“Indebtedness, duty and profound concern”

I’ve always found one thing about the High Holydays particularly puzzling. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are, without question, the most introspective of any of the Jewish holidays. The work we are supposed to do is in the first-person: I have to be thinking about my life this year, about what I’ve done wrong and how I can improve myself, about whether I will have a new chapter in the book of my life. These are things I can do alone; in fact, if I could be sure about my ability not to be distracted or tempted by other things around my house, I might find it more productive to do it at homes. And yet, in normal years, the synagogue is packed for the High Holydays. We have more people here to pray now than at any other time of year. My Christian colleagues are often surprised and perhaps amused when I tell them that synagogues usually build their buildings to accommodate the High Holyday crowd, but usually include a moveable back wall so the sanctuary won’t look empty the rest of the year. The point is that for the important spiritual work which feels as though we would solitude, we surround ourselves with the biggest crowds of the year! So why is that?

One answer is that it is a holdover from the way we used to celebrate these holidays. In Temple times, the people were not expected to do any spiritual work at Yom Kippur; they were just spectators to the event that took place in Jerusalem. It was the high priest who ceremonially placed all of the sins of the people on a goat and then drove it out into the wilderness – the original scapegoat. All the people had to do to assure that all of Israel would be forgiven was make sure the goat never came back; they likely drove it over a cliff. After the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis kept the communal, gathering together aspect of the Holydays, even as they made individuals responsible for their own atonement.

Here’s a different answer: We’ve discussed in years past that while the work we have to do is mostly singular – “I” – the language of the prayerbook is mostly “we.” It’s we, say the rabbis, because it’s easier to admit something about ourselves to ourselves when other people are saying it aloud as well. Or, it’s just in case I’ve forgotten something I did wrong, and need my memory jogged.

Perhaps. This morning I’d like to suggest a different answer, one I hadn’t thought of before, and which came to mind after reading an article in the Times magazine section two weeks ago. You may have read it. In the magazine it was called, “The Ceremony.” Online it’s titled, ‘A Sadness I Can’t Carry: The Story of the Drum.” If you haven’t read it, I strongly recommend it. It is a beautifully written piece by David Treuer, who is an Ojibwe Indian from Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. He’s also the author of “The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present.”

The article is largely about healing from loss and pain, and it centers around what is called the Ojibwe Big Drum ceremony, or simply “The drum.” It is, he says, “a large, loud, social healing ceremony that takes place in dance halls designated specifically for that purpose in communities mostly in Minnesota and Wisconsin, throughout the year. … Big Drum exists to heal people from physical, psychological and social pain and grief. Outsiders are welcomed there. I’m not sure why. It could be that, like the first Big Drum brought by the Dakota, the whole thing is meant to heal communities and close the distance between them.

**The drum was not always an Ojibwe tradition. It came about in an unusual way which is the source of its power. Treuer writes: “Around 1750, a large**Ojibwe war party armed with French guns and powder attacked a Dakota village at Mille Lacs Lake. They slaughtered Dakota in the open and dumped bags of powder down the smoke holes in the Dakota lodges, burning women and children alive. The Dakota fled down the Rum River and spread out to the west and south into the plains. The loss of their forest homelands was deeply felt and often remembered. In the decades that followed, the Dakota and my tribe lived together and in tension: We found a strange way to not get along. We intermarried and traded and lived with Dakota near our borders and fought with and destroyed and were destroyed by Dakota farther away.

“Roughly 100 years after the war party’s attack, a Dakota entourage arrived in Mille Lacs bearing a ceremonial gift for the Ojibwe who had conquered them, a shocking kind of grace in the face of grief and loss. They were received and feasted, and the Dakota presented a drum and a ceremony to the assembled Ojibwe. They were told that the ceremony was one of peace meant to forever close the wound of our mutual bloodletting.

“The Ojibwe were instructed to pick, or ‘seat,’ people for different positions in the ceremonial society. They were told that every member who was seated should be someone who had killed a Dakota person in close warfare, people who had “touched blood.” They were also told that as the years passed and the ceremony spread to other communities, they would run out of people who had killed a Dakota and could then seat people who had killed other enemies. Eventually, if they stuck to the ceremony and its message of peace, they would run out of people who had killed anyone at all.”

The ceremony is still going on, some 170 years later. As far as I know, none of the Ojibwe have recently killed a Dakota. But Native Americans serve in the military at a much higher rate than other Americans, and now many of the drummers are veterans who saw service in Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan. As Treuer says, “…serving in a war, killing even if by proxy, seeing death, being responsible for it, all of that changes a person.”

He continues with a sentence that I find just fascinating. He writes: “My father was changed twice, once as a Jew during the Holocaust when others were trying to kill him, and again only a few short years later when he served in the Philippines and Okinawa, his force intent on killing other people.”

