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## Return

Unitarian Universalists are very *outré* on the question of *good* and more than a little slack on the question of not-so-good. It's good to be good on good; I wouldn't want my religion any other way. But what about when we're not good, or someone else isn't good, and we're caught in the friendly or unfriendly fire?

We find ourselves this morning at the beginning of the journey of the Days of Awe observed by Jews between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the ten days for clearing the wreckage of the past year and beginning again, in love. My very favorite spiritual practice associated with these awesome days is called *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* means *return*, as in, “stop all your wandering from your best self, and get back on track.” *Teshuvah* is not repentance; it's not about atoning for less-than-admirable behavior. It's about acknowledging that we've made mistakes – which is our lot, as perfectly imperfect human beings – learning from them, and moving forward.

Lori Palatnik, author of *Remember My Soul*, writes, “Everyone makes ...

mistakes. We all know when we stray, rationalize, bend the truth, avoid the effort, and ignore what is really important and meaningful in our lives.”<sup>1</sup> And then what? Well, I'm going to suggest we think of doing unto ourselves as we'd do unto a child in those circumstances. Here's the Unitarian Universalist rendering: Do we want to shame and embarrass the child who's been naughty? Okay, maybe we *want* to shame and embarrass them, but is that the most effective way to correct the behavior? Probably not. Do we want them paralyzed by guilt for their bad behavior? The correct answer is no. We don't want them mired in negativity and self-absorption. We want them happy, and free ... the same way we want to be. The alternative is to help the child – help ourselves – recognize that we've made a mistake, say the nine magic words that can change the world (if you're a longtimer here, you can say them with me!): *I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.* Then we make amends, if appropriate, learn from it, and move on.

Maimonides, the great twelfth century rabbi, laid out a four-step process for *teshuvah*. He said, first, *stop*. If what we're doing is in any way destructive, or unbecoming to our best selves, stand on the brakes. If we feel ourselves losing our temper, make a different choice. And zip it.

Second, Rabbi Maimonides says, *regret*. I know that if the other person or other people are behaving badly, it's really hard not to dive into the fray. My mother used to remind me that my name is not “everyone else,” and neither is

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Palatnik, *Teshuvah: Fixing Mistakes*, at [aish.com/jl/kc/48924947.html](http://aish.com/jl/kc/48924947.html)

yours. We are not everyone else; the fact that everyone else is doing it is not an invitation for us to do it, too. And if we do stoop to that level, it's important that we acknowledge that we went there, of our own volition – no excuses! – and that we're sorry we did.

Stop, regret, and then, third, speak up. We can start by talking to ourselves, and, if we have trusted counsel, or a g\*d, talk with them. Have a good look at how our behavior has harmed ourselves and others. And it will do us a world of good to pull out the nine magic words and mean it (now we can all say them together!): *I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.* For any of you in 12-step programs, I trust this process is sounding familiar. We've just arrived at Step 10; it's all about ending our self-destructive behavior and not taking down our loved ones with us any more.<sup>2</sup> If you're not familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-step recovery programs, I commend you to them: they are a blueprint for living a free and peaceful life.

Finally, fourth, says Rabbi Maimonides, make a plan. I once worked with someone who fought bitterly with her mother every time they were on the phone. Without fail, my co-worker would be awash in day-ruining emotions after their telephone interactions. The plan, then, was that she would make a little sign for her phone. It said, *Don't dial pain.* That's the plan: not to repeat the same mistake, but, instead, to make new ones. It doesn't always work that way, but

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2 Step 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it. See <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/steps.html>

that's the plan for the plan.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, it's simple – simple, but not easy – when we're the ones who are misbehaving. There's a lot more to work with when we're in charge of making the mess we're in. But what about when it's happening to us?

Twenty-eight years ago, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner published a little book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I bought the paperback for five dollars and fifty cents, possibly some of the very best money I ever spent. Rabbi Kushner and his wife, Suzette, had lost their son, Aaron, to a congenital disease, just after his fourteenth birthday. It plunged the young rabbi into both terrible despair and theological turmoil. Somehow – I'm not sure how – although he had a vague notion of what he called “G\*d's justice,” he had made it to adulthood believing that if he was good, bad things would not happen to him.

What compelled me about this book (and still compels me, today) is that it gave me, and gives me, a way to imagine a god – not capital-G G\*d, but what I like to call small-g g\*d, or gods, or goddesses, or goodness; the force of good – it gave me a way to imagine that, which is neither sentimental nor remote. It gave me the idea of light in the darkness, in spite of everything.

Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a young couple whose only child, in her first year at college, died of a brain aneurism. When Rabbi Kushner arrived to

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3 Maimonides' *teshuvah* process is paraphrased from Lori Palatnik, *op cit*

be with them, the first thing they said to him was, “You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur.”<sup>4</sup>

He found himself asking himself, “Who taught them to believe in a god who would strike down an attractive, gifted young woman without warning as punishment for someone else's ritual infraction?”<sup>5</sup> Well, the Bible is full of it, for starters. “No ills befall the righteous,” says Proverbs, “but the wicked are filled with trouble.”<sup>6</sup> The Bible is full of the G\*d who plays sadistic games with His most faithful followers.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, it just isn't true, but what a great way to keep people in line! If you can get them to believe the tidy equation that the all-powerful Big Guy's up there with Santa, keeping a list of who's naughty and nice, and then smoting the not-nice, or, at least, not bringing any presents down the chimney, wouldn't people be eager to try to be good? This is both terrible theology and religion that closely resembles torture. And it's just not how things are.

I don't know why bad things happen. I love best my friend Mike's very Catholic mother's response: *It's a mystery*. I'll go with that, and affirm that it is the exact same answer to the question we might also be asking, “Why do good things happen?”

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4 Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, p. 8

5 *ibid*, p. 9

6 Proverbs 12:21

7 Kushner, *op cit*, p. 25

It may and may not be true, but I'm told that a boy came home from Sunday school having been taught the biblical story of the crossing of the Red Sea. His mother asked him what he had learned in class. "The Israelites got out of Egypt," he said, "but Pharaoh and his army were chasing them. The Israelites got to the Red Sea, but they couldn't cross it. The Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie, and the Israeli air force bombed the Egyptians. Then the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge across the Red Sea, so Moses could cross."

His mother was shocked. "Is that what they told you?" she asked. "Well, no," the boy admitted. "But if I told it to you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it!"<sup>8</sup>

It's a mystery.

So where does prayer come in? Actually, it's another sermon! But I want to say just this: In the Talmud, the compilation of commentary on Jewish law, it is written that we cannot ask in prayer for G\*d to do something that is actually within our power. Theologian Jack Riemer says it this way:

We cannot merely pray ... to end war;  
For [we have already been given the means] ...  
To find [a] path to peace

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 56

Within [ourselves] and with [our neighbors].

We cannot merely pray ... to end starvation;  
For [we] have already [been given] ... the resources  
With which to feed the entire world  
If we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray ... to root out prejudice;  
For [we] have already [been given] ... eyes  
With which to see the good in all [people]  
If we would only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray ... to end despair,  
For [we] have already [been given] the power  
To clear away slums and to [bear] hope  
If we would only use our power justly.

We cannot merely pray ... to end disease;  
For [we] have already [been given] ... great minds  
With which to search out cures and healing,  
If we would only use them constructively.

Therefore, we pray to You, instead, O G\*d,  
For strength, determination, and willpower,  
To *do* instead of just to pray,

To *become* instead of merely to wish.<sup>9</sup>

I share Rabbi Kushner's conclusion that there is no god who causes bad things to happen, or condones evil. If there is a force of goodness in the world, it weeps with us. It is in the minds and hearts and hands of the people who rush in after a crisis, and are there to uphold us. Rabbi Kushner writes, "We can't explain [it] any more than we can explain life.... All we can do is try to rise beyond the question, 'Why did it happen?' and begin to ask the question, 'What do I do now that it has happened.'"<sup>10</sup>

In the language of his tradition, he adds,

We can be angry at what has happened..., without feeling that we are angry at

G\*d ...

or opposed to God....

We can feel that our indignation is G\*d's anger at unfairness working through

us....

We can [view] our instinctive compassion at seeing people suffer as coming from G\*d, who teaches us to be angry at injustice....

[We can know] that when we cry out, we are ... on G\*d's side, and [G\*d] is still on ours."<sup>11</sup>

My spiritual companions, in these Days of Awe, may we, too, seek the

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Riemer, *Likrat, Shabbat*, adapted

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 71

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 45

spirit of *teshuvah*: to return to our best selves, to stop, regret, speak up, and make a plan; to clear away the wreckage of our past, and begin again, in love. Especially, may we find in ourselves the courage and the grace both to say the nine magic words, and to receive those words, when spoken by others: *I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.*

Let us attend together to the brokenness in ourselves and in the world with all that is within our power, amplified and uplifted by the goodness of this beloved community, and throw our weight to the side of love, service, justice, and peace.

*L'Shanah Tovah!* Happy New Year!

Amen.