have wandered in the wrong direction, been drawn to destructive patterns, and *choosing to turn away from* those ways and toward the good, toward God. So it isn't enough just to say you are sorry in these days -- you also must promise and practice the changing of your ways, the turning of your attitude and behavior back toward what is right and good. In this way, you atone and become at one with creation, with the divine spark within you and the Divine beyond you.

We read in the prayer of confession this morning some of what you might consider in your moral inventory of this season: Not just how you were as a spouse, friend, boss, employee, but also as a keeper of the common good, a watchdog for justice, a voice for the voiceless. It may be one of the dangers of the season that if we take seriously the full spectrum of this moral inventory, we could spend all our time finding the places where we need turning and have no time left to do the work of changing our ways. It reminds me a bit of a joke in which a woman is in a fabric shop buying yard after yard of chiffon. The sales clerk comes over and asks her what she is doing. "I'm making a nightie," the woman replies. "Dear woman," says the clerk, "that is far too much fabric. A nightie only takes a couple of yards at most. You must have 50 in your hands." "Yes, well," the lady replies, "you don't know my husband. He's a Unitarian. He'd rather seek than find."

So we have to make sure we both seek and find -- identify our places in need of atonement and do the changing of our ways. Perhaps we don't need to do a full moral inventory each year, but choose a piece of our lives to survey. Perhaps each year calls to our attention a certain part of our personal or collective life for attention.

In thinking about the work of atonement this year, I must say I've been hard pressed to focus on my individual relations. Instead, I find my attention drawn to the state of our national life and the call to atonement we might have in this shared sphere of our lives. It is this I want to talk about today.

What is obvious to the most casual observer of national politics these days is manifold: (a) There is a growing distrust of our leaders, who seem to have betrayed us with a pattern of false or distorted information; (b) we went to war on the basis of some of this false or distorted information; (c) we are mired in an international situation that we have neither the manpower nor the resources to get out of admirably; and (d) we have alienated the international bodies that might have helped us to do so.

I don't know if you need me to detail the evidence. The lies of the Bush administration -- an administration that campaigned on a promise to restore integrity to politics -- are omnipresent. They began with the false claims that the tax cuts of 2001 would benefit middle- and working-class taxpayers, when in fact 42 percent of the benefits went to people making more than \$300,000.¹ They continued with attempts by the president and the administration to link 9/11, al Qaeda and Iraq in the American people's minds, using those words regularly together in speeches and press releases such that, on the eve of Congress' authorization of U.S. military action in Iraq, a CBS News poll found that 51 percent of Americans believed Saddam Hussein had played a role in the attack on the World Trade Center, although of course he did not.²

This week's story was of betrayal by the administration through the outing of an undercover CIA agent by columnist Robert Novak, who said he was contacted by "senior administration officials" in what appears to be an effort to punish the agent's husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, for his open criticism of the Bush administration's policy on Iraq. There have been lies, attempts to deceive, manipulation of information, and there is no evidence to show that anyone at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. is doing any atonement for this, any turning back toward honesty and good faith.

By now we all know that we went to war, in part, on the basis of false, exaggerated or distorted claims about the Iraqi weapons program. This week, the interim report of 1,200 inspectors, under the leadership of David Kay, showed no evidence of weapons of mass destruction and little evidence of anything else of such a destructive nature. They are, however, asking that the \$200 million to \$300 million already spent for that report be matched by \$600 million more to pay for further investigation. That request comes on the heels of a request by the president for \$87 billion for reconstruction of Iraq and to pay for the continued military occupation and peacekeeping -- **\$87 billion**. According to the *Washington Post*, that is three times the amount the federal government will spend on elementary and secondary education this year. And according to some other estimates, that figure is only a drop in the bucket for what would truly be required to rebuild both the infrastructure and the institutions of Iraq to ensure a successful future for that nation.

That, by the way, is money we don't have, borrowed dollars that (I think) are part of the largest annual deficit in American history, even adjusted for inflation. And although national borrowing obeys somewhat different economic rules than personal debt, we all know that debt eventually strangles a nation just as it strangles a household.

Moreover, in other times, we might be relieved to know we need not go this alone. I mean, there are organizations skilled at nation-building. Except this time around, we've

alienated such organizations. And the terms we've proposed in the last couple of weeks for a shared program were considered largely unacceptable by the United Nations. The claim is that they treat Iraq not like a shared nation-building exercise but the booty of war. Indeed, accusations this week by the Iraqi Governing Council allege that reconstruction contracts are being assigned without concern for transparency or competitive bidding. And that among the companies that have received contracts are former supporters of Saddam Hussein and companies like Halliburton, formerly chaired by our vice president, Dick Cheney. Halliburton, in which Cheney holds 453,000 stock options, has so far been given \$1.7 billion in Iraqi-related contracts.³ It's not clear if our money is being spent wisely abroad or to line some friendly pockets.

