

**Yom Kippur Afternoon**  
**September 28, 2009 ~ 10 Tishrei 5770**  
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In these difficult passages we read about pogroms and holocausts, martyrs and victims that challenge our belief in a benevolent God. We are reminded of the silence which allowed these events to occur, but finally we acknowledge rebirth, redemption and rebuilding. How does this relate to my life?

Some of you may know that for the past 35 years I have been writing, speaking, and organizing in the Jewish community around issues of alcoholism, addiction and sexual and domestic violence. My work grew out of my own experience when I reached out for help when I realized that my husband was an alcoholic. I followed Dear Abby's advice and went to my rabbi for help; he assured me that Jews don't have drinking problems. Next I turned to a social worker at Jewish Family Service, then to a yeshiva trained psychologist and finally to my parents. Each of them agreed that Jews don't have drinking problems so if I would figure out what I was doing wrong his drinking would stop. It was all my fault. I was immersed in shame. I felt that I had lost all control over my life and my world. It took me many years before I could bring myself to seek help again, this time in a support program for families of alcoholics.

At my very first meeting at St. Peters by the Sea Presbyterian Church I learned that I did not cause my husband's drinking. It was not my fault. My relief knew no bounds; I was eager to participate fully in this group to save my sanity. However, in order to do so I needed to follow the protocol which begins by asking one to acknowledge belief in a higher power. I went back to my rabbi, who assured me that Jews do not believe in a higher power. Today I wonder if he ever read or accepted the liturgy we have been immersed in these last few days and weeks.

I was forced to think about my belief in God, and struggled with my own confused theology. As a Jew growing up during precarious times, I was raised to believe in the importance of vigilance and control. We clearly could not trust God to do so. If I accepted the existence of God, I would have to accept my own limitations. I finally understood that I did not have the power to control the behavior of those around me, only my own actions. I had to let go of trying to maintain total control over everyone and everything in my life. I had to allow others the freedom of their own choices and actions.

Another important step in the program is one which we are all working on here today: that is to take an inventory of my own behavior, go to those whom I had wronged to ask for their forgiveness and make atonement for what I had done to them. I had been so busy blaming my husband for everything that was wrong in our family that I had not looked at myself and seen that while his drinking was out of control, I had no patience and was taking out my anger on my children by screaming, hitting and throwing things at them. Although I was speaking out about domestic violence in our community, I did not recognize that my own behavior was a form of child abuse. I excused myself because I understood the source of my actions. I didn't think about the impact on 5 little children of their mother's hysteria. My adult children were grown and scattered across the country when I recognized the truth of our early life together. During the

month of Elul for several years I wrote or spoke to each of them about my remorse for my actions. I reached out to them to ask their forgiveness for the years when they needed support and comfort from their parents, and instead had a father who was a drunk and a mother who was a witch. I didn't make excuses or shift blame. I took full responsibility and asked their forgiveness. In turn I heard their responses and their troublesome memories. It was difficult and painful to relive those events.

I am fortunate that my children forgave me. Our family has grown closer as years have passed because we work constantly at maintaining honesty with each other. We learned not to play "Let's Pretend," to confront problems as they arise and not avoid or put them off. We remind each other often of our love and caring. Every morning when I arise I thank God for the miracle of creation. In my work I continue to combat the silence in the Jewish community by educating professionals so that others who come for help will not be told, "It must be your fault. Jews don't do that." My children are attentive and affectionate, but when they go to sleep at night and dream of "mother" I don't know who that mother is.