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“At One”

First Parish in Wayland
September 20, 2026

Rev. Lauren Smith

Sermon: "At One"
Given at the First Parish in Wayland
On September 20, 2026
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In a time riven by conflict, the spiritual tasks of Yom Kippur offer a roadmap to recovery. Atonement and amends. Reflection, repair and forgiveness: these linked practices hold great power to repair the schisms in society and within our spirits.

We are nearing the end of the Days of Awe, the Days of Repentance, the high holy days of the Jewish calendar. Tradition says that on Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the new year, God opens the Book of Life and Death, reviews each person's actions in the previous year, passes judgment, then inscribes their name in the book along with his determination about how their future will unfold.

But there's a loophole. Tradition says those judgments are not sealed until Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The days in between are set apart for reflection, repentance and relational repair. Spiritually, Judaism's high holy days point toward reconciliation and renewal—within each person, between and among people, and with God.

At what did you aim this year?
How did you stumble?
What would it mean to begin again?

There are gifts for us in these holy days, whatever our religious heritage, whether or not we believe in God.

Early this summer, my husband Chris brought home a green cardboard container of perfect plums, which he placed on the top shelf in the refrigerator. They reminded me of one of my favorite poems by William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say."

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving for breakfast.

Forgive me,
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.[1]

I love this poem because it captures the sweet but somewhat mercenary dynamics in my own family around the refrigerator and any especially delicious items it may contain. Lately, we've gotten pretty good at refraining from eating each other's prize leftovers and, unlike the poet, we're even good at a proper apology when the occasion arises. This has taken many years.

Whereas, in the past, the last piece of sweet potato pie might just *disappear* from the refrigerator, despite a sign clearly indicating that it was meant for someone in particular, these days that slice is more likely to remain, slowly becoming slimmer each time someone makes the choice to take just a sliver instead of pilfering the whole thing. That shrinking dessert is testament to our evolving practices of begrudging restraint.

[1] "William Carlos Williams, This is Just to Say," 1938.

The elements of amends are: apology, reparation and a commitment to not repeating the transgression or mistake. And, as in my family, it takes reflection and practice.

What would it mean to begin again?

The first task is reflection.

Consider the questions in this morning's responsive hymn. Does one of the prompts speak to the ways you feel you have stumbled in the past year?

Has fear, at any time, made you rigid or inaccessible?
Have you struck out in anger without just cause, in word or in deed?
Has greed made you insensible to the needs of others?
Have there been times when selfishness has set you apart and alone?
Have you, at any time, fallen short of the admonitions of the spirit?[2]

The first opportunity of the holiday is to reckon with who you have been in the past year and how you have impacted those around you.

Ideally, the spirit of the inquiry is gentle and generous, like the bright sun in the poem Ted shared earlier. "Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole world."[3]

There may well be discomfort in the looking. If you are anything like me, you may sometimes flinch at what you see. The more compassion you can muster for your own imperfect humanity, the easier it will be to sit with who and how you have been in the world. The more understanding you bring to your observations, the more likely you are to move differently in the future. This is tender, risky spiritual work. Essential spiritual housekeeping. To say it plain: beating yourself up is not helpful.

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[2] We Begin Again in Love," from *Singing the Journey.* Words by Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs.
[3] Daniel Landinksy, "The Sun Never Says," in *The Gift: Love Poems from God. Inspired by Hafez.*

I heard a song on the radio that captures the spirit of reflection and presence that pervades the Days of Awe. It's called "Here." It's a kind of litany, with lots of repetition:

> Here's my pride and here's my shame.
> Here's a trophy that bears my name.
> Here's all the mistakes I made, all along.
> Here's the answers I never gave,
> Here's the calls I shoulda made.
> Here's the substance that I craved, all along.[4]

And then, as if the singer is speaking to directly to God on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur:

> Here's my address and the ones I blame
> And while you're sitting here taking names
> I just want to belong.

I imagine the singer as a man nursing a broken heart, taking stock of his life and trying to sort out what it adds up to. Underneath the lyrics, like a low hum, is a longing to belong, to matter to another person, and to feel worthy and be accepted. There is grief, too, the sense that he has lost something he cherished, something he wants to recover.

In 2001, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book called Living a Life That Matters. It begins:

> Like many people, I live in two worlds. Most of the time, I live in the world of work and commerce, eating and paying my bills. It is a world that honors people for being attractive and productive. It reveres winners and scorns losers … [Because] in most contests

[4] "Here," by Mumford and Sons with Chris Stapleton, 2026.

> there are many more losers than winners, most of the citizens of the world spend a lot of time worrying that they don't measure up.

"But fortunately," writes Kushner,

> …there is another world where… I have spent a lot of time. As a religiously committed person, I live in the world of faith, the world of the spirit. Its heroes are models of compassion rather than competition. In that world, you win … by helping your neighbor and sharing with him rather than finding his weakness and defeating him. And in the world of the spirit, there are many more winners than losers.[5]

Kushner shares that when he was young, he devoted most of his energy to the world of competition, the world of getting and spending. He was ambitious and wanted to accomplish great things in the world. He wanted to make his mark. He says, "When I was young, I saw …the world of faith, as a kind of vacation home, a place to which I repaired in order to relax from a world of striving…. At times, [the world of faith] seemed almost a mirror image of my first world, a place where different people played by different rules. Old people were respected for their wisdom and experience, as were old ideas and values. People were described as 'beautiful' because they exuded compassion rather than wealth or glamor. Success had a different meaning there.

