

Repentance for what we have done, and not done



Douglas Kindschi
Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

Last week on the first page of the Grand Rapids Press Religion section there was a story from the Washington Post titled, "Rabbis look far and wide for examples of repentance." It reported on the rabbis' difficulty in finding examples of public figures who acknowledge mistakes and failures made. The story quoted Rabbi Shira Stutman: "To have political leaders in this day and age, leaders of all sorts who are so proud of being unrepentant in any way, shape or form only adds to the problem."

The rabbis also report difficulty in finding examples of repentance from famous men who lost their jobs for sexual misconduct. They focus on themselves, not the victims, and rarely do they make efforts to apologize or make amends. The tendency to cover up rather than repent is all too prevalent.

The issue is not only repentance at the individual level but also institutions that have sinned and too often cover up rather than repent and seek atonement.

Recent reports of the horrendous abuse over decades by Catholic priests involving hundreds of victims are shocking, but just as disturbing are the persistent efforts to cover up the abuses. Protestant evangelicals are not immune either, as the problems with the founder and senior pastor of the famous Willow Creek Church, Bill Hybels, have become known. Again, it is not only the abuses but the institutional efforts to cover up and dismiss the seriousness of the behaviors.

The Washington Post story also discussed the need for countries to atone. Rabbi Daniel Zemel, of Temple Micah, in Washington, D.C., called for countries to repent for their national sins, and even pointed to Germany as a country that made reparations for the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Franklin Roosevelt refused their entry. They also were refused entry to Canada. Rev. Killmer writes, "The situation deteriorated as Schroeder negotiated and schemed to find them safe haven in Europe. At one point, he formulated a plan to wreck the ship on the British coast to force the passengers to be taken in as refugees. He refused to return the ship to Germany until all the passengers had been given entry to some other country. ... The ship returned to Europe, docking at Antwerp, Belgium, on June 17, 1939, with 907 passengers."

Rev. Killmer continues, "The following year, after the Nazis invaded Belgium, France and the Netherlands in May 1940, all the Jews in those countries were placed at greatly increased risk, including the recent refugees. It has been estimated that of the original refugees, 227 people were murdered by the Nazis."

Certainly, Germany needed to atone for its terrible acts of commission during this tragic period, but other countries also need to atone for what they did not do. Our faith traditions all point to what we call "sins of omission," those times when we have failed to do the right thing. The Torah is very specific:

"You shall not watch your neighbor's ox or sheep straying away and ignore them; you shall take them back to their owner. If the owner does not reside near you or you do not know who the owner is, you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall remain with you until the owner claims it; then you shall return it. You shall do the same with a neighbor's donkey; you shall do the same with a neighbor's garment; and you shall do the same with anything else that your neighbor loses and you find. You

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Rabbi Zemel said his message during this period of repentance culminating with Yom Kippur this week is, "The Jewish message in this moment is now's the time to stick to our resolve more than anything else. If Judaism teaches us anything, it's what to love and what to fight against to the very, very end." Referring to the words of the High Holy Day liturgy he said, "Today, we are going to strengthen our resolve. ... Today enlarge us. Make us feel a sense of the holiness of what it will mean to be a civic-minded, passionately ethical American who's standing up for what's right."

Repentance also may be needed for the failure to do the right thing. A recently opinion piece in the Bangor Daily News by retired Presbyterian minister, Richard Killmer, compared the current ban on certain religious minorities from entering our country to the incident in 1939 when Jewish refugees aboard the ocean liner SS St. Louis from Germany sought asylum from the Nazis. The captain, Gustav Schroeder, "a German who wasn't Jewish, went to great lengths to ensure his passengers were treated with dignity and to protect them from the Nazis."

While they had visas to enter Cuba, they were denied, so they then headed to Florida hoping to enter the United States. President

may not withhold your help." (Deuteronomy 22:1-3)

In the Christian Scriptures, the Apostle Paul confesses that he does not do the good he wants (Romans 7:19), and the Book of James clearly states, "Anyone then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin." (James 4:17) The Book of Common Prayer used by many denominations states, "We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. ... We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us."

It is not only what we have done, but what we have not done that requires repentance. Let us also recall the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

During this High Holy time of the Yom Kippur, let us all join in seeking repentance for the wrong we have done, but also for the good that we have not done. This applies to us as individuals, as well as the sins of omission done by our country and our institutions.