

Beginning Again
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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Good morning, friends.

In my mind the calendar is wrong. January 1st may well be the start of the calendar year, but it is not really the start of the New Year to me. Nor, to my way of thinking, does a New Year happen on the stroke of midnight. No this is my New Year... It usually starts a few days before Labour Day, and then extends through September. For me this is the time of new beginnings, and resolutions.

Perhaps I feel so strongly about my suspicion that the calendar is wrong about the real start of the New Year because I am a product of a Canadian educational system and live in the northern hemisphere. I remember long, easy-going summer days and the realization as the days got shorter and cooler, that soon school would start. It was always a sure sign that it was time to shift gears when my mother would take us shopping. New shoes, new pencils, new notebooks, new clothes and a New Year. They just go together in my head. I remember the thrill of a new perfect box of pencil crayons, my excitement and the anticipation of seeing people that I had not seen since June. I remember my childhood resolve... this year I'm going to work harder in math! And I'm definitely going to keep my notebooks neater.

Which parent of us does not remember a child, turning on their heel, to climb school bus steps, or to walk into the door of the school, for the start of a New Year? I remember thinking, wow! She is getting older, a New Year! What will this hold for her? I find myself doing it still, now that my youngest daughters' son is getting ready to start grade 5 – how can that be?... Somehow the image of that little girl, standing outside of the long, low building has come back to me. And I know that whenever her birthday is, regardless of the fact that the calendar hasn't changed, this is a New Year in her life. Can you remember one of your September moments? Perhaps it was a new school, or a hard goodbye to a summer love, the melancholy of shorter days and leaves starting to change colour. Maybe you remember the end of the freedom of summer days or a move to a new city...

My long association with UU congregations has only reinforced the feeling that this is New Year. Here we are, at the start of a New Year! Our congregational calendars are filling up again. New Adult education curriculum starts, new children's programming

begins. Committees and Boards are scheduling meetings, ready to roll up their sleeves and begin with renewed resolve to focus on the business at hand.

I'm intrigued by many of the cultural customs marking the New Year. Many have at least an element of a 'fresh start' in them. In Nowruz (no-ruse) a Persian observance, people jump over small fires, symbolizing leaving, or burning, away the misfortunes of the previous year. The Japanese New Year, Oshōgatsu (Oh-Sho-Ga-tsu) includes the ringing Temple Bells, 108 times, as a way to cleanse past mistakes. As summer closes, it seems inevitable that we ask ourselves, 'what is ending, or what is ripening in our lives, and what do we need to let go of?' This year, in a few weeks, the Jewish people will observe their period of New Year reflections. The time that begins with Rosh Hashanah, and which ends with Yom Kippur, are the High Holy Days in the Jewish calendar. I find myself wondering...are there lessons in the Jewish New Year for us? Is there wisdom that will help us to build better religious communities? Are there lessons for us as individuals?

The need to mark time is a strong one, and Jews who do not normally attend synagogue often participate in community life during the High Holy Days. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who some of you may know through his book, 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People' writes in "To Life: A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking", In the congregation I served for twenty-four years, the 270 seats in the sanctuary were usually more than adequate to accommodate the worshippers on Sabbaths and holidays. But for the High Holy days every fall, we would open the collapsible wall separating the sanctuary from the large multipurpose room behind it, set out an additional seven hundred seats, and then set up a tent in the parking lot for an additional four hundred worshippers. (And at peak moments of the service, we would still have people standing in the back and aisles.) Every year for twenty-four years, I would try to conduct a service so meaningful, and deliver a sermon so eloquent, that people would be moved to attend in similar numbers every week. And every year, the crowds would disappear after Yom Kippur and not be seen again till the following September.

What is it? Why are these times so significant for **us**? In some cases, I think, the significance comes because we have been separated. This is, a time when we, perhaps more than is typical we reflect on the meaning we hold in one another's lives. We are looking at the year ahead, our yoga schedule, the kids swim lessons, the upcoming surgery, the planned vacation and we ask, "is there space in my life for this congregation this year?" There is a wondering to it, a poignancy that blends with the anticipation and freshness.

Harold Kushner says,

In part, I think, the season catches our apprehension about what might happen in the year ahead. When we are young, we can hardly wait for our next birthday. We are eager to be a year older, to rush into the next chapter of our lives. But as summer yields to autumn in our personal calendars, our mood changes. We become less eager, more apprehensive. We are all too aware of the uncertainties of life, all too aware of the bad things that might happen to us and to those around us in the course of a year. We find comfort in community, in the presence of so many others around us sharing the same hopes and fears.

The support of sympathetic and compassionate people, who are willing to support us in our religious journey, is a comfort.

The Jewish communities of Eastern Europe have a tradition called Tzedakah (ze-dah-kah). In this custom a congregational leader visits each household with a sack. At each home people reach into the bag, and in some cases, they put money in, and in others, they take money out. No one, but the individual donors and recipients know who does what. The purpose of this custom is to ensure that each family has the money they need to buy provisions for the holiday. It enables each person to participate in fully in the holiday, and in community life.

Surely this is one way in which we, members of churches, and congregations and fellowships can make this New Year a particularly meaningful one. We can be generous supporters and gracious and grateful recipients of the gifts of community. We can take the time to remember what we have been given through our participation. What has your membership in this fellowship given you? Have you been loved? Accepted? Supported? Have you been challenged to find new ways to make sense of your life? Have you been reminded that jobs don't determine your worth, or that others celebrate your successes or that you are not alone in your grief? Take the time this New Year to appreciate the gifts that this fellowship has given you. Take the time to thank those who have been particularly supportive. There it is! A New Year's resolution! Let us resolve to find time for gratitude and appreciation, to be grateful for the gifts of community.

