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Yom Kippur Reflections, 2009

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We often think of Yom Kippur as what its name indicates— The Day of Atonement. It's a cumbersome title for a holiday with an already weighty reputation. There is a series of images we tend to piece together in our minds in relation to the holiday – a kind of visual documentary. We imagine orthodox walking to shul, quaint and somber in the autumn air, preparing to repent. We imagine footage of Jews praying under their striped shawls in a one-room Brooklyn synagogue. A voice-over might declare a newsflash detailing the day's bomb threats against metropolitan area Jewish centers. We might see the images of the Jews at the Western Wall, below al Aqsa, and recall the modern Wars of Religion -- and the war of this day in 1973. Then our documentary switches back to quaintness – maybe imagining a scene from a shtetl where our Eastern European ancestors are gathering to toss bread crumbs into the Vistula or the Volga.

The unsettling juxtaposition of quaintness and violence gives the holiday a confused, near-apocalyptic mystique which no other day on our calendar shares. Yom Kippur seems almost an anachronism, a relic of a more devout age, a holy, vulnerable holiday, a day out of place in a world of guided missiles, smart bombs, twittering ideologues, and the internet. It seems antiquated, too moralistic for our times. And yet, in certain ways, among all the holidays on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur is perhaps the

MOST relevant, the MOST significant for modern humanity.

Its relevance lies in the concept of “sin” – a dominating theme of Yom Kippur. The “sins” at the focus of this holiday are different from the sins we are used to hearing about. As a western people, we often think of sin in the Christian context. We relate it to the Seven Deadly Sins, a list compiled by monks during Europe's Dark Age.

But in Hebrew, there is actually no word for “sin.” The Hebrew word translated as “sin” -- “al chet” – in fact means “the missed mark.” It's a word that comes from athletics, from sports — and specifically from archery. And not coincidentally, the word “Torah” -- aside from being the book at the historic core of the Jewish religion -- is also an archery word. It means “to take aim.”

So what does this mean? Does it mean that the biblical authors were all macho archery buffs? Possibly. Does it mean that they are using archery as a metaphor for ethical behavior? Probably.

Getting the translation correctly, we understand that Yom Kippur is not about “sin” as we are familiar with it. Rather, it is about reviewing the instances where we “missed the mark” on an ethical choice. This day, set aside from our routine, allows us to review the past, and focus



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on “making the mark” by trying again, aiming better, in the next year.

Yom Kippur’s tradition places us on a metaphorical archery range and calls on us to scrutinize our own array of targets. We see one target upon which we made the bull’s eye. We see another upon which we missed the mark badly. We see those just missed by a small error. And, of course, many – many – upon which we never bothered even taking aim. We notice the scattered punctures and broken projectiles of our actions and thoughts. “Next time,” we say to ourselves, “Next time, we’ll shoot again and make the mark.”

Yom Kippur is straightforward and remarkable. It’s an idea about the possibility of human change, self-improvement, and reconciliation. It’s a Jewish mental health day – collective health as well as personal health – and it is strikingly modern for an ancient ritual.

The world has changed greatly since Yom Kippur’s inclusion into the canon of holidays. Our people are no longer goatherds and olive merchants. Our interpersonal relations are more varied and complex than they used to be in ancient times, and our world is much more complicated now than ever before. So we will need to think particularly hard, and honestly, about this question:

if our world is an archery range, what are our targets? Where has the world missed the mark? Where do we now have to take aim?

Our targets are complicated, but they are right before our eyes: in Tehran, in Mogadishu, in Urumqui, in Oaxaca. They include hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, refugee crises, lack of access to healthcare, and the many and various social dislocations resulting from climate change, war, and politics. Our targets include housing for all, healthcare for all, religious and political freedom for all, literacy for all, gender and sexual equality, and the protection of the human rights of prisoners. We must aim at targets in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, in Camden, in East St. Louis, in Newark. We must take aim at xenophobia, at the lingering legacy of racism. Like the personal targets we carry in our hearts, we must incorporate the world’s targets into our self-reflection so that we may take aim and try again, to better ourselves and better the world.

I realize these are rather large demands coming from someone my age, who graduated from JCSS just a few years ago. And I’ll be honest -- I feel self-conscious making such grandiose statements. But these are the real hopes of my generation. And so while my words may seem a stretch, they are said earnestly and with genuine humility and hope for the world.

Thank you and happy new year.

Daniel Solecki is a JCSS graduate and current member.