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October 9, 2008: Secularists Need Yom Kippur

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Title: Secularists Need Yom Kippur

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10/9/2008--Since I don't consider myself Jewish anymore, I don't go to services. But I make two exceptions. I attend services for the High Holy Days and do something at Passover. These are two Jewish holidays Hallowed Secularism will need to reinvent. Last night was Kol Nidre, the opening of Yom Kippur, the Day of Repentance. This holiday comes at the end of a ten-day period beginning with Rosh Hashanah. During the entire period, Jews engage in intense self-questioning. On Yom Kippur, this process achieves a unique intensity as a total fast amounting to 25 hours combines with haunting melodies and an impressive atmosphere. The entire period of the High Holy Days is known in Hebrew as the Days of Awe. I find it impossible not to be changed by this process. Without it, or something like it, any secularism is doomed to shallowness and self-satisfaction. Secularism today has a great deal of trouble with its view of the human condition. It fluctuates between accounts of pure selfishness—the Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins, for example or the basic model of economics—or the false human heroism of Romanticism and Existentialism. Religion does much better. The model of people on Yom Kippur is, “we all do evil, but we can repent and do better in the future, and we will.” This is a beautiful message and strangely self-fulfilling. If you believe it and practice it, it can become true. The Jewish practice always brings new insight. Last night I realized for the first time that not only is my sin personal—the usual litany of callousness I won't bore you with—but also social. I live comfortably in a world in which other people suffer. Thousands starve to death every day. And this remains so no matter what I do. I can give more money to good causes, or even give up my life and work among the poor. They will still starve and I will not. And even if the world gradually improves its social and economic arrangements, as I believe we will, a similar structural evil will always remain. This is, as the Christians say, a fallen world. I can do something. I can repent. And I can promise—to the mystery of existence—that I will do better this year. For this I can thank Yom Kippur.