

Sermon:
Sunday, September 20, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

This evening begins the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It concludes the Days of Awe that began with the new year celebration, Rosh Ha'Shanah, last weekend. On Yom Kippur, observant Jews fast from sunset to sunset, and they take a moral inventory of their lives. They go to anyone they have wronged in the past year and ask their forgiveness. In synagogue, the Kol Nidre prayer, or "All Vows," is sung. At tomorrow night's sundown, morally prepared for what is to come, the High Holy Days are over and a new year has truly begun.

The Kol Nidre is an interesting prayer. It basically asks God to let the petitioner off the hook for any promises or vows they may make in the coming year. If that were true, there would be nothing to atone for come next Yom Kippur! So where did this prayer come from?

Imagine you are a Jew living in the river port of Seville, in southern Spain, in 1391. Your family has lived there for generations, and you may know that Spain is home to one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe. Your family lived in Seville when southern Spain was called Al-

Andalus, and was under Muslim rule. But now, in the late 14th century, the Christians have retaken this port town. The Jews were welcomed by the Muslim caliphate, but the Christians are less hospitable. Your neighbors are the same people they've always been—Muslim, Christian and Jewish, each living in their own neighborhoods. Yet you have heard rumors that the Christian armies are coming, and they will not be so understanding.

On June 4, 1391, the Christian army reached Seville. The Spanish-Jewish philosopher Hasdai Crescas wrote about what happened next in a letter to the Jewish communities in Avignon. In this letter he writes that the army gave the Jewish families of Seville a terrible choice: convert or die. He writes, "The majority...changed their faith. Many of them, children as well as women, were sold to the Muslims, so that the streets occupied by Jews have become empty. Many of them, sanctifying the Holy Name, endured death, but many also broke the holy Covenant." When given this terrible choice, some Jews chose death, but some chose to convert to Catholic Christianity. Even this was not always enough. The Church became so concerned about these so-called "New Christians" that it invented the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal to inquire—with violence if necessary—into the strength of converts' Catholic faith.

So what do you think, imagining yourself to be a Jew faced with that terrible choice to convert or die? I can admire the steadfastness of those who chose death. But I can also understand the decision of those who chose to convert. If you were God, judging those converts on the day of reckoning, how seriously would you take their vow of conversion? How binding should such a promise be?

Judaism affirms a God who treasures human life and never wants the law to stand in the way of human health and life. Even the fast on Yom Kippur: if you're sick, and need to eat, not only are you excused from the fast—you're not allowed to fast, because taking care of your body and your health is more important than fasting. So some scholars think that the traditional Yom Kippur prayer called "Kol Nidre" or "All Vows," was developed during the time of the Conversos and the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. We heard it this morning: "...all the vows we will make not long from now,/ All the promises we will make,/ All the unspoken oaths we will declare,/ Are hereby cancelled, annulled, voided and made unbinding." Scholars think this may have come from those sword-point conversions. "I might have to swear to something wrong, God," the prayer says. "Be merciful. See me. Don't make me choose between You and life."

The Kol Nidre speaks to these sacred vows between people and God. But where else in our lives do we see sacred oaths that should not be kept? Where else do people have a choice between keeping their promise and keeping their life? We see it when intimate relationships turn abusive, and the abused person faces the choice to leave.

I'll go on to talk about those facing abuse as women and those abusing as men. This doesn't cover all the realities, of course. Abuse can happen in queer relationships, and trans people are especially vulnerable to intimate partner abuse. Women can harm their male partners. The research is muddy: what counts as abuse? But when we look at serious bodily harm, sexual assault, and death, men are almost always the perpetrators, and their partners, usually women, are the victims. For instance, half of all American women who are killed by a person are killed by an intimate partner. In this sermon I will mostly use "he" for an abuser and "she" for a victim. This language tells an important story even if it doesn't tell the whole story.

In our faith, we support the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This means we support people when they need to leave abusive relationships. Even in marriage, even when the partners have made a vow

before their loved ones and God to stay together, abuse nullifies that vow. It's one of those vows in the Kol Nidre that we might ask God to hold for us. When I marry people, I end by saying, "Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder." That sentence should come with an asterisk: do rend the marriage asunder if one partner is using intimacy to hurt the other. Think of all the other vows the partners make to each other in the wedding ceremony. In standard language, they promise to "love and cherish" each other. If one partner is controlling, entitled, dishonest, disrespectful, possessive or manipulative, that is not love or cherishing. If these behaviors become physical violence, that is the opposite of love. An abuser is already nullifying his wedding vows with his actions. His partner is free to seek her own safety by leaving.

