Tonight marks the beginning of the 10 days of T’shuvah. Each year we run the marathon that is the High Holy Day season. We brace ourselves for hours of prayer and reflection and penitence and fasting. Each year we utter the same prayers, the same words of Torah and Haftarah, participate in the same rituals of fasting and eating, atoning and blowing the shofar. And each year at some point most of us wonder ‘why are we here’? ‘Why does God demand this of us?’ Scholars advise us that even though the rituals, prayers and scriptural readings remain the same, each year we bring something new to this season and something newer still is what we walk away with. Less scholarly observers will opine that we are tortured by the long services and repetitive rituals to make us truly repentant. The truth is, the High Holy Day season – as a commandment from the Holy One and as a demonstration of faith by its participants – is really an act of love.

The High Holy Days liturgy focuses on 2 kinds of forgiveness – the kind we receive from and give to one another, and the kind we seek and receive from God. Tradition teaches, “On Rosh HaShanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed”. If we think about the process of these *Yamei T’shuvah* – the days of repentance – then on Rosh HaShanah we are forgiving and on Yom Kippur we are forgiven.

For some, letting go of slights and grievances seems to be fairly easy. To their credit, they just refuse to hang on to anger and resentment. They allow the slings and arrows of others to slip away like water off a duck’s back. For others, however, every small slight becomes a new grudge to bear until they find themselves consumed with anger and resentment and just cannot bring themselves to forgive. Indeed, that anger and resentment can fester and foment into hatred and the need for revenge. This is why I claim though forgiveness is a very complex thing, it is ultimately an act of love. God demonstrates love for us flawed lowly mortals by giving us the chance for atonement and extending the hand of forgiveness. Similarly, we demonstrate our love for one another when we too, are prepared to make amends with each other and forgive – when we make the conscious choice to not let anger fester into hatred.

This time last year, I shared with you that I was struggling with forgiveness of our neighbours to the south. I’ll admit that events do still happen from time to time that cause me to feel angry and/or frustrated, but those feelings are short-lived. I’ve moved away from anger to sympathy. I know many of our southern neighbours are not happy with the state of affairs in their country, just as we might be unhappy or frustrated about affairs here. The truth of the matter is, no matter how legitimate my feelings might be about circumstances between us and our American cousins, my lack of forgiveness won’t change the situation south of the border, but it could change me, and not for the better. I simply don’t want to live a “me” that is permanently mad at the world or a part of it, so, ultimately I decided to just let it go and direct my emotional energy elsewhere. Now, that seems pretty straightforward. So does fasting, praying and asking God’s forgiveness on Yom Kippur, but as I’ve already noted, forgiveness can be a very complex thing. There are many places where Scripture instructs us to “love your neighbour as yourself”, but what do you do when you don’t love yourself?

I want to share with you a story about one of my former students, whom I shall call “Fred” – that isn’t his real name – but he is a very real and quite extraordinary young man. Fred was a student in my moral philosophy class during this past winter term. We seemed to connect with each other. During the course of the term, he spent several hours in my office engaging me in philosophically complex conversations as he attempted to puzzle out the integration of his newly acquired theoretical moral knowledge with the practical workings of his own life. Just three weeks into the term, having completed a unit on personhood, which included an exploration of the topic of animal welfare, he declared he had decided to become a vegetarian. He made this decision because he wanted his behaviour to be logically consistent with his moral thinking. He felt his genuine concern for the welfare of animals should rationally find expression in his dietary choices. I was a little stunned by this depth of thinking. I don’t always encounter this with my students.

This past spring he was accepted as a philosophy major at another university in Canada and was preparing to leave Vancouver, but wanted to get together with me for tea before leaving. Surprisingly, “forgiveness” was one of the things that Fred wanted to talk about. Like many of my international students, Fred adopted an English name for himself soon after he arrived in Canada as we Canadians often struggle with the pronunciation of foreign names. Fred was not the first name he chose for himself. When he first arrived, he was staying with his devoutly Christian uncle, who had given him a Bible to read, ostensibly to help Fred develop his English. Fred originally chose a name from the Bible, specifically the name of a biblical hero, because he thought that would be a good ideal to live up to. In his early terms as a student at our College – long before he signed up for my moral philosophy class – he wasn’t always the best student. In our conversation in June he shared with me that he felt he had let some of his professors down and one professor in particular came to mind as he and several other students had taken advantage of her generosity of spirit. He expressed sincere regret for his earlier behaviour and hoped that his former teacher would forgive him. He also shared with me that, in the wake of his behaviour in those early semesters, Fred had abandoned that biblical hero’s name because he didn’t feel he was worthy of it. He chose what he felt was a more ordinary name, ‘Fred’, and that his hope is that he will not only be forgiven by his former professor, but will once again be worthy of that biblical hero’s name. I think asking her for forgiveness is admirable, but what became very clear to me in that conversation is the one person Fred is struggling to receive forgiveness from is Fred. I believe this is a struggle that many of us have in common.

When we begin the process of self-examination that is a central part of this season, the rabbis often describe the “sins” we are seeking to atone for as those instances in the past year when we have “missed the mark”, when we failed to live up to the best version of ourselves. Not too surprisingly, perhaps, when we find it difficult to forgive others it is often because we see something in them that we don’t like about ourselves. So, what do we do when we fail to live up to the best that is us, when we let ourselves down by not living up to our own personal vision of who we should be? How do you love your neighbour, when you can’t find it in your heart to love and forgive yourself?

I raise these questions tonight because with the liturgy’s heavy focus on seeking forgiveness from God, on recalling and recounting every kind of transgression that we can possibly commit and begging God to forgive us and take us back, and making all of that contingent on our forgiving others, that we often forget to forgive ourselves. And sometimes, perhaps oftentimes, the greatest stumbling block to repentance and atonement, is being unable to forgive ourselves.

I return to my student, Fred, who is working on being able to reclaim that biblical hero’s name for himself. I look at the student I experienced in my classes, who was very different from the young man he described and was experienced by my colleagues. I experienced a young man determined to become a better man, a student dedicated to accomplishing tasks in a timely manner and making meaningful contributions to the class that benefitted his student colleagues. The young man I came to know is dedicated to conducting himself in a thoughtful way that is considerate of others and not solely focussed on himself. Fred wants to make a difference in the world – he wants to make it a better place for others – and I have no doubt whatsoever that he will do just that. My hope for him is that he retakes that biblical hero’s name sooner, rather than later, because that biblical hero was no less flawed a human being than the young man who insists on calling himself Fred is. In short, Fred needs to forgive himself and give himself permission to be the person he is.

So as we begin these days of repentance, I encourage you to try and make amends with one another – to forgive and ask for forgiveness as our tradition calls us to – but also to remember to forgive yourselves. God is the only perfect being in the universe and even God sometimes gets angry. Even God, in a place or two in Scripture expresses regret and we are not supposed to be like God. We are supposed to strive to become the best version of ourselves. “Become” is an active verb – it is the process of becoming. We are always in that process of becoming. We cannot change what we have done in the past – just as Fred can’t go back in time and change the student he was then – but you can learn from your past, make amends where possible for things you regret and continue to strive to become the best version of yourself. Living a good life, a life that is faithful to the teachings of Torah means always striving to become that next, better version of yourself. That is the best kind of self-love and it is that kind of self-love that opens the door for us to love others.

May this season of t’shuvah be a season filled with love, for God, for your fellows and for yourselves. May we all find the courage and strength within to offer and receive forgiveness so that on Yom Kippur we find ourselves at one with our faith and with God.

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I wish you a sweet and happy New Year and may you be inscribed in the Book of Life for blessing.