

## ARTICLE OF FAITH

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## Days of Awe: Turning to do good

*By Dr. Joel L. Kushner*

Jews around the world are currently celebrating a ten day period called the High Holy Days, the Days of Awe, which starts with Rosh HaShanah, the New Year, and builds to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Our tradition tells us that on Rosh HaShanah, God opens the Book of Life, reviews our page, and decides whether or not we shall be inscribed again for the next year. The liturgy instructs us on three actions by which we might sway God's hand as God decides about our living or dying.

- *T'shuvah* (turning away) from the thoughtless and cruel actions of our sins;
- *T'fillah* (prayer) with God and soul searching within ourselves;
- *Tzedakah* (good deeds)

One of the most intense prayers in the liturgy speaks about who will live and who will die in the coming year, those that will live their full span of years and those that will have that span cut short. As I read it this year, my mind went to a recent email that I received. It asked community members if anyone knew about a recent increase in transgender murders. My mind stretched. Had I heard anything about the violent death of a transgender person in the news? I wasn't sure. I moved on to the next email.

During the Days of Awe services, there is a confessional prayer, the *Al Cheyt*, (literally "Missing the Mark" but translated as "For the sin"), that we repeat again and again. Each verse starts with, "**For the sins we have committed against you by,**" followed by a specific sin and ends with asking God for forgiveness. We say the prayers as one community and share the responsibility for those sins.

Sitting in services, I thought again about the email about the murder of transgender people in my community. I had ignored it as I thought, "Too much on my plate and I don't really know anything about that. There are lots of people on that email list, someone will respond." God did inspire someone to research the question, get information and report back but I had chosen inaction.

- *For the sins we have committed against you by not running to do good...*

But wait, as an editor of *Kulanu*, a newly published book on LGBT inclusion for the Reform Movement of Judaism, I had invited a rabbi and a rabbinical student to submit several pieces related to transgender Jews. For me, this material was essential because transgender Jews had not been represented ten years before when the first version of the book was published. The Reform Movement had advanced and it was now time to be fully LGBT inclusive. The submissions included a piece to help us understand why transgender inclusion is important, a guide to making one's community inclusive to transgender people, a workshop and finally, liturgical blessings on the occasion(s) of transitioning genders. Sitting in the prayer service, I thought, "Shouldn't I be proud of this? Won't I get a big plus on my page in the Book of Life for ensuring those pieces were published in *Kulanu*?"

- *For the sins we have committed against you by false pride...*

The blessings on transitioning gender in *Kulanu* have been featured in news stories around the world. When the articles came out, I read online response comments filled with hate speech of violence and ignorance. Referring to the author of the blessings, one commenter wrote, "If I remember correctly, gays were to be taken out and stoned. Those rabbis should receive the same punishment." The words of that powerful prayer I read every year came back to me — "*who shall die and who shall live*" — this time; strangers were actually talking about killing people I knew.

- *For the sins we have committed against you by advocating hate and violence...*

In another comment, an anonymous Reform rabbi spoke about the blessings as a loud, hysterical fad and likened them to "the joke of performing a bris (circumcision) on a dog for a rich donor." As a representative of the Reform Movement working at its Seminary, I thought "we have failed that rabbi in not adequately communicating the teachings of the Reform movement and its views on inclusion". As the person responsible for including those blessings in *Kulanu*, I felt strongly that I should reply to those comments, defend the existence of the blessings and explain why transgender inclusion is so important. A voice in my head asked if that would really help. A month has gone by and writing a response has been on my list but I have still not written those replies.

God did inspire a journalist to write about Trans inclusion and speak with [Rabbi Susan Talve](#) who reminded us that "We are made *b'tzelem elohim*. If we are made in God's image, we are all made in God's image. And what the Torah is trying to teach us to do is to honor our nature: to be who we are." Thank God for these people who spoke up and responded to the voices of hate when I did not.