I don’t know why I was astonished to learn that his father was Jewish. I guess it’s just not the kind of intermarriage I’ve ever encountered. I’ve since discovered that Robert Treuer was from Austria, and he met Treuer’s mother when he was teaching high school on her reservation. I have no idea if there was any Judaism at all in David’s life; he doesn’t mention it, though the fact that his father was an Austrian Jewish refuge from the Holocaust is part of the bio on his website, so it has some level of importance to him. I’ve just sent him an e-mail asking about it, because in his article he goes on to say specifically that the story of the drum is not a story of atonement. “Culturally speaking,” he writes, “we don’t do atonement. Even the word feels strange on my tongue, an unfamiliar Christian flavor.”

I hope he responds to my email, because, despite his Jewish genes, I think he is using the word “atonement” differently than Jews do. I think that the way he describes the purpose of the Big Drum ceremony is an answer to the question I began with: “why is this holiday communal?”

He writes that, according to the veterans he has spoken to, “…when the Dakota brought us the drum, a feeling of indebtedness and duty and profound concern displaced darker habits: of revenge, self-satisfaction, victimhood, self-righteousness, violence and reliance on the myth of our own innocence.”

“Indebtedness, duty and profound concern” – these are some of the feelings that the communal Ojibwe ceremony is meant to inspire. I think these are precisely feelings that should come us when we gather during the Days of Awe. Yes, the work we need to do on ourselves is introspective, is personal, is ‘I,” and not, ‘we.’ But the reason we need to do the work is almost completely communal. Sins against God – that’s between you and God. And, by the way, God can handle our sins. But almost all of the other failings, the overwhelming majority of the wrongs we commit each year, are against other human beings – and unlike God, many of them are deeply affected by our mistakes. I believe we come together at the Days of Awe to remind ourselves, at least in part, of what David Treuer says are the values of the Big Drum:

Indebtedness. We sit here surrounded by our community and we are reminded how much we owe other people for what we have accomplished in our lives, and indeed, for what we are able to do every day. Each one of us is part of many, often overlapping and interconnected communities. When we come here to think about our lives, we are reminded how much we owe to each of these communities for the quality of our lives. The High Holydays tell us that we, all of us, are debtors. In large part it is a debt that cannot be paid back, but it can be paid forward.

Duty. We have, as you already know, a duty to apologize for and, if possible, to fix the wrongs we have done. This includes the wrongs we have done to ourselves to be sure, but also to all the people in our lives, whatever the level of relationship. We may very well have that duty to people sitting around us at services, which would be reason enough to gather at this time. And, we also have a duty to the community. Not everything that we do wrong impacts the community directly. Perhaps most of our misdeeds do not. But we have a duty to tend to all the ties that bind us together, because all of our one-to-one bonds are ultimately what tie our community, even our society together. We are obligated to repair our damaged or broken connections with others because the fabric of the community ultimately depends on the strength of those connections.

Profound Concern. One of the ways we know that there is someone to whom we must apologize is that uncomfortable feeling we get when we’ve done something wrong. You could call it your conscience, or guilt, but whatever we name it, we tend to feel that way when we care about what we’ve done, and whom we’ve hurt by doing it. That is a sense of concern. It goes beyond duty, which is a sense of obligation, something you might fulfill even if you don’t care. Having a sense of profound concern for someone says that you are invested in the relationship, that it is important to you, beyond a feeling of obligation. This generally comes naturally in one-to-one relationships, but I believe that, of the three values Treuer lists, it may be the most difficult to reach when it comes to community. And so perhaps this is why we do a large part of our atoning together: to help us not only recognize our indebtedness and our duty to the community, but to help us realize the depth of our relationship with it. This past year and a half we have had COVID to teach us yet again how important our community is to us, how much we miss our community when it is not available, and how profoundly concerned we are that we keep it strong and viable. God willing, the pandemic will ease, and the physical distancing of the past year and a half will fade into memory. But we know that the lessons of national tragedies, as powerful as they are, also fade away. The High Holydays however come each year to remind us, teach us, goad us not just to remember the lessons, but to incorporate them in our lives.

So, why are the High Holydays, the most introspective of our holidays, also the best-attended? They are an opportunity for us to sit surrounded by loved ones, by friends, by acquaintances and by strangers and remember each year that, as Harry Goldin said, “life is with people.” We remember that we are each a member of a larger whole, a community to which we are indebted, to which we have a duty, and for whose health and continuity we each share a profound concern. May our prayers, our introspection, our caring and our concern move us to action on behalf of ourselves and our community. May our atonement reach the Most High, and may we enter the gates of repentance together.