

Awake, You Sleepers. Awake.

A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**

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Awake, you sleepers, awake. This is the meaning of the blast of the Shofar, the ram's horn that is blown to mark the beginning of the Jewish high holy days, according to the great 12th century Rabbi, Maimonides. The sound is harsh and shocking. It is meant to rouse people out of their usual slumber, their way of going through life only partly awake, and to remind them that each and every one of us is mortal

Rosh Hashana begins these holy days on Tuesday, and Yom Kippur ends them, ten days later. Together, they are called the "Days of Awe". According to tradition, God opens a book on Rosh Hashana, in which is written the deeds of each person for the past year – those good deeds that served god, life, or humanity – as well as those which defiled life, which were unkind, or evil. It is said that God knows on this day who will live for another year, and who will not, for it is already written.

But there are ten days, the holiest days of the Jewish year, in which a person has a chance to change god's mind, to undo any damage done, to find forgiveness and to begin anew. This is the time between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It is called *Teshuva*, the time of turning.

Awake you sleepers, awake. That is the message of these days of turning. Awake to see yourself for all that you have been this last year. Awake to see what and how you can change. Awake, or you will die, if not in form then in spirit.

Awakenings come in many forms. Once there was a Swedish chemist and industrialist who lived in Paris. And one morning he awoke, after reading a mistaken obituary about himself in the newspaper. The press called him the "dynamite king". As this man read on, he saw that destruction, the arms trade, and money were what made up his life, as the newspaper reported it. From that morning forward he resolved to change, so that when he really did die, the world would understand that at heart and in truth he was devoted to life, and to the upholding of life. He designed a plan to direct his vast fortune so that it would be used to support people and groups who had made progress in the quest for greater human understanding and for peace. And so it was – from this moment of awakening for Alfred Nobel - that the Nobel Prizes were born.

In his will, Nobel willed his fortune to be “annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind.” He created five awards: for physics, chemistry, medicine, and the one he most cherished, for peace. *Awake, you sleepers. Awake.*

Yom Kippur is the final day of the Days of Awe. It is also called the Day of Atonement. Of course another way to say that word is at-one-ment, so that the turning – be it back to oneself, back to humanity, back to the full potential of life, or back to god, according to your theology – really means to unite with or to return to *all that is* – what, in Unitarian Universalism we call the “interdependent web of all existence”, what in Taoism they call the Tao, in Hinduism Nirvana, and so on. Usually this feeling of at-one-ment comes through a mystical experience, something that cannot easily be explained or intentionally replicated. But mystical experience is essential to a life well lived, truth fully known. Its’ reality is supported by science. As renowned scientist (and Nobel Prize winner) Albert Einstein once said: “The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is this sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He (or she) to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”

Einstein observed Jewish religious practices when he was young, but as he grew more fascinated by science, his interest in organized religion faded. Yet he retained a powerful sense of his Jewish identity, and once referred to his relationship with the Jewish people as "his strongest human bond." Einstein was, in his words, "a deeply religious nonbeliever." He often spoke of a "cosmic religion" and a “God seen in the harmony of the universe.” *Awake, you sleepers, awake.*

The time of Teshuvah, the ten days between Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur, is a time of profound introspection. It is a time to ask questions about the past year. What went well? What could have gone better? What am I particularly thankful for? And most of all, what do I regret? Have I caused any harm, perhaps without meaning to? Who may I need to seek forgiveness from? Who may I need to forgive?

As my colleague, the Rev. Sarah York, has written:

There is incredible power in forgiveness. But forgiveness is not rational. One can seldom find a reason to forgive or be forgiven. Forgiveness is often undeserved. It may require a dimension of justice (or penance), but not always, for what it holds sacred is not fairness, but self respect and community. Forgiveness does not wipe away

guilt, but invites reconciliation. And it is as important to be able to forgive as it is to be forgiven.

And thus during Teshuva, the time of turning, we may need to ask a harder question: Do I need to forgive myself? Is there something I have done or thought that has harmed myself? Let me give you an example:

The most beloved adult in my world as a child and young woman was my grandmother. She was my safe harbor, the person I could turn to for anything. For all of my life she had been a steadfast source of love and comfort. When I was twenty eight and she was 78, she became seriously ill. We moved her to Santa Barbara to be near my sister and me.

But I was only twenty eight. I was far from mature. I did not feel worthy or prepared to care for this woman who had cared so well for me. I knew she was ill; I heard the diagnosis of terminal. But I was not ready to face that, not ready to let her go. I could not bear the thought of it. And yet I wanted, wanted to give back to her as she had done for me. I wanted our time together to be perfect.

But it was not. It was not at all. I panicked as she grew more gravely ill. Though I couldn't have articulated it at the time, I felt my own life diminish with hers, my own death draw nearer. There were days when I could not be with her, when I recoiled from the presence of dying and insisted on living with the living – with my young friends, my young life – though I believed this was wrong, I was sure of it.

I sat with her the day before her death. I knew, as those of us who sit with people we love as they near the end of their lives, sometimes know, that the end was near. I understood that this might be our last day together. I felt there was so much that I should say to her, do for her, be for her, but I could not do it, be it, say it. All I could do was to follow the suggestion of a kind nurse, who said that perhaps my grandmother would like ice chips to soothe her dry mouth. So on that day, full of a lifetime of love and memory, wanting desperately to express this, to do something that would transcend the loss to come and endure forever, what I did instead was to feed my grandmother ice chips, one by one, sliding them gently into her mouth.

