

A Unitarian Universalist Liturgy
for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur¹
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
September 27, 2009

Rev. Ann: Last Thursday at sunset, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the shofar sounded in Jewish congregations around the world. The sound of the shofar, the ram's horn, is like no other sound. It pierces the armor of the heart. Where it is heard in the heart, it calls a quiet moment out from our busy day. Where it is heard in the mind, it calls us to pay attention. Where it is heard in the spirit, it beseeches us to return to ourselves: slow down and turn inward, become at one with ourselves. May our hearts and minds be open to what this time may ask of us.

The spirit of the time is woven about two books: the Torah and the legendary Book of Life. According to legend, on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, the Angel of Life writes each of our destinies for the year to come. During the ten days following, the Days of Awe, the Book of Life is kept open. If we try to understand how to take the Torah's insights with us into the everyday world, the Angel of Life must reconsider what has been written. By this reflection, we will have made changes that will alter the future. At the last sound of the shofar on the day of Yom Kippur, says the legend, the Book of Life for the year to come is sealed.

On Rosh Hashanah, it is written, and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed: "How many shall leave this world, and how many shall be born into it, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days and who shall not, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by the sword and who by beast, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangling and who by stoning, who shall rest and who shall wander, who shall

¹ The liturgy is by Marcel P. Duhamel, Carolanne Mercier Duhamel, Charles (C. J.) Landsman, and Karen Landsman, adapted by Ann Schranz using elements of "Machar Service for Rosh Ha-Shanah" by the Washington Congregation for Secular Humanistic Judaism and using music by Leonard Cohen ("Who by Fire"). See http://www.uuja.org/holidays/lit/high_holy_days_duhamel.htm and http://www.uuja.org/holidays/lit/Secular_Jewish_Rosh_Hashanah.pdf on the website for Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness.

be at peace and who shall be tormented, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humble and who shall be exalted.”

Music: “Who by Fire” by Leonard Cohen on CD, followed by silence.

Kay: On Rosh Hashanah we are called to review how we have lived our lives in the year past. All vows, all promises we have made to ourselves in this last year; all commitments to unswerving thought, opinion and behavior are now canceled, nullified and made naught. Now we are free to reexamine all of our motivations and desires, and all the roads we have chosen to walk, without critique, for all vows, all promises we have made to ourselves, all commitments to unswerving thought or opinion are now canceled, nullified and made naught.

Eric: On Yom Kippur we are called to look at how we may live our lives in the year to come. We have been given freedom to choose to be human beings, even in this world where it often seems as if no one behaves as a human being. The Spirit of this time calls us to look at ourselves from a place different from the usual vantage point: to see ourselves without the trappings which may clutter our days and ways; to see ourselves as we truly are. It is awesome to look clearly at the real moment. Thus, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Days of Awe. We stand in awe of the universe within ourselves, as we do of the universe around us.

Rev. Ann: We bless this moment by asking the questions asked by Rabbi Hillel: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? The great Maimonides said that belief in an external image of the divine is idolatry. What we know as holy we know as an inner force within ourselves. We created outer images - of gods, of history - to understand ourselves, and what is in store for us.

Kathleen: We stand in awe before our own destiny as we do before the vastness of time. *Teshuvah*, *Tefilah*, and *Tzedakah* -- the starting place is within. The Hebrew word, *teshuvah*, means “return” as well as “repentance.” *Teshuvah* implies a returning within: to examine the reality of who you are, spiritually as well as intellectually. Returning to your inner reality can give you the power to create the changes you must make for the survival of your true self. *Teshuvah* asks for self-reflection and for insight. That is the starting place, the only one there is.

The starting place is within. *Tefilah* means mirror as well as prayer. To pray is to mirror within, to see ourselves as we are there are powers beyond our beseeching, powers beyond our reach. But we can know surely what is within: what our own loyalties and conscience urge, what good sense and affection bid us to do. That is the starting place, the only one there is. The starting place is within. *Tzedakah* means more than righteousness. It means listening to your deepest intuition of what is right and necessary for you.

Rev. Ann: We know that time moves beyond our control. Things change beyond our control. Yet we can decide how we will change our responses to changes around us. This is the starting place, the only one there is. Those who change without evaluating are like leaves blown off by the wind. Those who change without choosing are servants to the whim of time. Truth and power abide in us. Thence will come the light to illumine our paths. The lines written in the book of life are the signatures of our year to come.

Kay: The sages taught that only for transgression against the rules of their god can Yom Kippur atone. For transgressions against the neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone unless one seeks reconciliation and good will. We resolve to remove from our minds all sentiments of rancor and enmity. In token of that resolve, we perform the rite of Kol Nidre. Let us prepare for the year to come by becoming at one, in the silence . . . [pause for a moment of silence].

