

When people ask me what Yom Kippur is about. To me, as a Jew, and as a Humanistic Jew, I say it's mainly about three things: improving yourself, apologizing, forgiving others. All of these require self-reflection and major introspection. Tonight, as we start our Yom Kippur together here at Kahal B'raira, I reflect on each of these core facets of the holiday.

YK theme #1: Improving yourself

At its core, Yom Kippur is about reflecting on our own lives, looking back at the past year, and deciding what about ourselves we want or need to change in order to improve. **As a secular Jew**, I always appreciate Yom Kippur as a time to look inward, to examine my life, my behavior in the past year, and the kind of person I am and want to be. I cherish this time of year to give me the impetus for self-reflection and change.

There's a process starting with Rosh Hashanah and bringing us into Yom Kippur. On Rosh Hashanah, we have the tashlikh ceremony, where we let go of the things we need to from the past year. Then we determine the things we need to change, and then make a process for making changes. This time of year and having time for this process of self-reflection is a gift we have as Jews.

What propels people to make change? Certainly illness, our own or illness of those we love, or death of loved ones can cause a jolt in our lives and be an impetus for change. But do we need to wait for the pain of these experiences to thrust us into change?

I've been thinking about how we get evaluated at work. We have annual performance reviews and supervisor evaluations, and we get feedback on our performance all the time. But what about being evaluated in our personal roles? Why don't we get performance reviews on our roles as a partner, a friend, a parent, a child?

This high holiday season, I decided to ask for personal evaluations on how I'm doing. On Rosh Hashanah, I was in Michigan, so I asked my mom for a daughter evaluation—how am I doing in my daughter role? And this is one of my struggles—how best to be a daughter to an aging parent from a long distance and also how to come to resolution with the issues that can effect parent-adult child relationships.

So when I asked how was going, my mom gave me good marks for being a caretaker, but not such a good rating on allowing her to take care of me. Now this is something I hadn't thought about for quite some time being an adult. But I realized that everyone needs to feel needed, and this part of my role as a daughter.

I also asked friends for evaluations. I got lots of praise for loyalty, support, and listening. I also received feedback on how to improve. The key is to figure out how to get honest information and how to be open to hearing criticism.

What is your process? How do you approach this time of year and self-examination?

How do you know what needs to be changed in your lives, in you? Assuredly the biggest thing is observing and listening—to our own gut as well as others. I want to share this poem about listening to illustrate its importance in creating change within us. It is by Sidney Greenberg.

Listening

If we are to change we must listen. There are voices deep within us that we may not have heard. They tell us what we need, and if we are to know ourselves, we must listen.

There are voices reaching us from those who love us, from those who care about us, from those who know us better than we know ourselves. If we are to change, we must listen.

*Listening may be hard.
We sing and read and look
Taste and smell and touch with ease
But listening comes hard to us.*

*Other people's joy and tragedy
Enter our minds,
But listening to the person behind the joy,
Letting in the person underneath the tragedy,
That takes hard concentration
And a strong will.*

*The world is filled with sound
That must be turned off
If we are to hear.*

*We fill our world with sound
That we must turn off
If we are to listen.*

If we are to change, we must listen.

Have you failed to hear those around you giving you hints pointing to needed changes? Have you turned off your own heart when it suggests a better path? Have you refused to hear about your own shortcomings? Have you shut out words or cries or body language of your friends, your partner, your children, your co-workers, your parents that indicate you should examine changing?

On this Yom Kippur, I pledge to examine these words and actions more closely in the coming year. I strive to listen to others and within myself. Will you join me in this quest to listen to those around us, to our inner voices—to learn about what we each need to change about ourselves to fulfill our Yom Kippur mission of improving ourselves?

And I want to say one thing not just about internal change, but also communal change. Here at Kahal B'raira, there's always talk of change. Do we want more programming, less programming, different programming? Do we want more leadership, less leadership? Do we want a building? In fact, communal change is often easier to discuss than internal change, because then it seems like someone else's responsibility to make the change. And I have certainly been among those pushing for change in our congregation. And I want to say to each of you tonight that you are my community, and above all else, I appreciate that. And pushes for change do not alter this core belief. We can love something or someone, and also wish for improvement. And it's the same with individual change. We start with our core person, who we have built, admire, and don't want to change. But there other aspects of ourselves that we know need improvement. The key of Yom Kippur is to separate out the core that we love and wouldn't alter for anything from the aspects that need improvement and then make a plan for making those improvements throughout the year.

YK theme #2: Apologizing

A large part of the process of self-reflection and change on Yom Kippur is about apologizing to others for things we've done in the past year that we regret. Now, apologizing is complicated and requires significant thought. Apologizing is not merely saying you're sorry. Some apologies are insincere with no remorse. A true apology involves reflection of what we've done wrong, how it has affected others, and a plan to change the behavior in the future.

The effect of a true apology is striking, disarming. Have you ever had someone yelling at you and then you just apologize? It takes the wind out their angry sails if you are sincere, and moves the conversation to healing or change rather than anger. It can remove the defensive barrier.

A few months ago, at work we had to stop offering a class because we weren't going to be able to get the funding for. This involved laying off a staff member and cutting down another staff person's hours. While we knew this might be coming, it wasn't an easy conversation to have. When I told them, somewhere in the conversation, I must have said I was sorry. Because a couple weeks after our conversation, one of them said to me that the most important thing I said in that conversation was that I was sorry. And she knew I tried to alter the outcome, and I really was sorry.

And I think of our president. What if he had apologized for anything he's does? What if he had said, "I'm sorry all these people have died. And I'm sorry we waged this war in Iraq that caused it" instead of the rhetoric we get. Would people view him differently? And the president before him, Bill Clinton, what if he had apologized for the amazing lack of judgment he showed while he was president, instead of lying about it? Would things have turned out differently for him?

So the sincere apology is very powerful—it can bring us to resolution, turn anger into problem solving, and change opinion.

YK theme #3: Forgiving

And the other question is for the person being apologized to—is it necessary to accept every apology? Are there acts too egregious that an apology cannot remedy them? Yom Kippur begs us to answer the question about how and when to forgive someone.

Just as apologizing can be a gift, so too can forgiving someone.

Example—story about forgiveness.

And this may seem like a simple story, but I found the process startling, because in the family I come from, neither anger nor forgiveness are given so freely. It could be 10 years later, and something will come up again. So, you see, forgiveness alleviates guilt. We need to forgive each other.

Marge Piercy wrote a beautiful poem called *How Divine is Forgiving?* specifically for Yom Kippur. I like it because it talks about forgiveness not from altruism, but from necessity. She writes that we forgive each other when we really don't care about the wrongdoing, because it has brought us some unexpected gain. Or we forgive because so much time has passed that we've forgotten. Or we forgive because it hurts to be angry at those we love. The last stanza of her poem reads:

*We forgive mostly not from strength
but through imperfections, for memory
wears transparent as a glass with the pattern
washed off, till we stare past what injured us,
We forgive because we too have done
the same to others easy as a mudslide;
or because anger is a fire that must be fed
and we are too tired to rise and haul a log.*

Forgiving is just as important as apologizing.

It's what enables us to move on with our lives, with the relationship.

Forgiveness is a gift we give to those we love or those who deserve it or those or need it.

So as we usher in this Yom Kippur tonight, I challenge you to join me. Examine your life and yourself—what needs changing and improvement and how are you going to get it done. **Listen** to others around you and your inner voice. Ask for performance reviews on how you doing in the personal roles you play. Apologize when it's appropriate or someone else needs you to. And forgive others because you love them, because anger hurts. And let us strive for these things not just on Yom Kippur, but throughout the year.