I love the Jewish tradition of starting the new year with repentance, atonement, and forgiveness. I like clearing the slate and starting fresh. Putting the junk aside to clear the way for the new. I like brand new pencils for school and a clean work space. I like feeling like it’s never too late to start over, to change, and learn, and grow.

The start of school has always felt more “new” to me than the first of January. It could be that I come from a family of teachers, but I think it’s more ancient than that – I think it’s as ancient as the Jewish calendar. A good and sweet new year to you all this morning.

Those of us who are even partially awake to the evils of society – to racism, violence, inequalities of all sorts – can grow weary and ragged with the weight of the world. And we need a fresh start every now and then. A good and sweet new year is what we long for.

We can grow weary and ragged if we’re not careful...

Careful to connect with what is good in humanity and my unique contribution to that good, connect with the changing seasons and rhythm of the planet, connect with a love that can guide incredible change and growth.

I had the honoring of connecting with that love yesterday at the memorial service of the Rev. Richard Henry, the minister of my youth – the one who inspired me into the ministry, the one who loved me into being. He was a great man. And his greatness is measured by the love he expressed for this world and all the quirky people in it. I remember how he would give me his full attention when we were in conversation, and I would leave most conversations wondering why I had done most of the talking. I learned from him that ministry is mostly listening. Perhaps that’s why I’m drawn to the introspection of Rosh Hashanah....

The Jewish practice of New Year being a quiet reflective holiday contrasts well with the secular world we inhabit in which the fall is buzzing with activity, busy as school starts again, and we gear up for the holidays and long winter ahead.

The shofar, which announces the holidays in the Jewish tradition, is supposed to make us tremble in awe. The ten days starting with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur are commonly known as the Days of Awe. This is a time for serious introspection, a time to consider the previous year and repent before Yom Kippur. Repent means to change your mind, to go a different direction, try something new. Turning. It’s not just saying you’re sorry and repeating the same action, but actually changing direction and turning anew, doing something different the next time, or in the new year.
A time of introspection – the detailed mental examination of your own feelings, thoughts and motives. It is only through introspection, by examining our deepest self, that we can choose something else. As Bevyn and Dave both suggest this morning in their remarks. Examining whiteness for those of us who are white, and examining hurts we have caused others. Without such examination and introspection, we operate out of instinct, and repeat the same actions again and again. You know Einstein’s definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.

This fast-paced world we live in, with cell phones which reach you at any time of day, and email that allows us to communicate within seconds with people half way around the world, doesn’t exactly encourage this kind of introspection. And so we have to choose to take the time for this. I wonder if you were able to carve out some time in the last week to consider the purpose of your life? Or to consider the hard choices you may be facing in your life?

This time of year, I think, the fall, the autumn, can be a poignant time of year – the quickly changing seasons can make us wistful, and remind us of autumns past – it’s an awe inspiring season, sometimes with brilliant colors erupting in nature, and wildly changing temperature of air. Days of Awe seem like a good description, whether you’re of Jewish ancestry or not. It calls us to reflect, as it reminds us of autumns past, and yet hints at the season to come. Reflecting on your purpose or place in the world can come naturally in this season of turning. Why am I here? Who am I to be? Is this how I wish to be living my life? Or is there a turning I need to do, for me? for my family? for my world?

There was an elder in a church, long ago and far away, who used to say, while greeting folks after worship, “You are loved.” We need to know that we are loved, in order to forgive or seek forgiveness, don’t you think? I don’t know if it matters if you are loved by another person or loved by God; what matters is that you know you are loved. Forgiveness grows out of that love. When we know we are loved, we can forgive ourselves and others – we can let go of those burdens of resentment and hate and the desire to hurt in response to being hurt.

Whenever Rosh Hoshanah and Yom Kippur come around, I have a desire to confess some great sin to the congregation I serve – I generally can’t think of anything to confess. It’s not that I don’t make mistakes, quite the opposite - but either my mistakes are too raw or personal to admit publicly at the time, or don’t seem significant enough to bother you all with.