Eric: What are our assumptions about our place in the world? How are our relationships with others? How are our relationships to family, friends, and enemies? What are the inner silent vows we have sworn which keep us from making the commitments our heart of hearts knows would be better, if more difficult? We ask ourselves these questions that we may begin to be at one with ourselves, at one with each other, at one with nature, and at one with the Eternal Unknown.

Kathleen: All vows, bonds, and oaths, wherewith we have vowed, sworn, and bound ourselves, to take effect from this Day of Atonement to the next Day of Atonement (may it come to us for good) all these vows made so as to estrange ourselves from those who have offended us, or to give pain to those who have angered us - they shall be absolved, released, annulled, made void

and of none effect. These, our vows, and these only, shall not be vows. These, our bonds, and these only, shall not be bonds. These, our oaths, and these only, shall not be oaths.

Rev. Ann: And all the congregation shall be forgiven, and the stranger that resides among them: for all have sinned unwittingly. Kol Nidre is a renunciation of vows, but it is more. It is a practical and honest reminder of our fallible humanity. In our recognition of our own limitations is the source of our own compassion for our neighbors. In our own humility before our humanness lives the source of our connection with all people. That connection is our strength. Kol Nidre, as it is read in the traditional service, takes on a special value. It says this: with the permission of this congregation, we will declare it to be lawful to pray with those who have transgressed. Who among us has not transgressed? Let it, then, be lawful for all of us to read together.

(The Congregation will please stand.)

Following the ancient tradition, let us say these words (printed on the back of the Order of Service):

Congregation: I hereby forgive whomever has hurt me, whomever has done me harm, whether deliberately or by accident, whether by word or by deed. May no one be punished on my account, as I forgive and pardon fully those who have done me wrong. I shall seek out those whom I have harmed and ask them to forgive and pardon me, whether I acted deliberately or by accident, whether by word or by deed. May I not willfully repeat the wrongs I have committed. May justice rule the world, giving joy to the land, happiness to the city, renewed strength and light to the people.

(The Congregation will please be seated.)

Rev. Ann: Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a new year, but it is also the Day Of Remembrance - when we remember all that has gone before us to make the world as it is today. Such remembrance is not merely an excursion into the past. The central theme of Rosh Hashanah is the power of memory itself. Memory defies oblivion, breaks the coil of the present, establishes the continuity of the generations, and rescues human life and effort from futility. And it affords

the only true resurrection of the dead. It is good that we have the gift of remembrance. It is good that we wish to transmit our traditions from generation to generation.

Kay: Though their tongues be silent, our ancestors speak through ours. We eat the fruit of trees planted by men and women long gone from our midst. The works of men and women of old are recorded in our histories and reflected in our society. The past lives in our minds, in our spirits, and in our hearts.

We stand with those who have wept, those who now weep, and those who have yet to weep. Let us stand and commemorate those of our loved ones who have died to our world. Recall before you the face and the spirit of the dearest of them, as you best knew and best loved them. Think on the meaning of their presence in your life.

(The Congregation will please stand.)

Rev. Ann: All over the world, people on Yom Kippur stand in honor of the dead. I invite you now as we stand together to speak the names of those dear to us who are gone. If you mourn a special friend or family member, call their names.

(Those who are willing speak the names aloud.)

Eric: For us, the word "god" means many things, and nothing. The ancient people cried out in their pain and sorrow, "Glorified and sanctified be God's great name in the world which God has created according to the divine will. May God establish the Divine Realm during your life and during your days, speedily and soon."

Kathleen: For us, the word "god" means many things, and nothing. The ancient people cried out in their pain and sorrow, "Let God's great name be blessed forever and to all eternity: blessed, praised and glorified, exalted and honored. Extolled and lauded be the name of the Holy One. Blessed be God, though God be high above all blessings and hymns, praises and words of solace, which are uttered in the world." May abundant peace and life descend from heaven.

Rev. Ann: The departed, whom we now remember, have entered into the peace of life eternal. They still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed and in the hearts of those who

cherish their memory. May the beauty of their life abide among us as a loving benediction. May the father and the mother of peace send peace to all who mourn, and comfort the bereaved among us. When we memorialize our dead, we reaffirm our common humanity. Each time we remember a loved one or we mourn the victims of the holocausts past and present, we affirm our intention to hold to life, to nourish it, and to protect it. The world is sustained by the just men and women in it. The light of justice and mercy has been passed on to us; let us pass that light to our children, to each other, and to the peoples of the world. As we conclude the liturgy, may this be our understanding of our covenant: to be a beacon of justice and mercy.

[Ann will invite the congregation to stand and sing “We Begin Again in Love” #1037.]

Closing Words:

For the light and truth that come to us in our daily lives, for the teachings that reach us through our experiences, we are grateful. Help us now to transform our gratitude into service: Let our labors add to the store of the world's goodness. Amen