

Forgiveness Again and Again

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Deuteronomy 29:9-15; Leviticus 16:29-34; Matthew 18:21-22

September 24, 2023

“I’m not alone, I’m not alone. I forgot, for a minute, who I belong to: the mama earth, the wind and rain, the beauty and the pain. I’m not alone. For me the world was created. I’m not alone. To dust I will return.”

These are lyrics to a song called “I’m Not Alone” by Aly Halpert, a Jewish educator and folksy singer-songwriter based in Philadelphia. Aly’s “about section” on her website reads, “Aly writes songs for building community, working for collective liberation, and visioning different worlds.... Her songs support those moving through grief, praying for change, and connecting with the divine.” I first heard about Aly Halpert in a class called Music and Ritual during my last semester at Harvard Divinity School. For the past year (plus), her music has been an important way for me to connect with the divine, with my inner self, and, actually, with others. You see, the divinity school/seminary world is *small*—if you’ve attended in the past couple of years, chances are you recognize the name Aly Halpert and have listened to at least one of her songs.

Her best-known song is called “Loosen.” It goes like this:

“Loosen, loosen, baby. You don’t have to carry the weight of the world in your shoulders and bones. Let go, let go, let go. Holy breath and holy name, will you ease, will you ease this pain?”

While I was reading and preparing for this sermon, this sermon inspired by the Jewish Days of Awe (or, High Holidays), I listened to Aly’s first full-length album, *Loosen*, on repeat. “We are beautiful people, even though our hearts are broken.” “I was made to be here, all the life inside of me.” “Another world’s not only possible—on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” I find her lyrics stirring and captivating. To me, they reflect the complicated experience of being human. Many of us question our belonging in our families and communities and, even, our relationship with God. We carry personal grief, grief passed down to us generationally from our

families, and the grief of collective change, loss, and powerlessness. But, we also hold the magnificent, dazzling, bright potential of connection and joy within and around us. We return *again and again* to places and people that make us feel like fuller versions of ourselves. We return *again and again* to wholeness, even when we carry grief, sorrow, and the knowledge that everything we know and love is fleeting.

Our service today falls on the ninth day of awe in the Jewish calendar. The Days of Awe, or High Holidays, take place in Tishri, the seventh month in the Jewish lunar calendar. The Days of Awe stretch from Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year, to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, totalling a ten-day period of prayer, self-examination, and repentance. This year, Rosh HaShanah fell on September 15. Today, September 24, we are one day away from the final Day of Awe, Yom Kippur. We are a day away from the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. In observance, millions of people around the world will follow rituals of abstinence, fasting, sabbath observance, worship, and prayer. Tonight, millions will observe Kol Nidre, or the “All Vows,” a prayer recited on the eve of Yom Kippur. The website ReformJudaism.org describes Kol Nidre as “the special liturgical formulation chanted solely on Yom Kippur, during the evening service at the beginning of the holiday. It is a legal formula for the annulment of vows, which dates back many centuries. The practice of reciting Kol Nidre probably began in about the 9th century C.E. Recited in a mix of Hebrew and Aramaic, the vernacular language of the time, Kol Nidre cancels and annuls all unintended vows made to God during the previous year.” Kol Nidre ushers in the theme of this holiest of all days: atonement and the “opportunity to envision what our lives and our communities could be like if we each become a little more caring with each passing year” (ReformJudaism.org 2023).

The Days of Awe are more than just confession. They’re a sacred time of contemplation, reimagination, and commitment. Indeed, it is often said the High Holidays are a time for *t’shuvah* (ReformJudaism.org 2023). Commonly understood to mean “repentance,” the literal meaning of

t'shuvah is "return" (ReformJudaism.org 2023). *T'shuvah* reminds believers there is always the potential of connection, divinity, joy, and holiness.

The two Hebrew Bible texts we heard today, Deuteronomy 29 and Leviticus 16, are commonly read during Yom Kippur observances. Deuteronomy reminds us of God's covenantal promise to God's children, all who live now in this present moment, all our collective ancestors who stood on this earth before us, and all the generations who will come after us. Leviticus describes Yom Kippur: "This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the Israelites once in the year for all their sins" (Lev. 16:34). Isn't it cool that millions upon millions of people have observed the same ritual on the same lunar day for over five-thousand years? And it's recorded, right here, from Moses to today, in our sacred text?

And then, in the New Testament, the Greek Bible, we hear Jesus living out his message in Matthew 5 not to abolish the laws but to fulfill them. Matthew 18 reads, "21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Forgive *seventy-seven times*. Forgiveness is at the core of Christ's ministry of love. And, of course, we know this. For many of us, forgiveness is one of the earliest acts of compassion we learn in Sunday School. And, yet, it's still *hard*. Isn't it?

I'm not sure what's harder for me: forgiving someone who has hurt or wronged me or asking for forgiveness. They're both uncomfortable. Just thinking of the act of forgiving, I'm feeling tense, like I want to pull away, retreat into my body, and protect myself. When I'm asking for forgiveness, I feel more expansive. I want to draw near to the person I want to forgive me and show that I'm ready to make amends, and I'm ready for them to let me in. Think, for a moment: what does it feel like to you when you ask for or provide forgiveness? [Silence] Sometimes, I feel like forgiveness is a never-ending act. That can be a tiring thought. Maybe Jesus also felt this way, and that's why he said we need to forgive the same person seventy-seven times. Maybe it takes seventy-seven times of *trying* to forgive before we've

actually forgiven them. Or maybe, we can count on seventy-seven times that a human being will act like, well, a human being and make mistakes that stress or hurt us.

The word “atonement,” as it is, actually emerged later than I had expected in our English language. Instances of “atonement” emerged in the early 16th century, denoting unity or reconciliation, especially between God and a human being, an individual. It means “at one”-ment, influenced by the medieval Latin for “unity.” Atonement is, then, the process of two entities becoming “at one.” In biblical Hebrew, the word translated as “atonement” comes from the root verb “kaphar” (כָּפַר), meaning “to cover, cover over, purge, make an atonement, make reconciliation” (Sefaria.org 2023). We have the English definition telling us that atonement means becoming “at one,” and we have the biblical Hebrew interpretation telling us that atonement shares the root with “covering over.”

At first, these facts were puzzling to me. What does covering have anything to do with forgiveness and reconciliation? Then, I started imagining the materials we use to cover us up, keep us warm, provide protection, and unite us in safety and comfort. I started imagining Band-Aids, fur coats, duvets, quilts, tents, tarps, roofs, canopies, parasols, umbrellas, chuppas—all of the things human beings have engineered to tell us, *you are safe, you are protected, you are not alone, you are home*. What if we could imagine forgiveness this way—as a protective covering inviting us to sit together, heal our wounds together, and seek comfort and safety and warmth together? What if we could imagine God’s loving arms around us, building a home over us, and telling us, *you are safe, you are protected, you are not alone, you are home?*

“I’m not alone, I’m not alone. I forgot, for a minute, who I belong to: the mama earth, the wind and rain, the beauty and the pain. I’m not alone. For me the world was created. I’m not alone. To dust I will return.” We are never alone in our pain. We are never alone in our journey to forgiving and being forgiven. Atonement is bigger than that: it calls us to build our coverings together again and again and again, seven-fold, and seventy-seven-fold. Amen.