

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Newspaper Columns

The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian
Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly
Excellence and Professor of Law

10-11-2022

There's a secular need for the High Holy Days. This is why

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-newspaper-columns>



Part of the [Constitutional Law Commons](#), [Law and Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Law and Politics Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2022). There's a secular need for the High Holy Days. This is why. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-newspaper-columns/59>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly Excellence and Professor of Law at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Newspaper Columns by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact beharyr@duq.edu.

There's a secular need for the High Holy Days. This is why | Bruce Ledewitz

Bruce Ledewitz

by Bruce Ledewitz, Pennsylvania Capital-Star October 11, 2022

In 2009, the humanist thinker Greg Epstein wrote an influential book about secular people entitled *Good Without God*. The book was a response to the angry, anti-religion triumphalism of Chris Hitchens and the other New Atheists.

Epstein described an attractive model of non-belief—tolerant, loving and moral—open to the wisdom of the religious traditions but living without a God.

He assured everyone that non-believers could be just as good as participants in organized religion.

Epstein's spirit of openness is more difficult to sustain today because of political polarization over religion. Nevertheless, the optimistic Epstein model of big-tent secularism sympathetic to the religious traditions continues today in efforts like Krista Tippett's On Being Project, which last week sent its followers an email with the heading, "Just Be Your-self" (the program described was considerably more nuanced than that).

The problem with this happy picture is that human beings are not good, certainly not most of the time, whether we are religious or not.

Human beings are violent, hateful, selfish, petty, dishonest and short-sighted. Each one of us, all the time. We also do good things, of course. But our religions are actually focused not on our accomplishments, but on our failings.

Christianity is the clearest example of this. Its entire point is the reconciliation of fallen humanity with God through the revelation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

Every religion I know has a story and practices to deal with human weakness. These religions are a kind of technology of forgiveness.

[Only you can prevent amendment abuse | Bruce Ledewitz](#)

Judaism's approach to our failings—"sin crouching at your door" in the words of Genesis 4:7 — is primarily an elaborate set of rituals known colloquially as the High Holy Days and more formally as the Days of Awe.

In the classic Jewish tradition, the last month of the old year, Elul, which comes at the end of the summer, is spent in self-reflection and attempted reconciliation with those persons we have wronged or with whom we have fallen out during the year.

Then the new year celebration, Rosh Hashanah, ushers a 10-day period in which this self-reflection intensifies, culminating on Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, remembrance and repentance. At the end of Yom Kippur, according to the traditional teaching, God decides each person's fate for the coming year.

Yom Kippur, like all the Jewish calendar, began at sundown, this year on Oct. 4, with a hushed and somber service called Kol Nidre in which all the unsuccessful promises we made in the past year are annulled and we are permitted to begin again. The congregation dresses in white, symbolic of white shrouds of death. Traditionally, people walked to synagogue—no keys, no money, no cell phone. Yom Kippur is a serious and extended pause in one's life.

Having experienced the High Holy Day rituals for many years before I left Judaism, I can attest to the power of religious renewal.

As the shofar—the ram's horn—sounds its mournful blast at the end of Yom Kippur, I always felt that I had had an experience close to death. I had a new appreciation of life. I felt I had been given a second chance. And I was determined to live better and more meaningfully.

[America won't find God. But we might find something else | Bruce Ledewitz](#)

These memories still sustain me.

But what happens to a secular society that never engages in a candid reflection on all our shortcomings, never is required to confront our own sin and thus is never renewed and given a second chance?

How much of the angry fatalism in American life today reflects our subconscious understanding and dismay over our own unceasing evil? And how much of the unreality of American public discourse roots in our inability to be realistic about ourselves?

In other words, the problem of secular life is not how to be good without God, but how to be bad without God and without the forgiveness and renewal that our religious traditions offer.

I cannot be certain how much the absence of rituals of renewal harms American life. After all, many Americans, some of the angriest, are devoted churchgoers. They should be benefiting from the teachings of religion. But it doesn't seem to help their outlook very much.

Nevertheless, religion at its best resists demonization of others through the recognition that we are all sinners. And in that recognition, there is

always the potential for human solidarity.

Sociologically speaking, we are on the way to a secular society. More broadly, in the West, we seem to be on the way to a secular civilization.

Unfortunately, we have not yet begun to take that change seriously. We will not be able to build a healthy secular civilization without recognition of human sin and some ritualization that allows us to confront ourselves realistically and be forgiven, whatever that means in secular terms.

Maybe the answer will be some form of yearly communal retreat. Maybe there will be shared time for sustained and quiet reflection. But I don't see any movement in that direction yet.

On the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, many Jews participate in the ceremony of Tashlich, which literally means "casting off." During this ceremony, Jews symbolically cast off the sins of the previous year by tossing pebbles or bread crumbs into flowing water. During the ceremony, I always read Isaiah 1:18: "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

In my experience, people who no longer practice Judaism, always remember Tashlich. Who doesn't long to start again? Who doesn't wish to shed all the mistakes of the past?

Another High Holy Day season has now gone by in my post-Jewish period. I miss it. But more to the point, people who have never known religious life don't know what they are missing. There is a secular need for High Holy Days.