All marriages have their ups and downs. Some of the hard times can partake of entitlement, dishonesty or control. Imagine a partner who thinks it's their right to watch the game on Sunday afternoons, regardless of the needs of the household. Or a spouse who overspends and then lies to their partner about the state of the household finances. These behaviors corrode a marriage. And we learn how to be married by watching our parents. If something was normal when you were growing up, you may think it's

normal now, and be surprised by your spouse's objections. This is task of growth in adulthood: respecting others and ourselves and learning together how to build a life.

In a healthy relationship, the two partners listen to each other. They are loving and humble before the vow of their marriage and their love for one another. So when one says to the other, "I need to figure out how we can take care of the household, even when the game is on," or "I need honesty about our spending habits so we can build a life together," they listen and work together toward a solution. And even if the conversation sounds more like, "I need your help!" "The game is on!" and there are hurt feelings on the way to reconciliation, a healthy marriage can move through these difficulties to a better partnership. If there is a foundation of respect and mutuality—more important, in my opinion, than the rainbows and butterflies of love—people in long-term partnerships can face challenges together.

In a dangerous relationship, these moments of entitlement or dishonesty don't lead to productive conflict. They lead instead to an escalation of manipulation, control, and even violence. When a wife confronts her husband about his spending habits, he calls her too stupid to

understand what's really going on. He raises his voice. He mocks her and tells her that if she wasn't so lazy, they'd have more money. He goes out the next day to buy something they can't afford. He breaks objects in their home or hits her. He makes her afraid, and she feels like she has nowhere to go.

If you are in a situation like this, if you are being abused like this, I want you to prioritize your own safety and leave if you can. Begin to make a plan for how you can at least take a break from your relationship, or leave outright. Save money in a separate account. Ask for help—in your order of service is a 24 hour hotline run by the YWCA that can help you on the phone or via chat. (There's also guidance there to help a friend or loved one who is being abused.) Enlist a trusted friend to help you build a network of safety around yourself. You can talk to me. You have my permission as your pastor to leave a marriage or committed partnership that is abusive. And if you can't leave, I hope you will create whatever space for well-being and safety that you can within your marriage. You know what is best for you. I believe in a God who wants you to stay alive and flourish as a person.

What if you recognized yourself or someone you know in the role of the abuser? Lundy Bancroft, who has worked with male abusers in Massachusetts for decades, and whose book informs this sermon and is also referenced in your order of service, has advice for those of us who want abusers to change. After all, as Unitarian Universalists we believe that everyone has some good in them, and that moral growth is possible for all of us. But Bancroft's advice is stark: an abuser will only change if he decides that he wants to change. He will have to give up his entitlement, control, and power over his partner and any future partners. He has to want to. Bancroft runs programs for abusive men, most of whom are court-ordered to be in them. He says that only the men who voluntarily sign up for his programs are successful in making change. He advises partners of abusive men to use outside resources like the YWCA, law enforcement, and restraining orders to protect their own safety. If you know an abuser, especially if you're a man, you can appeal to his moral center and invite him to change. You can refuse his narrative of victimhood and entitlement. You can help him see, as Lundy puts it, that the first steps toward right relationship are to admit fully what he has done, stop making excuses, stop blaming her in any way, and begin to make amends.

That sounds like it's right in line with our values as Unitarian Universalists, right? And if you're being abused by someone you have loved, you may feel bad in your own heart that you are not inviting them on their moral path. But I want to say this very clearly: It is not the abused person's job to change their abuser. It was not the Conversos' job to change the Inquisition. It is not the abused person's responsibility to change their abuser. Only he can change himself. Your life is yours, it does not belong to him. I hope you can get to safety and pursue your own healing, with help from the community and the police if necessary. Your responsibility is not his moral growth but your own. I want you to believe in your own value, your own capacity for goodness and your own moral growth.

All of us, whatever our circumstances, have an inherent capacity for goodness and a responsibility to our own moral growth. In theistic language, this is how God sees you and what God wants from you. In humanistic language, this is the source of your inherent worth and dignity as a person. This is why God lets us off the hook of unjust vows. This is why our lives matter more than the fast. The God we honor, the source of your inherent worth and dignity, this is steadfast. The love and grounding

there is unwavering. It never belittles, never berates, never disrespects, never lies. It is always present and always a source of compassion. It calls us to our better selves. Some theologians say that God is the one who always keeps promises. There is a source of truth and ultimacy that sees us and holds us and never lets us go.

This source of well-being and compassionate regard wants your safety, your life, and your well-being. If you need to make amends, it will be there with you even when that process is painful. If you need to get to safety, it will accompany you every step of the way. Our God is a God of justice and compassion. As we heard in the prayer:

We are free...to engage life with
tenderness and understanding and outpourings of kindness.

We are free...to continue to be generous to each other, to
ourselves, and to the common good.

At the start of the new year, we begin again in love.

I love you all. Amen.