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What me, worry? What do I have to repent about?!

In the fall of 1970, in graduate school, I met two guys whose influences I still feel in my life. No, this is not a Bill and Hillary story, but the point is that many of us encounter the guiding principles of our lives when we're young and impressionable. The place where I met these guys was Brandeis University, the department was Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, and the professor teaching me about their messages was a renowned biblical scholar. The guys I'm referring to are the 8th century BCE biblical prophets Amos and Hosea, and I see now that studying what they said helped to form my character and some life-long values. Simply put, they urged people to know that God demands that we do "right" in this life.

But first – I got used to clarifying what would be going on in my classroom at the beginning of the first session. So you could leave now if you stumbled in here by mistake or if this isn't what you really want to think about. Come back in a few minutes with your hair re-combed, your bladder emptied, or your lipstick refreshed. *What did she just say?!* To be fair, what I just said is probably mean and nasty enough to be a quote from Amos or Hosea. These two pulled no punches in telling people what they were doing wrong and why God was disgusted with their actions.

Hosea was the guy who said (chapter 6, verse 6), "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*" The trappings aren't important, as much as God may like the smell of good barbecue. Amos put it much more strongly (Chapter 5, verse 21), "*I hate, I despise your religious festivals; I cannot stand your solemn assemblies.*" Oh dear, so much for our pretty clothes and pot-luck get-togethers. What did these guys want?

It's simple. They say that God asks humankind to act with justice and mercy throughout life. These are two basic values, elaborated in 10 commandments, later evolved into 613 ways and means. Acknowledge God and make that your priority. When and how you pound your chest, or bend your knees during prayers, the things that other members of

the congregation may observe that you're doing, are not really important. The sincerity with which you look into your heart and reflect on your actions is what really counts. I think that this is what is basic to the Jewish idea of repentance. And how do you measure up on the justice-and-mercy scale in your life? The prophets urge us to think about the essentials, to not just recite the words of prayers, to follow a formula.

But who is watching? Who is judging? Who cares? This gets to why I was at Brandeis in the first place – I wanted to write my dissertation about “The Idea of God.”

Eventually I realized that my interest was directed more towards a psychological perspective, rather than a historical and linguistic understanding, and admitted (blush, oops) that I was in the wrong department to pursue the question in the ways I wanted. See, I've always wanted to understand this idea about *what is god*. Why do people want to believe in god? Who is the judging force we pay lip service to today? Do we really believe that these prayers will get us off the hook in case there is some omnipotent force? Or is the point of knowing what god is to inspire us to be better people? Thus, in biblical Judaism, the prophets urged people to act correctly, guided by God's teachings. For me, the spark of god in me is what I believe to be the impetus for me wanting to be a good person in this life. There, it's out, my guiding principle. I want to be a good person, and yet I know that I often fail.

So now comes an even more personal part. Some of you know that I have a form of blood cancer. I've felt impelled to do a life review a bit earlier than developmental psychology would say comes naturally. The *Al Chayt* prayer, our communal Confession of Sins, is a great jumping-off point for a life review.

So what comes up for me as I think through the *Al Chayt* prayer? And to answer my opening question, well, yes, there are reasons why I want to, and need to, repent. And maybe even worry.

See, I may slander someone in my thoughts, or through my stubbornness to believe that I'm “more” right. I may be insincere due to my desire to be liked. I may excuse myself for the angry things I say, justifying myself, thinking it's not my fault, that it's probably just a chemical-induced rage coursing through my system due to cancer treatment. I may have no energy or motivation to do anything, let alone a *mitzvah*, and then I can blame that on the drugs I'm taking. I might bemoan the fact that I didn't eat enough

broccoli, and even work that into the pattern of not having to take responsibility for even the simplest things. This might easily become my style of thinking.

Oy. My father's religious beliefs would not condone me standing on the *bimah* and saying sarcastic and cynical things. But maybe the guys I met in graduate school, my old friends Amos and Hosea would be OK with it. I'm glad I've learned Jewish values to measure myself against. I think Judaism wants to inspire us to continually take our prophets' words to heart, and to measure ourselves against noble ideals and values that the god-force gives us.

Yes, I want to live my life based in justice, mercy, and compassion. I want to be honest with myself whenever I'm not acting in accord with what I believe is right, through some cues from the *Al Chayt* prayer. I want to examine my thoughts and actions and take responsibility for them. So this is my idea of God: being inspired to use my intellect, emotions, memory, and conscience to guide me to sincere repentance and thus, to live the way the god-force wants me to – hopefully, consciously, being a good person.