

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

A Christian perspective on the Jewish Yom Kippur

By Douglas Kindschi

Director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at GVSU

Last week, Rabbi Michael Schadick wrote about Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and the first of the High Holy Days.

Nine days later comes a day of fasting rather than feasting. Yom Kippur means Day of Atonement and is the time to reflect, pray, repent and seek to change.

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi in Great Britain, in a recent blog suggests it is the time we ask the deep questions: Who are we? How shall we live?

Such acts of repentance assume that we can, in fact,



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change. Sacks 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 that we are what we are, and we cannot change what we are. They believed that 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). Likewise, the prophet Joel calls out, "Rend your hearts, and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).

In this same prophetic tradition, we read in the first book of the Christian New 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. In similar fashion, the apostle Peter preached repentance, as did Paul.

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

We have the power to change our ways. It is this ability to make a decision, to decide to act differently, that is critical to the concept of repentance. Even today, there are those who argue our character and actions are completely determined by our genes, by our DNA. They say choice and free will are just illusions. Our religious traditions, however, remind us we have the opportunity to choose, to repent, to live a better life.

In this season of Yom Kippur, no matter what our religious tradition, let us take time to examine our lives, repent and act in ways we know to be right.

Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu