

“Making Amends: What Does it Matter?”
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Tonight marks the beginning of the Jewish high holy days: Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, begins at sundown, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, begins the evening of the 11th. For Jews, Yom Kippur is the most solemn day of the year, yet there’s an undertone of joy, too. The joyful part is knowing that God will accept the people’s repentance, forgive their sins, and seal their verdicts for a year of life, health and happiness.

Unitarian Universalists often acknowledge this time of the year as an opportunity to reflect on one of the themes of Yom Kippur, such as forgiveness or atonement. For us, atonement is not a word that we use often. Yet the concept, I think, is an important one. To me, the phrase, “making amends,” is a little more accessible. To think of amending as changing for the better.

We’re all human, and so we all make mistakes. We’ve probably all done some things in the past that we’re not proud of. But the past is past, right? What’s done is done, we might say to ourselves. Why should those past wrongs have any effect on our lives now? Why should we put energy into trying to atone for, to make amends for, something that might have happened years ago?

In her book, [The Secret of the Shadow](#), Debbie Ford uses her own life experience and the experiences of people she later counsels to demonstrate how in fact, usually those wrongs we’ve committed, even small ones, affect the way we feel about ourselves at some level. Even the ones that happened long ago.

She tells the story of one of her clients, Jordan. (Read pp 141-144)

In the book, Ford suggests actions we can take to heal from our pasts. One of those suggestions is to make a list of all the people we’ve hurt in some way and then to make amends for those wrongs we’ve committed. When I read the book about 15 years ago, I decided to do it.

I was one of those rebellious teenagers, and so my list started there with things like writing and drawing pictures in a couple of school books, lying to my parents about where I was going, stealing a bandana from a store. I wrote to my school and apologized for defacing the books and included a check to cover the damage. I got a nice letter back from the school. I apologized to my parents for lying to them when I was a teenager. On my to-do list is to write to the Chamber of Commerce in the town where the shop had been, because I don't remember what store it was; I will apologize and include a check for them to use in whatever way seemed appropriate. There was a friend whom I had treated unkindly; she had moved out of the area years ago. I located her and was able to contact her and apologize. With every amend I made, I felt guilt I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW I HAD lift from somewhere inside me. ...

Admitting to ourselves on paper the things we've done that have hurt others, and then making amends for the harm we've caused can be a powerful experience. By clearing up the past, we can look in the mirror and say, "Yes, I AM a good person," and not feel like a fraud, as I used to. We can live a life of integrity that feels authentic.

If we look for the metaphors in the Yom Kippur story, we can think of the idea of having our names written in God's book as representing our being in "right relationship" with the Spirit, with the universe. By righting the past wrongs that keep us feeling a little unworthy, we move into a sense of that "right relationship." We can feel more open and connected with that which is larger than ourselves, however we may define it.

This morning, I'd like to offer you all a chance to start your own list. The exercise is optional of course. If you prefer, you can simply sit and reflect on what you've heard this morning. It's not necessarily an easy exercise. And this list is only for you. You can take it home and work on it further if you want to. (Instructions p. 150, no. 1)

And as we talked about earlier, with making apologies, we can ask for forgiveness, but the other person may or may not forgive us. We can't control that. But we also want to remember that the process of making amends is for us: we are doing it for the integrity of our characters. Or, to "rebalance the karmic scales," as Ford

puts it. Making amends is a gift we give ourselves. May we give this gift courageously, and receive it graciously.