

SERMON FOR YOM KIPPUR MORNING (October 4, 2014) by j wallace

IN THE SPIRIT OF THE DAY – YOM KIPPUR 2014

In the spirit of the day, I have a confession. I'm a procrastinator.

If I'm leading a workshop, writing a paper, giving a talk, I often end up creating it, just before I am to facilitate/hand it in/get up on the bema. It's not that I don't think about it ahead of time. I do. Aviva asked me if I would give this talk back in early July, and I've thought about often it since then. I've read, I've researched, and it took until this week for the words to come together.

In the spirit of true confessions, I'm not even a last minute kind of procrastinator, I'm a just after the last minute procrastinator. If it felt remotely appropriate for me to just e-mail this to you tomorrow I would do that, and then I could work on it tonight. I'm sure I would be more brilliant tonight, when I have all of Yom Kippur to reflect on. But, Yom Kippur is a day of finality, of the clock running out, and the book being sealed. The time is now.

I am a well practiced Yom Kippur procrastinator. Every year, we begin Rosh Hashanah with sweetness, and celebration. After Rosh Hashanah I do Tashlich, and I throw my bread upon the water. I make a silent account of my sins and failings, and I think about who I need to ask for forgiveness. Making the list is always sobering. I want to have right relations, and the truth is, I am a mixed bag of flaws and contradictions, and across a year, I have invariably hurt other people.

I have not celebrated their successes enough.

I have not welcomed their advice with generosity.

I have said yes to too many things and not got them all done.

I have had suspicions about the motives of others.

I have allowed my hurts to influence how I have treated others.

I have failed to remember birthdays and anniversaries, and not send good wishes and presents.

I'm going to spare you the specifics, these are the broad strokes, but let me be clear, every year, I am reminded how this season is for me. I am flawed, and this season is my opportunity to make repairs, to ask for forgiveness. Every year I plan to start right away, to beginning the business of challenging and honest phone conversations, and coffee dates and emails. And every year, in this work, I arrive at Yom Kippur unfinished.

We say "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed." but my own Yom Kippur observance involves both the writing and the sealing. In the afternoon of Yom Kippur, after the service, and before Neilah I sit down and take on the most serious of these neglected requests for forgiveness. I know. Writing is not in keeping with the letter of the day, but it seems entirely within the spirit of it, and I'm of the belief the sincerity is more important than technicality. You might disagree, but this is the current arrangement I have worked out with G-d. As I understand it, G-d allows each of us to make our own arrangements.

I write. I think about my actions, my motives, my feelings, and then I move away from me, and I think about the person I am writing to. I think about their feelings, the impact I had. The rule in our house is that it is only an apology if you commit to doing better in the future. Statements like "I'm sorry you felt that way." are not an apology. It's not okay to be sorry that someone else had feelings, you have to be sorry, and commit to changes in your own behaviour. Sometimes the change is a specific action I can commit to in writing ahead of time. Sometimes it's commitment to doing the learning needed to make the change.

Somewhere in the late afternoon, as the day moves towards Neilah, I remember that the gift of procrastination is that it is never too late. You can always do just a little bit more. For Yom Kippur, I try to remember that this means that this contrition, this honest examining, this commitment to do better should not be confined to eight days in the fall. This is something I can keep doing. Something I should keep doing.

And while all this focus is on asking for forgiveness, it feels important to note that forgiveness comes not from the asking, but from the giving. The fresh start is not from the asking, although that's important, it's from the granting. Giving forgiveness is in many ways harder than asking for it. How do we let go of grudges? How do we let go of hurts? What is the space we allow people in our heads and hearts when we don't? What does it mean to open ourselves to being hurt again?

On the topic of forgiveness, I'd like to pause, and ask people to think about, for those of you who are like me, a mixed bag of flaws and contradictions, how do we forgive ourselves. While committing to do better, how do we make room for peace with ourselves? What do you do to acknowledge the past, and make room for a more fabulous future. I'd like to pause, and ask people to take a moment, in gratitude for who each of us are, that we forgive ourselves for something we're still carrying. In all of the confessing of the day, in all of this taking responsibility, all of this contrition, I think it's also important to make room for forgiveness for ourselves. We are imperfect. We will be imperfect, but perfect is the goal, and not actually achievable.

Which brings me to my second theme for Yom Kippur, vulnerability. For me, Yom Kippur is a day of vulnerability, of risk taking, of negotiating both

with G-d and ourselves. And I'd like to take a further step into vulnerability with you.

I'm feeling a little haunted by the UnetanaH Tokef, and in particular by the line about "how many will come to be, who will live and who will die." I'm feeling a little haunted by it as I think about the coming year and my hopes and wishes. When I last spoke at a service, at our pride service in June, I was pregnant. (Shir Libeynu, we're full of all kinds including pregnant guys). Pregnant with life and hope, and thinking about how it would be to welcome a new person into this community. I was pregnant in June, July, August, September and now in October. And astute listeners may now be thinking that for that far along, I am surprisingly exactly the same shape I was in June. I am the same shape I was in June, and I am not that far along. I'm a nine weeks, which feels, in so many ways "just a little" pregnant. When I found myself, unexpectedly, and disappointingly no longer pregnant in July, I wrote about it, and posted it on my blog. I wrote about it because I was already vulnerable, and writing about it allowed me to ask for help. Many people saw the vulnerability in the writing, but the writing was just giving voice to what felt like a great gaping vulnerability that was already there. After I wrote, I was amazed at how many people reached out to me, in love, in compassion, with gentleness to say that they too had had that experience. This hard thing, this ending of a new beginning, this ending of hope and expectation is something a great many people share. Many people stepped into the vulnerability with me, shared their own vulnerability and loss with me, and their acts, individual and collective were immensely helpful to me. I moved from isolation to community. Being vulnerable, and sharing my

vulnerability, allowed me to learn and be cared for by others. If you were one of those people, thank you. Thank you. If you are hearing this now for the first time, thank you for listening now too. I am sorry if recalling my vulnerability has made this day harder for you.

Being pregnant again has me thinking about vulnerability, both emotional and physical. About the vulnerability of hope, the vulnerability of fasting, of bodies, of asking forgiveness. It is making me particularly present today.

I hope, that this year, we are all able to make peace with our vulnerabilities. That we are able to share our vulnerabilities, and reach out to others in their vulnerabilities. I hope that we are able to be vulnerable with each other, and in doing so, take better care of each other. I hope I can meet you in your vulnerabilities, and help sooth them. I hope you can meet me in mine. I hope we are able to ask for forgiveness, from others, from G-d, and from ourselves. I hope that we are able to give and receive forgiveness. I hope that in the coming year, we are all able to do better, give better and receive better.