

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

What can we learn about repentance following Yom Kippur?

By Douglas Kindschi

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Last week, I wrote about the coinciding of the Jewish and Muslim New Years, which does not happen very often since the two traditions take different approaches to coordinating the lunar year with the solar year.

This week, Muslims celebrate Ashura while, for the Jews, it is the most important High Holy Day of Yom Kippur. It is considered the most solemn of the Holy Days, marked by fasting, prayer and atonement for one's sins. It is the call for repentance and change.

Repentance and change is a theme common to many of our religious traditions.

Former Chief Rabbi of Great



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Britain, Jonathan Sacks, has said God's greatest gift to us is the ability to change.

He asks, "Where did Western civilization get the idea that people can change? It is not an obvious idea. Many great cultures have simply not thought in these terms. The Greeks, for instance, believed we are what we are, and we cannot change what we are. They believed character is destiny and the character itself is something we are born with."

Stories of change, however, are to be found throughout the Abrahamic religions.

The story of Jonah in Hebrew Scripture tells of the warning to the city of Nineveh that it will be destroyed, yet, because of repentance, the city is spared.

The prophet Ezekiel cries out, "Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations"

(Ezekiel 14:6).

In this same prophetic tradition we read in the first book of the Christian Testament about John the Baptist, who came preaching repentance in the wilderness of Judea. In the next chapter, when Jesus hears of John's imprisonment he picks up the theme, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:1).

No wonder these two Jewish figures would sound the repentance theme.

PARABLES IN A NEW LIGHT

In what is perhaps the best-known of Jesus' parables, the prodigal son asks for his inheritance and leaves his family, only to realize he must repent, change his ways and seek to return to his waiting father.

This parable, along with the other parables of Jesus, will be presented in a new light by a

Jewish professor who teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt University's Divinity School.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine is the University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies with appointments in both the Divinity School and College of Arts and Sciences. Her lectures on understanding Jesus in his Jewish context correct false stereotypes and brings new meaning to his teachings.

We will have the privilege of hearing her soon, when the Kaufman Interfaith Institute presents the annual Interfaith Consortium Conference at Calvin College on Nov. 1. This year's theme is "Understanding Jesus Means Understanding Judaism."

Levine's many books include "The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus" and the edited collection, "The Historical Jesus in Context." She is the co-author

of "The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us" and co-editor of the Jewish Annotated New Testament. Her most recent book is "Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi."

Her 1 p.m. talk is on the "Parables of Jesus" and will be followed by breakout sessions, as well as a panel discussion that includes scholars from all three traditions reflecting on the place of Jesus in his first-century context. The 7 p.m. lecture is on "Jesus in his Jewish Context."

Registration and more information for this free conference is at interfaithunderstanding.org with the opportunity to sign up for optional lunch and dinner meals.

Join us for new insights and learning from our various religious traditions.

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