As members of a religious community we receive, and we give. Take a look around... Today someone in this room is recovering from a hurt, someone is ill, someone is mourning, someone is wondering how they can carry the load they have been given. As members of a religious community we are called to walk with one another, to try to help one another. Consider the ways in which you can support the others who call themselves members and friends of this religious community and those who would find religious community here. Sometimes our service to our community happens at the

organizational level - Working to make the congregation a healthy one. Goodness knows we need people to serve on boards, and to write by-laws, and to facilitate meetings. Other times our service to our fellow members takes place at a deep and personal level. It is my belief that we are called to Minister to one another. That is what distinguishes religious communities from other worthwhile organizations, like the United Way, or the Girl Guides. My second suggestion for a community sustaining New Years Resolution is this... Each of us can resolve to be more of a companion to our fellow travellers, we can contribute to our communities in ways that help others belong and participate in a meaningful way. The Jews believe that giving and receiving are both holy acts. To receive is to allow another to give, and, in the Jewish tradition, to give is a Mitzvah – a blessing.

Harold Kushner, in his discussion about the meaning of the Jewish New Year, explains, ...at the culmination of the service, we invoke the metaphor of God sitting in judgement over humanity, opening the books, scrutinizing the records of the past year, and passing sentence of each of us. Maybe some Jews literally believe that God decides their fate for the coming year every September, with the sense of being freed from responsibility that such fatalism brings. But I would hope that most of us realize the worst thing you can do to a poetic metaphor is to take it literally.

Kushner goes on to ask,

What can that image mean if we don't take it literally? It can mean that our deeds count, that God takes note of our day-to-day behaviour & ethical choices. It can mean that what kind of person we are matters to God. It can mean that we are ultimately held accountable for how we use the opportunities with which being alive and human presents us.

Kushner concludes,

We come away from the long, majestic Rosh Hashanah service with the message that living in God's world is serious business and we have to rethink our priorities if we are to use rightly the New Year we have been given.

As Unitarian Universalists, we may have different opinions on whether there is a God who takes note of our behaviour, but I think we can agree that our choices matter, that we are responsible for how we use our opportunities, and that we need to examine our priorities to ensure we make the best use of the year that faces us. That is what we each need to do, that is what this congregation needs to do. Being in human community requires us to be mindful of our responsibilities as stewards to the communities that we love and care for.

The image of God sitting judgement with carefully kept record book open also provides me with another insight about how we can be together. I for one, find it very liberating to think that it is not my job to take care of all the judging. It's God's job!! I don't have to worry about it. Often we forget that we are mere mortals, and we begin to operate as if all the final judgements depend on us... and that the results; disappointment, hurt feelings, misunderstandings come about because of a decree we issue. I'm not saying that we don't have opinions on the actions of others, and that we are not affected by what is done, but I am suggesting that we should be gentle, we should remember that we can't possibly know all that there is to know about each and every situation, and so, to remember that our judgements are very personal. They may have more to do with our perspective, than with the overall reality. I'd like to suggest that we resolve to put our ledgers away. That we deal with one another honestly, and compassionately, and that we allow one another to make mistakes.

As part of their New Years celebration many Jews throw breadcrumbs into a body of water. Family & friends gather together at the waterfront, or river, & symbolically cast away the sins of the past year. And as they do this, they resolve to do better... How lovely, a clean slate. The custom doesn't pretend that the wrongs didn't happen; part of the exercise is an honest personal accounting of what it is that needs to be cast away. There is no pretending that bad ethical choices or unkindness don't have an impact, or that magically all will be made right again. This is an opportunity to leave the guilt of mistakes behind and to move forward. We can do this too, as individuals and as communities. , -We can let last year's mistakes go. Certainly their impact remains, but we can choose to accept what was, to figure out a better way, and then, to get on with it. And so, here is my final resolution for the coming year. We can resolve to learn from our past mistakes, let go of the guilt and remorse, and move forward with new wisdom.

I find myself comforted by the traditions and stories of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Partly because I am affirmed in my belief that our Julian calendar has it all wrong. New Years is not in January. And partly because I have found in one of the world's major religions, a source of inspiration. In these ancient traditions I can find lessons that I believe will help us to lead better lives, and to build stronger faith communities. The result for me, are the New Years resolutions I've shared with you today.

1. Let us resolve to find time for gratitude and appreciation, to be grateful for the gifts of community.
2. Each of us can resolve to be more of a companion to our fellow travellers, we can contribute to our communities in ways that help others belong and participate in a meaningful way.
3. We can resolve to take our responsibilities as nurturers of this congregation seriously. To remember to use the time we have carefully, and to remember that

we will be held accountable, not only by ourselves and one another but by those who have not yet found us, for the health and well-being of our congregation.

4. We can resolve to put our ledgers away, to deal with one another honestly, and compassionately, and that we allow ourselves and one another to make mistakes.
5. We can resolve to learn from our past mistakes, let go of the guilt and remorse, and move forward with new wisdom.

Summer is coming to an end, all things must end. There is something bittersweet about today – our summers are precious and fleeting, and September starts tomorrow. September; a new page on the calendar brings new beginnings – I remember the empty pages of my notebooks, the newly sharpened pencils and the anticipation. I carry great hope for our time together in the coming months. I hope you do to.

So, lets hold our resolutions close and enjoy the feeling of possibility – together. Happy New Year.