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I was chatting with a friend this week, and with the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur around the corner, the subject of forgiveness came up. I shared with her the remarkable experience of suddenly finding a newfound ease with a particularly painful and difficult relationship, a conflict that had affected our shared community. "I'm not sure how it happened exactly," I said, "but I know there was some sort of grace involved."

As my friend expressed her happiness for the change with my difficult relationship, she added jokingly: "I'm Southern," she said, "We're so proud of our grudges, with us it's almost an art form." We laughed together as we talked about those unresolved resentments we carried with us, petty and significant. New Englanders, I've heard it said, don't hold grudges, we just never forget. Perhaps the difference is the feeling tone of Southern and Northern grudges... I think of the phrase used so often in the South, a syrupy sweet reference to a difficult person, often in their company: "well bless her heart"... meanwhile New Englanders have perfected a different art of icy distance and shunning. It's no coincidence that the Handmaids Tale is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts! Home of the scarlet letter, and the original Puritan shun. So how exactly do Californians hold their grudges? I guess I'm still learning this... but I'm more than aware that you do too!!

Our story this morning reminds us, that we can hold our grudges with a kind of pride until our backs are bent with carrying the heavy with the load of our burdens. I certainly know this pride well myself, and maybe you do too... the pride that comes with not wanting to admit you were wrong, not wanting to hear the other side or sides of the story, the pride of holding the higher ground and keeping your distance. The pride in protecting our hearts, not wanting to show we are hurt or vulnerable, not wanting to admit our part in the conflict. There can be a kind of shielded comfort in an "us" and "them," a "right" and a "wrong."

At this time of year, the practice of forgiveness takes the center stage in Judaism as the high holidays concluded last night. The high holidays are rich with forgiveness rituals, encouraging the observant to confess their wrongdoings over the past year, to actively forgive those whom they have harmed and grant forgiveness to those who have done harm. A window of time opens when calcified conflicts have the potential to soften, and then closes again with the end of the holidays.

At the core of this forgiveness ritual is the high holidays theme of *teshuvah*, a call for each person return to right relationship, with themselves, with one another and with God. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that God has a wish for creation to be reconciled and at ease with one another.

The word for this wish for this state of coexistence is known as *shalom*, a word many of us recognize simply as "peace." *Shalom*, however, is more than this, it is the deepest and most expansive sense of wellbeing and wholeness we can imagine, the absence of war, yes, but also, the active reconciliation and healing amongst those who have been estranged, from feuding relatives to warring nation states. Since Judaism doesn't conform to the idea of heaven or a time to come, *shalom* is to be aspired to on this earth. The high holidays practice of *teshuvah*, or return to right relationship, gives humankind a chance every year to move just a little bit closer to God's wish for *shalom*.

Of course, the Yom Kippur intention to forgive doesn't always go as planned.

Sarah Schulman is an activist, playwright and author of the recent book *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility and the Duty of Repair*. Born of years of experience political communities dedicated to social change, her book rests on her idealistic hope that these communities could be models of

right relationships amongst their members. However, her experience has proved otherwise. Sarah has been bullied, called out, shunned, and ostracized by other activists. Through writing the book, she discovered she shared this experience with countless others involved in similar justice centered communities.

Well one year, Sarah decided to take Yom Kippur practices seriously and contact someone who had participated in group bullying against her. Here is her story:

She writes:

Many people I know who had moved away from this clique had warned me that group punishment was notoriously their cultural mode. As a result of regular disagreement about our understandings of a situation, some people who did not know how to discuss differences acted out by doing some grotesquely mean things. When I tried to discuss it with them, they refused to talk to me. This made it impossible for us to find an alternative.

Finally, Yom Kippur came, and I wrote to each person, saying that I apologized for my part. My friend Stephen, the boyfriend of one of the clique members, was skeptical. "They should be apologizing to you," he said. But I know they had no self-reflexivity, so I took the initiating step. Now, none of these people had been brought up Jewish and so perhaps they didn't get the Day of Atonement thing. But, behaving as a group instead of as individuals, they assigned one representative to respond. Her basic argument was that since I had apologized, that meant that I was confessing I had been wrong. And since only one person can be wrong, that meant they were right. So instead of my gesture serving to open the door, it was used as confirmation of their unilateral Supremacy.

I answered her (by email, because part of their group bullying tactic was the refusal to speak) that generally Yom Kippur is a collective experience. And that my history with it showed that people usually responded to apologies with "Thank you" or said nothing, or also apologized for their part. Usually, Yom Kippur is not used to deepen the accusation. She wrote back: "Never contact us again." The concept of mutuality was unbearable.

Sarah's yearning for reconciliation came from a sense of her religious commitment to seek forgiveness, and her deep belief that accountability, healing, and reconciliation should be possible in communities that share values and work together for a better world. Ironically, the group's refusal to engage or apologize expressed the opposite values. Entrenched in their own points of view, political communities like the one she engaged often circle their wagons to protect and maintain a set of beliefs, polarizing right and wrong often to the exclusion of other viewpoints.

Like my friend remarked about her Southern family, communities can perfected grudge holding as an art form. Liberal and radical communities are by no means excluded and use the same tactics as conservative groups. I suspect that many of us who have been involved in political movements, or even in our own or other religious communities, can attest to the hurtful dynamics of group bullying, shaming and exclusion that often go uncontested.

Many of us know painful it can be to be targeted and shunned by a community you have trusted, believed in and whose ideals you have worked to advance. Shulman quotes historian John Boswell in saying "Being treated as a non-person may be the most crushing kind of oppression that there is."

In 2013, Scientific American featured an article showcasing research about the psychological benefits of both forgiving and not forgiving. The research is particularly relevant to group dynamics at play in communities like Sarah's. The author, Professor Cindy May, addresses the power dynamics people consciously or subconsciously engage in withholding an apology and refusing to forgive. She writes:

No one wants to admit to being a hypocrite. Inherent in an apology is the admission that one's behavior failed to align with personal values and morals, as people generally don't apologize for actions they believe are right and just. Thus when we admit that we are wrong, we expose the fact that we may talk the talk, but we do not walk the walk. By refusing to apologize, we deny any incongruity between belief and action, thus preserving a sense of authenticity and self-worth.

Without recognizing how these dynamics are at play in our communities, we are failing to address an aspect of toxic human behavior which has the potential to escalate into the kind of tribalism, supremacy and extremism we claim to condemn. Without checking our community's need to be right and preserve our own interest at all cost, even the most well intentioned and values-centered communities are at the risk of acting out. In doing so, we behave as if justice is completely unrelated to our relationships.

In fact, our relationships are the foundation of how we understand justice to be enacted on the most intimate and personal levels. Our faith defines community by our relationships and our interconnections—we covenant with one another by promising to respect and be enriched by our differences, honoring one another's inherent worth and dignity. One of our Unitarian forebears Francis David was known for saying "we need not think alike to love alike." Just as in the Jewish tradition, as Unitarian Universalists we too aspire to "right relationship"—in our most intimate partnerships and family relationships, with one another here in our religious community and with larger community of neighbors, locally and globally. In the book *Practicing Right Relationship* by Mary Sellon and Dan Smith, the authors define the phrase this way:

By right relationship we don't mean "right and wrong." "Right" relationships are characterized by honor, respect, love, and care. Right relationships are creative, mutual, and generative; life-giving things are birthed.

If the mutuality of right relationship is what we strive for, we know we must be aware of the way toxic ways groups and communities can behave. Shunning, punishing and discarding those who disagree or transgress us without a consistent commitment to restoring relationship betrays our covenant with one another. Removing a person from the community can rupture not only the individual spirit, but the spirit of the community. It also mirrors our nation's punitive system of justice, where offending individuals are removed from the community and housed within the bloated prison and jail system, even condemned to death.

Our liberal faith has a view of human nature that is inherently good- we believe in "original blessing" and not "original sin." Over the past 10 years, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Reverend Mpho Tutu have traveled the globe in what they call "the Forgiveness project." They have listened to the most horrific stories of violence—tribal hatred, neighbor turned against neighbor. And yet still, Archbishop Tutu affirms the same truth that we proclaim:

Our nature is goodness. Yes, we do much that is bad, but our essential nature is good. If it were not, then we would not be shocked and dismayed when we harm one another. Forgiveness is the way that we return what has been taken from us and restore the love and kindness that has been lost.

As architect and chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa, in the face of the horrific crimes of apartheid, Tutu has become a global advocate for restorative justice practices. He writes:

An offence has caused a breach in relationship and the purpose of the penal process is to heal the breach, to restore good relationships and to redress the balance. Restorative justice is singularly hopeful. It does not believe that an offence necessarily denies the perpetrator completely as when we imply that once a thief then always a thief.

When we are betrayed or transgressed, what is stolen from us is our sense of trust in the fundamental goodness of others. We dehumanize the other as they have dehumanized us, not realizing we have sacrificed

our most sacred and deeply held belief along the way. If we fall into believing “once a thief, then always a thief,” we lose the opportunity to pursue the kind of right relationship for which our hearts yearn.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don't have the benefit of a common ritual of forgiveness to turn to every year. Instead, many of us may forge our own individual paths to explore the choice to forgive or seek forgiveness. Lacking a common ritual of forgiveness, we benefit from the freedom to forgive and the choice not to. But without spiritual reminder to forgive, we can fall prey to letting our resentments and conflicts fester to the point of no resolution. We risk carrying our grudges with us from generation to generation, their burdens growing heavier and heavier on our backs by the year.

Forgiveness is a collective enterprise, not one that should be done alone. Today, may we set the intention for our relationships to bring us fulfillment, joy and meaning. May we set the intention for this place be a home for all who seek, more than a building but a place to heal, a place to find sanctuary, a place to learn to forgive. May the community we create today be re-covenanted together, honoring the worth and dignity of every person.

Shalom Havayrim. Peace, friends. May we begin again in love.