It is true that Iraq is free of a horrible tyrant and his reign of oppression. That is significant. However, a significant price has been paid. As of Thursday of this week, the United States had lost 315 lives in Iraq and Kuwait, including a growing percentage lost after the end of major combat was declared; 1,703 soldiers have been wounded.⁴ I have not been able to verify this figure, but one estimate I saw said that the Iraqis, on the other hand, have lost somewhere around 37,000 people. Cities like Baghdad are racked with disorder. Indeed, the number of gun-related killings in Baghdad is up 25-fold. According to a *Los Angeles Times* report, before the war, the city morgue of Baghdad investigated about 20 deaths a month. In June, that number leapt to 389. By August, it was 518. Our peacekeeping, stabilizing efforts are failing in some significant ways.⁵ Moreover, according to Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), a Congressional Budget Office report claims that, given our present one-year rotation policy, the Pentagon will have to reduce our troops in Iraq and Kuwait from 180,000 to 38,000 or 64,000 in six months' time -- not nearly enough troops to fulfill our obligations in either Afghanistan or Iraq.

So what are we to think of the efforts in Iraq? And is the moral language of atonement even relevant to the business of politics and state? For guidance I turned to Michael Walzer, ethicist and political scientist, professor at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton.

In his book *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer devotes a chapter to pre-emptive wars. He argues that pre-emptive strikes can be just or unjust: "The line between legitimate and illegitimate first strikes is not going to be drawn at the point of imminent attack but at the point of sufficient threat."⁶ In other words, your opponent need not have his troops at the border and his finger on the trigger for a pre-emptive strike to be just. Instead there must be sufficient threat, which Walzer goes on to say entails three conditions: Sufficient threat must involve "a manifest intent to injure, a degree of active preparation that makes intent a positive danger, and a general situation in which waiting, or doing anything other than fighting, greatly magnifies the risk." The conditions of sufficient threat are, he adds, to be measured in the *present* time. If, for example, there are years before the risk is expected to mature, then a pre-emptive attack is immoral and must be replaced with diplomatic efforts to head off the threat and its maturation.

Walzer's opinion, as expressed in a more recent interview on the subject, is that the U.S. attack on Iraq was unjust. Moreover, his primary criticism is not (as it is for many) that

we acted alone. Indeed, Walzer points out, "Most of the just uses of military force in the last thirty or forty years have not been authorised by the U.N." Our error instead, according to Walzer, was that the threat was not sufficient or imminent enough to justify pre-emptive attack.

However, there is, for Walzer, more than enough blame to go around. In an interview earlier this year, he said that "though it is easy to criticize American unilateralism ... European irresponsibility is an equally serious problem."⁷ If the international community wants balance of power, Walzer believes, then it must be willing to put up the money and manpower to maintain it. If it doesn't, that leaves a dearth of resources to solve budding international problems like those in Iraq, those we saw develop in Kosovo and elsewhere. "I continue to believe," he went on to say, "that had France and Germany (and Russia too) been willing to support, and had the U.N. Security Council been willing to authorise, a strongly coercive containment regime for Iraq, the war would have been, first, unnecessary, and second, politically impossible for the American government to fight."⁸

So we may not own all the blame for the situation in Iraq, but we do have the lion's share. We have the lion's share of the responsibility for beginning what we may not be able to finish, and attacking when we had insufficient cause. Congress, I would say, also has its share for its virtual withdrawal from the debate about the war, leaving us as citizens with little or no voice in the matter. And of course, we ourselves share a piece of the responsibility. As Walzer also says in his chapter on "The Question of Responsibility": "Even in a perfect democracy, it cannot be said that every citizen is the author of every state policy, though every one of them can rightly be called to account."

If wars can be called just and unjust and responsibility assigned, then it seems to me the language of atonement has its place in our national life the same as it does in our personal lives. And it feels to me like there is much atoning to be done, from the head of state on down and even among ourselves. What it means to atone for war I do not know, except that in this case it involves acknowledging to the world our individual and collective responsibility for what has happened and what continues to unfold. I think that responsibility requires that we now do what we can to show goodwill, even if it costs \$87 billion we don't have and sacrifices in human lives, which are, of course, even greater than can be counted in dollars and cents. We have a responsibility to try to make the Iraqi nation whole and stable before we leave. Moreover, like all atoning, it means turning away from old patterns that allowed such failure to new ones that offer hope for renewal in the world. Our democracy needs to be strengthened or this series of events may be just a prelude.

It is this work of atonement that has my attention this year. My hope is that God and history will have mercy on us and we will find a way soon to change our collective ways and restore trust and integrity to our national life.

Amen.

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Footnotes

¹ "Starving the Government," reporting on Paul Krugman's speech on the UC Berkeley campus, Friday, Sept. 26, 2003 (Bonnie Azab Powell, Sept. 26, 2003).

² "Path of Lies: 9/11 to Iraq" by Lakshmi Chaudhry and Christopher Scheer, *Alternet* (Sept. 9, 2003).

³ See *Forbes.com*.

⁴ *New York Times*, Thursday, Oct. 2, 2003.

⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 10, 2003.

⁶ *Just and Unjust Wars*, p.81.

⁷ In an interview in "Imprints: A Journal of Analytical Socialism" (Vol. 7, No. 1, 2003).

⁸ *Ibid.*