She died early the next morning. I was inconsolable. For months, years, when I thought of her I was wracked by guilt and despair, certain that I had failed her in those last months, not been what she deserved, not been what I meant to be, not been nearly enough. I believed this was something I could not recover from; that I could never again have a normal, joyful life. This guilt, regret, sorrow impacted everything– my work, my relationships, my hope for myself and for the world. It was more than depression, it was a

turning inward with anger and guilt and negative emotion that came close to destroying me.

But five years after my grandmother's death an older woman friend took time to learn about my experience, and in the best ways of mentors, to share her wisdom with me. The words she used were gentle, understanding. They were words that I could let in, could let finally, finally penetrate my pain. "You did the best you could" she said, "you were young. Your grandmother was the most important person in your entire life. She had always been there for you, always. And now she was dying, she was leaving. This was more than you could cope with then, more than you could bear. You did not know anything to do beyond what you did for her. You had no experience, no one to help you learn or tell you that in the long run all that mattered was that you loved her, had always loved her. You could not have done better, given all that. You did the best you could. She would want you to forgive yourself and to live again. She would want you to be happy."

To this day I think I heard this woman's words as clearly as I did because they were so much like what my grandmother would have said to me, had she been able to come back and set me straight, with her great trademark love and unconditional acceptance.

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And so it was that I came to accept my failures, my limitations, and to forgive myself. I forgave my grandmother as well, for leaving, and learned to recognize and appreciate those parts of me that were still so much like her. In the language of turning, I turned back to myself, to life, and to a future renewed with possibility and hope. I was awakened out of my own slumber of despair to my inherent goodness, even in imperfection; awakened to the fragility of life and most of all to the awesome power of human love. I transcended the ordinary, and for a brief time, touched and was touched by the holy.

There are many ways to awaken. Consider your own lives. It might be an illness that does it, that compels you finally to slow down, eat more healthfully, and live a balanced life. It might be a landslide, or a hurricane, or a storm so great that, like Jonah in this morning's story, you know you have to turn your life around, turn it back to god, back toward the will of the universe, and the light of truth and forgiveness. It might be - not a shofar - but a phone call or a knock on the door bringing terrible news; someone you loved is gone, death has come for them, and out of this loss comes the knowing that your own life has to finally, finally change. Think about it, now. What is written on your Book of Life?

During the High Holy Days even the secular Jews return to the fold, not just to slide into the back row of the temple for the reading of the Torah, but to earnestly practice the faith of their father and their mother, and the fathers and mothers before those. It is a serious business, and it takes over the daily, mundane way of the world. And at this time, more than any other, anything can be an occasion for awakening. A small loss, a great tragedy, even an ordinary, everyday event. Anything.

A vignette from the Hasidic tradition of Judaism illustrates: Once on the second day of Rosh Hashanna, the Zaddik, (spiritual leader) Rabbi Levi Isaac of Ber-dit-chev was standing at his window. A Gentile (non-Jewish) cobbler, a shoe-maker, passed by. He saw Rabbi Levi there at the window, and asked, simply enough: “Have you anything to mend, sir?” meaning, of course, any shoes or boots in need of repair.

And at that, to the great surprise of the cobbler, the Rabbi came outside, threw himself on the ground, and weeping bitterly he cried, “Woe is me, and alas for my soul, because the Day of Judgement is almost here, and still I have not mended myself.”

Still, I have not mended myself. Have you? This mending is the spiritual work of Jewish people during the High Holy Days. I suggest that for us, and for all religious people it is our work as well, for all the days of our lives. It must begin within, this mending. Only then can we turn away from our selves to do the real work of Jewish life, indeed the real work of all spiritual beings, whatever tradition we claim – *tikkun olam* – the healing of the world. We need not look far to find what and how to change, to turn. Jonah knew what he had to do. It was as clear as the storm on the water. Alfred Nobel knew, because of a mistake in the paper. And the Rabbi knew, because of the simple question of a cobbler. *Awake, you sleepers, awake!*

The shofar does not sound every day. And for us, unless we visit a Jewish home or temple at the high holy days, it does not sound at all. Our awakenings must come in less formal ways, often without rigid structure and symbol. It may well be, as the Rabbi suggests, that all our experience is an opportunity to awaken.

Church is a good place for awakening. Here, we have the beauty of the building, the structure of the service, the liturgy, the music, the chalice, the silence and the fellowship to cue us, to stir us to a greater reality. Here, we are encouraged by our Call to Worship to stop, to pay attention, and to consider the things that truly matter in life – the things of worth, as the name suggests. Here, we are asked to think, to be, and to look higher. And see what happens when we do look higher – look up, there on the stained glass above us, the words of god, or the words of truth – speaking down to all of

us gathered here us, urging us to do the most important deed we can ever do: *Beloved, let us love one another.*

This is where it begins, here, with one another. Deeds matter, how we live our lives matters. Do you remember the medieval play “Everyman?” In it, one human being is faced with death. He knows it is near, it is coming sooner, much sooner than he had expected. He does not want to go. He turns to all the attributes of life (which appear as characters in the play), to all the sources of meaning he found in life, to seek help, and to find company for the lonely and frightening journey to death. He goes to Beauty, Knowledge, Fellowship and Worldly Goods. One by one, each of these that so sustained him in life, forsake him on this last, final journey.

In the end he finds only one attribute willing to accompany him. It is “Good Deeds” who will not forsake him, “Good Deeds” who will go with him on this ultimate journey. The message of this play, as with the story of the Days of Awe, is that it matters what we do, that our deeds count, up to the very end. Our deeds count, and even as that last breath begins to cross our lips, it matters how we live our lives. It matters what we do.

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