

Order of Service
September 24, 2017
Our Desert Faith Tradition

SERMON “Our Desert Faith Tradition”

When I first started looking at preaching this Sunday, in the last month of our theme of Welcome, I was immediately drawn to the foundational Islamic tenet of hospitality. It is a deep cultural difference from our contemporary world. Muslims are called by their faith to welcome all guests into their home, offering them food and lodging, even if they are strangers who knock at the door.

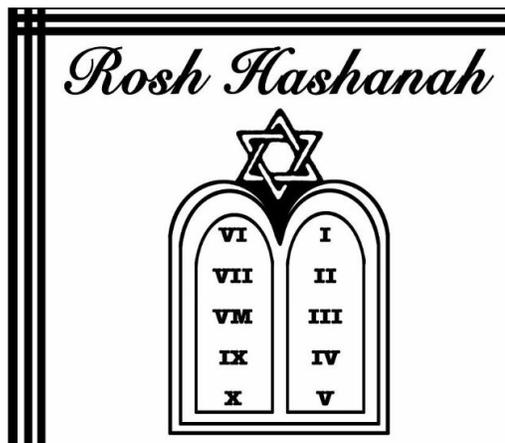
I have personally experienced this welcome in mosques that I have visited: the Islamic Center of Boulder and the Islamic Center of Golden. When you are a guest, you are served. Beautifully. Conversation, food and drink are a gift. It is a



lovely experience, and I hope many of you will find a way to visit a mosque, to learn and expand your world. I know many of you already have.

We are, right now, in the midst of the Jewish High Holy days ... Wednesday evening began the Rosh Hashanah holiday, and we are now in the In Between days, which will culminate Saturday, on Yom Kippur. So, I wanted also to honor this Jewish New Year tradition, which is quite beautiful, and from which I think Unitarian Universalists can learn a lot.

Rosh Hashanah, this past week, was the Jewish New Year, and begins a 10-day holiday, with the Days In Between – between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There are two important aspects to these ten days – a turning inward for self-reflection and awareness, and a turning outward towards Right Relationship. Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment (traditionally God's judgment, but also self judgment and self awareness), and a metaphoric journey towards Yom Kippur, where one tries to make right ... where am I failing to live up to my best self, and where have I fallen down in relationship with others. The 10 days are used for that inward reflection and outward action to mend relationships.



Our lives are time bound ... we all live and die ... on Rosh Hashanah, we look at where we are ... what is the reality of where I am now, and where is the gap ... between where I want to be. The 10 days are spent trying to making amends if need be, trying to close that gap. But, we can never close it completely! So, on Yom Kippur, God closes the gap. And seals the book of life (decides who will live or die in the coming year). God closes the gap between our highest selves, and where we are able to get to in these Days In Between. And forgives the gap, that difference between our highest selves that we aspire to, and the reality of our imperfection. God forgives our failings.

Now, you might know that I don't believe in that Hebrew God. I came out of seminary a religious humanist. You might also know I have Jewish heritage myself: my great grandfather's family fled from Budapest in 1855, when he was five years old to escape Jewish oppression. They changed their last name, and assimilated here in the United States. My grandmother, his daughter, married a man so anti-Semitic that she never told her husband that her father was Jewish! It was a secret in our family until my grandfather died in 1976.

I tell you, I have struggled with the Jewish faith. I have both a revulsion for the brutality and misogyny of the Hebrew Bible, and a yearning for many of the beautiful Jewish traditions. In researching for this service, a local rabbi introduced me to Marcia Falk, a Jewish poet and liturgist, who has taken the theism and the gender out of Jewish ritual, which makes it much more accessible to me, and many others. One of her poems for the Jewish New Year:

Casting Away

We cast into the depths of the sea our sins, and failures, and regrets
Reflections of our imperfect selves flow away.

What can we bear,
With what can we bear to part?

We upturn the darkness,
Bring what is buried to light.

What hurts still lodge,
What wounds have yet to heal?

We empty our hands,
Release the remnants of shame,
Let go fear and despair that have dug their home in us.

Open hands,
Opening heart –

The year flows out,
The year flows in

Preparing for this service, I was reminded of the story of Billings, Montana, over 20 years ago, when the whole town rose up in response and resistance to hate crimes against Jews. Lydia preached about it a few holiday seasons ago. And, One Voice most beautifully sang about it for the Offertory today.

A young mother in Billings had converted to Judaism, and was concerned when her five-year-old son was being bullied for their faith, terrorized by trespassers, and then horrified when a brick was thrown through his bedroom window, where a lit menorah was displayed for Hannukah.



The town rose up in resistance to the hatred, and in support for the family that had been targeted. The newspaper editorialized against anti-Semitism, and printed images of menorahs, and soon 10,000 homes in Billings Montana were displaying those menorah images, in solidarity. The Jewish community in Billings, MT, is and was small, and many many of those 10,000 homes displaying the menorahs were Christian homes.



That incident sparked the Not In Our Town movement, committed to resisting hatred. There are films about the original Billings incident, and others, including the massacre of Sikhs in Wisconsin, African Americans in California, murders of immigrants, and highlighting other towns that have resisted violent hatred based on difference, proclaiming that it has no place in their town. A new and recent chapter of the Not In Our Town movement is now in Charlottesville, Virginia.

