



View from the Pew

Mary Adamski

Forgiveness permeates Jewish week

Awe is a word that has been so overused and abused that it wouldn't seem to have real meaning anymore. Teenagers and sports announcers use "awesome" to describe everything from outrageous clothes to athletes' moves. War advocates loved to use "shock and awe" to spin their unrealized dream of being a dominating power force that overwhelmed the enemy.

When Jews begin their observance of the Days of Awe next week, it's all about God, their relationship with the Almighty and what their Creator expects from them. From Rosh Hashana, the beginning of the New Year 5767 through Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, an observant Jew will spend 10 days thinking about getting straight with God.

"We stand before God because he told us to in the Torah, to account for our actions and our misdeeds," said Dina Yoshimi, a member of Congregation Sof Ma'arav. "It is a time of true awe, not in a sense of fear and trembling, but in a sense of how you fit into the universal picture. (It's) the sense of how we as individuals fit into the vastness of God's creation, to see that our role is essential and small. We acknowledge God, praise God and perform the commandments. We are the caretakers for creation. Those are awesome responsibilities, at the same time a small part of the big picture."

Services during the High Holidays are long, hours of Torah readings and prayers recited and sung in Hebrew. Synagogues and large congregations have rabbis and cantors whose life's work has been to learn the words.

Sof Ma'arav, a small Conservative congregation, is led by its lay members. They choose not to worship with followers of the Orthodox, Reform or Traditional variations of Judaism. They used to bring in a guest cantor for this special season, but decided four years ago to do even this special observance on their own.

Yoshimi will be one of several soloists singing lengthy minor-key Hebrew prayers and texts. An alto, she had the experience of being in several synagogue choirs before joining the volunteer spirit of Sof Ma'arav. "In Hawaii there are so few of us, everyone takes what they have and offers it." Outside of that role, the former Dina Rudolph is a Japanese linguistics professor at the University of Hawaii, the mother of two young children and the wife of David Yoshimi, who is not Jewish, but joins in special events.

"We are a learner's congregation. Someone will take you under their wing and help you," she said. When they practice, it's not just about singing, but about "finding a space within you where you are trying to convey the deepest meaning of the words you are singing. The practice is called 'kavanah,' coming with presence, that you are truly focused, fully there. You can only try.

"It's a humbling experience," said Yoshimi. "You are addressing God on behalf of the congregation, asking for forgiveness. When you stand in front of the congregation, you are the intermediary, the accountable party representing those before you. In a sense you have to be a little bit more honest, more intent.

"The first year I did this, I was totally intimidated -- how can I step into this awesome role?" What has happened over the past four years is that "the meaningfulness of the holiday became more meaningful. There are prayers where we join and prayers where we listen, pieces that intend to invest you with a feeling of solemnity. There are pieces in the music that tear your heart open; they are meant to open your heart.

"Something that will touch me for a lifetime was the experience of Yom Kippur the first year, the intensity of focus. It affects how I will live my life as a Jew. These are my people; this is my history; this is what God has given us. I love this; I want to keep it treasured to me. Every year, I work at winnowing away layers that I can dismiss to increase my focus. It is unbelievable how distracting our modern life is," Yoshimi said.

Even nonobservant Jews are likely to find time to join in a service during the Days of Awe, and they quickly find their place. "From the time you are a child, it is a part of you that you grew up with. There is a theme, a motif that goes through the whole service, repeated again and again. When you hear the first riff of that theme, it transports you to that place."

Observant Jews fast during the holy days, an experience that the volunteer cantor finds an "enhancing component" of the singing. "You would think fasting would undo you, but fasting and singing are wonderful companions. The voice comes from a firm foundation. ... You are producing clear notes.

"It is a joyous holiday but the joy is formal," she said. During the holidays people ask others to forgive them for misdeeds or hurtful actions. "Everyone is hugging and kissing ... but there is still that sense of weightiness. You do feel that you stand before God."

Mary Adamski covers religion for the Star-Bulletin. Reach her at madamski@starbulletin.com.