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Yom Kippur Reflections, 2006

Mark Rosenman

When Bennett called me and asked me to speak at our service tonight, I must admit my first thought wasn't really about what I could say that would shed new light on the meaning of Yom Kippur, a question that great and not so great Jewish thinkers have philosophized about over the centuries. My immediate concern was: how could I come up with a quote as erudite, from as universally esteemed an authority as Peter Cole managed to do when he spoke here at last year's service and-if I'm not mistaken--quoted lyrics from a song by Rage Against The Machine. But then I realized that as secular humanists we don't particularly regard competitiveness as a virtue so I decided to relax, set aside the tome by Martin Buber I had been plowing through in search of a good quote, and decided that I would just think about what Yom Kippur means to me. This is what I came up with

It's always occurred to me that there is something rather easy about Yom Kippur. That might seem odd, since Yom Kippur is described as the most awesome day of the Days of Awe, the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar, a time for painful reflection and self-scrutiny, a time to remake the world and help God write a better chapter for oneself and the world in the Book of Life for the year ahead.

The reason I say that Yom Kippur is easy is that, at least for me, finding things to atone for and to feel sorry and remorseful about is *not really* an arduous task. There are so many targets of opportunity for my remorse and atonement, so many ways I could mend my ways.. To be a better husband, parent and friend. Less impatient, less judgmental, more involved. The list of how you--or at least I--could be a better person goes effortlessly on and on, until you tend to want cry "uncle" and give up and go back to being the same morally so so person you have always been.

In short, it's easy to feel remorse, even genuine, heartfelt, if-only-I-could-be-a-better-person remorse. It feels good to feel bad about your shortcomings, because it brings us in touch with our aspirations to be better, our genuine yearnings to pull ourselves out of old patterns and habits and to be reborn, to really be the kind of people we urge our kids to be. In this sense I would say that Yom Kippur taps into the same vein of human psychology that revival preachers tap into, who work their congregations into a frenzy of sin and remorse.

The problem, of course, as my wife the psychotherapist would say, is that it's so hard to change. The entrenched barriers we



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struggle against--selfishness, fear, laziness—are deeply entrenched and feel unmovable. Trying to be a better person is like being elected to public office as a reformer, a story that politicians—and Jimmy Stewart in the film *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*—have played out time after time. The story always has the same ending. The idealistic reformer goes to Washington or to some other seat of power, determined to be fair, to help the weak, to do the public good and live up to the potential of democracy. But he finds that the entrenched special interests, the forces of selfishness and reaction are there waiting for him and it's usually those forces that win out in the end.

But I don't want to sound hopeless or cynical about atonement because I don't feel that way. In daily life and all the more so on this night I feel that there is potential in me and in everyone to be just a little better, especially when we can inspire ourselves by seeing others doing what's right. Remember the story of one of the heroines of the civil rights movement, who explained that she decided to sit down in the whites-only section of the bus not because she was trying to make a statement but because her feet were simply "tired from shopping." If all of us could make a little more effort, to do things that benefit ourselves and others at the same time, the daily newspapers would have a much more cheerful story to tell.

Speaking of regret, I'd like to share something from a memorial service that my family and I attended a memorial service for a cousin, who was named David but called Duff. Duff was my mother's cousin and was

an important part of my life since I was born. He died last summer at age 78. A large group of family and friends gathered at the Ethical Culture Society in New York last Tuesday night. One thing that was said about my cousin particularly impressed me—and it was really true--that he valued his life, his family and his friends and therefore did not live with a lot of regret.

I'm struck on this solemn occasion that regret really is a double-edged sword. On the one hand we feel that regret is a prerequisite for repentance and self-improvement. Yet we don't particularly admire those who are overly regretful or who are inclined to flagellate themselves about their shortcomings.

Put up or shut up is probably good advice, even on Yom Kippur. Be as good a person as you can be, make as much difference as you can, without pretending that you are more repentant than you really are.

If I'm not sure what we as individuals should do, I am more sure what I think we as a community should do. Yom Kippur is a time for people like us-- who are generally agnostic on the existence of God and who are responsible to take forward the Jewish legacy of reason and social justice --to renew our determination to be masters of our own fate and to resist the false claims of fundamentalism and intolerance.

Could I suggest though that there is some atonement that we secular liberals need to do, as we continue to find the majority of our fellow citizens attracted to the ideals and beliefs of the right instead of our own. I



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think that at times we tend to be self-satisfied. We tend to hew tightly to others who share our views. Many of us rarely if at all have to deal with the challenge of trying to persuade a family member or friend who think other than we do. In particular we should better understand what needs religion and patriotism satisfy and how the left can do a better job than the right in addressing those needs.

Furthermore we should alert to inconsistency in our own beliefs. I would cite one of our and my heroes, Bob Dylan, that ever paradoxical, quintessentially Jewish poet, who in his early song *It's Alright Ma I'm Only Bleeding*, tweaked the left of the early 60s with the line "others say don't hate nothing at all except hatred." I think that Dylan's gibe at those whose ranks he'd been part of says a lot about how we need to scrutinize our own motives and take pains to avoid slipping into an orthodoxy of our own.

One thing I don't regret is the 6 years my family spent as JCSS parents as Max and Lila worked through the program. I would urge all prospective and current JCSS parents to give this organization your all. Yes, the members meetings sometimes meander and yes it takes fortitude to deal with your child's reluctance to get out of bed on Sunday morning—but maintaining this community and upholding an alternative Jewish tradition are worth it. Shira will probably never forgive me for saying this, but I was deeply moved that she agreed to get involved as director of the JCSS school. Because of her and others I have come to know in this community, I think that JCSS is important and want to see it thrive.

Finally, in the spirit of Yom Kippur and notwithstanding some of the skepticism I have voiced here this evening, I would like to assure Janice, Max and Lila that I can and will do better and that the three of you wonderful people deserve no less.

L'Shana Tova!