- *For the sins we have committed against you of silence and indifference...*

- *For the sins we have committed against you by turning a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed...*

When the Task Force sent out a request to send a letter supporting the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), legislation which had been stalled for so long because of the inclusion of gender identity in the bill's language, I thought, "Great. ENDA is finally coming for a vote. We might actually extend basic rights like protection from discrimination in the workplace to transgender people and the rest of us, but I'm too busy to write a letter. There are others who will submit letters. That will be enough."

- *And for the sins of turning our backs on or participating in the oppression of lesbians, gays and bisexuals and transgender people...*

Driving through Hollywood with my 8 year old son and his friend, I heard my son say, "Look at the 'he-she'" and the other boy replied in kind. What did I say? I did tell them that using that language is hurtful so they should not do it. But, no, I did not take the time to really explain in an age appropriate manner about transgender people, though I believe that you can teach the youngest children about the diversity

of human beings.

- *For the sins of not seeing the spark of divinity within each person we encounter...*
- *And for the sins of being passive recipients of negativity or listening and allowing others to spread hurtful stories...*

[Rabbi Michael Lerner](#) reminds us of areas in our lives where we have missed the mark, areas that connect to our spirit and to our social consciousness. I have found that they fit only too well the challenges of my too busy modern life.

- *For the sins of dulling our outrage at the continuation of poverty, oppression, and violence in this world...*
- *For the sins of feeling so powerless when we hear about oppressions that we finally close our ears...*

The *Al Cheyt* list goes on but I think that I have shared enough of my sins. I have started my *t'shuvah*, turning from sin to make amends and my *t'fillah*, my prayers for these Days of Awe but there is the third aspect that affects my fate in the Book of Life. *Tzedakah* is often translated as "charity" but I take the Liberty Hill Foundation's motto to heart — *Change, not Charity*. I try to do *tzedakah* and social justice work all year long but it pays to have a strong finish when it comes down to being inscribed in the Book of Life.

For my end of the year *tzedakah*, I will:

- go to the [Task Force Action Center for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act \(ENDA\)](#) and send a letter to my Senator and Representative;
- make a financial donation to support the Task Forces' lobbying work;
- help shape a soul by sitting down with my son and explaining to him about the divinity in every person, regardless of how they look, and how we celebrate the process of becoming who we are meant to be as we grow up.

In the coming year, I can not allow feelings of powerlessness and the dulling of my outrage to stop me from taking positive action to fight oppression. I want to be able to thank God for inspiring fellow activists in their work and for inspiring me to take action.

Sitting in our prayer service, we sang, "How good and pleasant for brethren to dwell in harmony (*Hinei ma tov uma na'im*).” Yet I know that my brethren and sisteren and otheren are not all dwelling in harmony; are not all safe on the streets or in our homes if we have them; that we do not all have equal protection under the law. Until we all do, none of us can say that we truly dwell in harmony.

In sharing my heart's reflections at this time of year, I hope that even if this is not your New Year or Day of Repentance, that you too will search your heart and your actions, consider those you have missed the mark with and make amends to them to the best of your ability. There is still time for turning to do good deeds and making Change.

- *For all these sins, o God of Mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement*
- *For only with repentance (t'shuvah), prayer (t'fillah) and change (tzedakah), can the hand of God be swayed to inscribe us once again in the Book of Life for another year*

*L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu* — May you be inscribed (in the Book of Life) for a good year.

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The National Religious Leadership Roundtable (NRLR), convened by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is an interfaith network of leaders from pro-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) faith, spiritual and religious organizations. We work in partnership with other groups to promote understanding of and respect for LGBT people within society at large and in communities of faith. We promote understanding and respect within LGBT communities for a variety of faith paths and for religious liberty, and to achieve commonly held goals that promote equality, spirituality and justice.

The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the political power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community from the ground up. We do this by training activists, organizing broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and by building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement's premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., we also have offices in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis and Cambridge. The Task Force is a 501(c)(3) corporation incorporated in Washington, D.C. Contributions to the Task Force are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law. (C) 2007 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force . 1325 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005. Phone 202.393.5177. Fax 202.393.2241. TTY 202.393.2284. [theTaskForce@theTaskForce.org](mailto:theTaskForce@theTaskForce.org).