I realize, however, where this desire comes from – it’s not from ancient tradition, frankly, it’s the result of a movie that came out in 2000 while I was a seminary student in Chicago. Probably not a very significant or impactful movie for most people, but for those of us in theological school at the time, it was ever fascinating as it focused on the friendship and careers and love triangle of clergy – a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi, and the childhood friend they both are in love with. The rabbi, in a dramatic climactic scene, confesses to his congregation – well, let me read the scene to you…. the rabbi, played by Ben Stiller, says...
“Since, uh, Yom Kippur... is kind of like the Super Bowl of the Jewish calendar... most rabbis try to cram a whole year’s... worth of sermons into one kind of big "best of" sermon. Um, I'm not gonna do that tonight. I'm not gonna talk about the meaning of God...or the situation in Israel...or the status of Jews around the world. I'd like to talk about something a little more personal. I'd like to talk about us. The status of you and me. A wise man once told me that no rabbi can save anyone. He can only offer himself as a guide to other fearful people. We live in a really complex world... a world where boundaries and definitions are blurring... and bleeding into each other in ways that-- that I think challenge us not just as Jews but as human beings. And for a while now, you've let me be your guide. You've shared your lives with me. You've explored your faith with me... in ways that I know sometimes have seemed a little strange... and, and maybe even a little scary... but you put your trust in me... and over the past few months... I have been violating that trust. I've been violating it because I haven't been sharing my life with you. For a number of months, I've been seeing a woman who isn't Jewish. It doesn't matter if I'm still with her, which I'm not, or if I still love her, which I do, very much. What matters is that I shouldn't have been afraid to discuss it with you. I'm not sorry for loving her. I am sorry-- I'm very sorry-- that I put too little faith in you. Yom Kippur is the day of atonement. And so tonight I stand before you...and ask you to forgive me.”

Isn’t that a great sermon? OK, I don’t know about the Super Bowl of Jewish holidays remark, but otherwise a great way to honor Yom Kippur, to set the record straight and start again. This sermon, of course, in the movie, is followed by a vote of the Board about whether or not to fire the rabbi... and, as this is Hollywood, not real life, they of course, decide to keep him on.

In real life, however, forgiveness doesn’t always come so easily. To shift from a wrong, an act of violence, an injustice, resulting resentment, hate, or anger, to forgiveness, something has to change. This, unfortunately, is inner work.

I say unfortunately, because usually it’s easier to shift objects around us, than the heart inside. That’s why war is easier than peace. We shift objects in war – guns and missiles, bodies and such. Peace requires a change of heart. And we’ve obviously not yet figured that one out.

Sometimes shifting objects can help with that shift of heart.

And we must remember that we’re never in control of the response of another. We influence one another greatly, but anyone who is raising a child knows that we are not in control! We can call congress... but that doesn’t guarantee anything. I can say “I’m sorry,” but the other person may not forgive me. Likewise, I can say, “I forgive you” but sometimes the other person is not sorry. and of course, it’s complicated by the fact that we can be offended by words or actions of another that are not intended to be offensive – then where does that leave us? Is it my problem, or yours?

This all leads us back to Love and to Covenant. Both Judaism and Unitarian Universalism are covenantal traditions – traditions in which how we treat one another and the world is more important than what it is we say we believe. We have a covenant with the world and one another to act out of love, for the healing or betterment of the planet. It makes sense to me to begin the new church year seeking and granting forgiveness, so we can begin again in love.

Some of us begin again in this community, having spent many years here, and others, like me, are relatively new and some are just starting here or checking us out for the first time this morning. If you’re just checking us out, please find the checkered tablecloth in the library after worship.
We begin again in love. A good and sweet new year to you all this morning.

“For a while now, you've let me be your guide,” said the rabbi. “You've shared your lives with me. You've explored your faith with me... in ways that I know sometimes have seemed a little strange... and, and maybe even a little scary... but you put your trust in me...” and for that I am grateful.

Perhaps trust is a reflection of that feeling that “you are loved” – when you are loved and you know you are loved, you can trust. If you know you are loved, when a promise is broken, forgiveness can take place. We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

Remembering a great man yesterday put me in touch with that love. I cried throughout the service. I don’t often get to cry at memorials. I cried because he saw love everywhere and sometimes I have to look pretty hard. I forget what he seemed to know, that love – love for ourselves and others, is the ground of our being and the hope of our species.

In love, knowing that you are loved, I invite you to reflect on your hopes and dreams for your new year. Your present context, at home or at school, work or life.

Remember to connect with what is good in humanity and your unique contribution to that good, connect with the changing seasons and rhythm of the planet, connect with a love that can guide incredible change and growth.

What is it that you trust? What relationships in your life need healing? What sustains you as the seasons change and summer turns to autumn and we feel again the familiar cool crisp air, but make things new? What difficult feelings and disappointments and anger need the transforming power of love and forgiveness in your life? How will that help heal the world?

Benediction

Let our new year vow be to make each day a thing complete. Remember to return again to the home of your soul. You are loved. A good and sweet new year to you all this morning.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.