Kushner concludes by saying, "Looking back at my life, I realize I was commuting between these two worlds in an effort to meet two basic human needs, the need to feel successful and important and the need to think of myself as a good person, someone who deserved the approval of other good people."

One man, two worlds, two needs.

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[5] Harold Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters,* 2001.

Many of us, like the young Harold Kushner, are subject to the same twin hungers: the need to be important in the world, to leave an imprint, and the need to believe we are good people. The gift, the opportunity—especially in times of reflection—is to integrate those two aspects of our humanity. So that two becomes one.

One more story from Rabbi Kushner: He wrote a book called "How Good Do You Have to Be." Its message was that God doesn't expect perfection and that each of us is loved unconditionally just as we are. The book expressed the same sentiment as Mary Oliver's beloved poem "Wild Geese, a favorite in Unitarian Universalist congregations. You may know it:

> You do not have to be good.
> You do not have to walk on your knees
> for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
> You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves
>
> …
>
> Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
> the world offers itself to your imagination
> Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
> over and over announcing your place
> in the family of things.[6]

Rabbi Kushner traveled the country doing book readings, sharing his message about unconditional divine love. But he encountered something interesting as he interacted with audiences. Most people appreciated his affirming message that they were loved as-is, despite their flaws and failings. But there were always some who wanted to hear that they were loved because they had earned it. They had worked hard to be good people, and they wanted to know their efforts and accomplishments mattered.

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[6] Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese" in *Dream Work*, 1986.

Kushner shares this story in a chapter called “The Two Voices of God” in his book “Living a Life That Matters.” His premise is that God speaks in two voices—the voice of unconditional love and the voice of judgment. He believes—and I believe—we need both to thrive. We need to know that we are worthy of love, despite our flaws and the mistakes we have made in live, large and small. But we also need accompaniment in our aspirations to be better people and to become more skillful in our relationships with other people. We need people and practices that keep us honest when we have missed the mark. We need support as we change and grow. And most of us appreciate recognition when we manage to succeed, when we eye that slice of sweet potato pie with longing in our hearts and shut the refrigerator door, knowing it belongs to someone else.

Two voices of God, two essential pathways to wholeness and integrity.

Unitarian Universalism has long affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That means, in plain language, no one is disposable. No one is garbage. Sometimes when we look at the ways we have failed, shame arises or even feelings of worthlessness. Most of us—dare I say all of us?—have experienced this at one time or another, and it can be excruciating.

I once heard someone describe guilt as a bad feeling a person has about something they have done, whereas shame is a bad feeling a person has about who they are. Shame is largely unhelpful. It is rigid and brittle and tends toward defensiveness. If it arises in you, treat it very carefully.

Know that, though it may sit close to a lesson you would benefit from learning, *shame, itself, is an unrepentant liar about who you are and what you’re worth*.

Learning to meet shame with compassion, learning to set it aside, can position us to wrestle more fruitfully with ways of being and doing that we would like to shift.

After taking stock, the next step is to make amends: to apologize, perhaps, to ask or offer forgiveness, to take concrete steps to repair harm. Like Zizi, the giant bird in this morning's story, who gathers a basket of vegetables from her garden to bring to the children whose garden he has inadvertently smashed, prepared to say the hardest word: I'm sorry.

The elements of amends are: apology, reparation, and a commitment to not repeating the mistake.

Our reflections and amends include our private and public selves.

I feel implicated by the first line of the hymn we sang earlier, "For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference."

My cousin Louis Torres died in Afghanistan in 2012. He was killed by an improvised explosive device (an i.e.d.) in Kandahar Province. I never met my cousin Louis, but I grew up with his mother, my cousin Amy. After he died, I tucked a photo of him inside the pulpit of the church I served, so I would never forget what's at stake in our shared work for justice and peace. This year and every year, I ask myself: Have I done enough? Has my ministry been sufficiently accountable to Louis and the many innocent people impacted by war? How have I used my voice help prevent violence and war, and to mitigate its worst atrocities? In Iran, in Gaza, in Ukraine. I am only one, but still I am one.

My colleague in Unitarian Universalist ministry, the Rev. Bill Schulz was Executive Director of Amnesty International from 1994 to 2006. I heard him preach a sermon called "What Torture Has Taught Me," just as his time at Amnesty was ending. He alluded to a personal struggle, albeit with far greater experience in the fray. He wrote:

> For the past twelve years, this question has haunted me: Is what I say about the world around us, about the nature of God and humanity, about the dynamics of human relations—is what I preach to people sufficient to encompass a world where [the brutality I have witnessed] exists?"[7]

At what have we aimed, as a community of faith?
Where have we stumbled?
What would it mean to begin again?

I look forward to exploring these questions with you in the coming months and years, growing and learning together, making our mark on the world.

Forgiving ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

And that might just make all the difference.

May it be so.

Amen

[7] Bill Shulz, "What Torture Has Taught Me," 2005.