One thing that I have learned since the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville is that anti-Semitism is foundational to the White Nationalist movement. You might have seen news reports of those neo-Nazis chanting “Jews will not replace us,” and the hate slogan “blood and soil,” right out of Nazi Germany. Many people who work in social justice already knew this – that anti-Semitism is foundational to our current climate, to the neo-Nazi movement, the white supremacist movement, the white nationalist movement. I didn’t know it. A colleague of mine has said that anti-Semitism isn’t a racial justice issue, because Jews don’t consider themselves a race. Well, some do and some don’t, but what matters here is that the White Supremacists consider them an inferior race! So, they are racialized by the haters. So, I have come to understand that anti-Semitism IS a racial justice issue.



Unitarian Universalist Jewish-identified Clergy wrote an open letter, which was published in the *UU World*.

Dear fellow Unitarian Universalists,

We Jewish-identified UU clergy are feeling the sting of the overt anti-Semitism expressed by white supremacists in Charlottesville: the swastikas, pictures of Hitler, and people proud to call themselves neo-Nazis; the chants (“Jews will not replace us”); the posters (“the Jewish media is going down;” “Jews are Satan’s children”); the slurs and more.

Some of us have been called these names. Some have experienced overt anti-Semitism. Some lost family members in the Holocaust and pogroms. The words and images from the “Unite The Right” rally chill us to the bone.

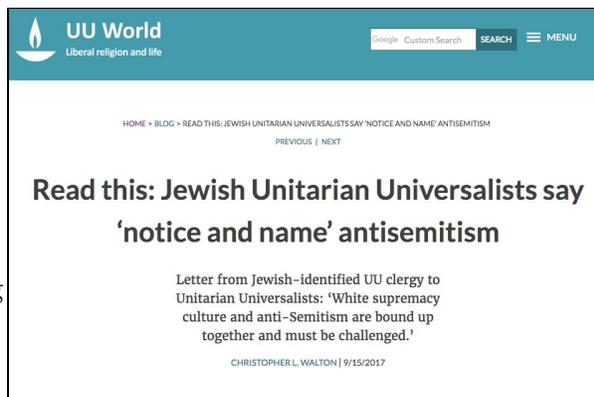
It is clear that Jews are one of many targets of these rising waves of hatred. This is not surprising: “Jewishness” as “other” has long been bound up with social constructions of race and racialized oppression. Some Jewish people experience white skin privilege; some do not. White supremacy culture and anti-Semitism are bound up together and must be challenged.

As Unitarian Universalists do this important work, it is important to note that “Jewish people” are not only members of “other” communities which “neighbor” our UU congregations. There are Jewish-identified folks in the pulpits and pews of many of our own UU congregations. Some may be feeling acute emotional and psychological impacts from the rising anti-Semitic actions and rhetoric in the country.

Dear ones, [the letter continues] as we together challenge the hatred made explicit in Charlottesville, we feel that it is critically important to be recognizing ALL those under attack. Many are being targeted right now, including People of Color, undocumented folks, LGBTQ folks, Muslims, Jews, persons experiencing disabilities and women. We do not want to displace anyone who is vulnerable and write this with deep commitment to collective liberation. In this spirit, we ask you – we call on you – to notice and name anti-Semitism, as well as other oppressions that are present.

We hope that this letter will open many conversations with UU groups and individuals so that we can work together to counter intersecting forces of oppression and persecution wherever we find them. Together, may we speak out against the multiple expressions of hatred that threaten to divide us.

Faithfully, signed by 25 UU ministers, and a rabbi who serves a UU congregation



The Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness website: uuja.org ... has many good resources for understanding this better.

This man is Eric K. Ward. He is a long-time activist and scholar (and musician), and was formerly the Gender, Racial and Ethnic Justice program officer at the Ford Foundation, and now he is a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center. He recently published a compelling article called, *Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism animates White Nationalism*.² He has been studying white nationalists since 1990, and here is a definition:



“American White nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacism, is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and anti-Semitism forms its theoretical core.”

Let me say it again: **Antisemitism forms the theoretical core of White nationalism.”**

Eric Ward believes that “within social and economic justice movements committed to equality, we have not yet collectively come to terms with the centrality of antisemitism to White nationalist ideology, and until we do we will fail to understand this virulent form of racism rapidly growing in the U.S. today.”

And, he believes that anti-Semitism “is a particular and potent form of racism so central to White supremacy that Black people [can] not win [their] freedom without tearing it down.”

Black people cannot win their own freedom without tearing down anti-Semitism.

I’m not going to go into his whole theoretical argument. I’m happy to send you the article if you like. My Jewish friends already know this! I didn’t.

The irony of me here in the pulpit today, in the midst of the Jewish High Holy days and having planned two months ago to lift up that beautiful Billings Montana story of how that town rose up in resistance to anti-Semitism ...

... the irony is that, at the beginning of September, right here in Lafayette, a swastika was carved onto the home of a Jewish couple.

Here’s the picture accompanying the *Daily Camera* article from September 6th. Showing the swastika that was

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<http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/#sthash.9UVFzNxb.7KSmC7ZE.dpbs>

carved into their apartment door the first time. It was painted over immediately, and the very next day, it was carved again, into their door a 2nd time!

I feel outrage for this couple, and such sadness ... for all of us.

For these ugly times ... for the increase in hate crimes that have been unleashed by this administration, by white supremacists and white nationalists at the highest levels of government.

And, I am sad that, perhaps, we missed a chance here ... I had already planned to preach about Billings, and then, here it is, right in our back yard.

And, I KNOW that you, here in this congregation, do so much. For the wider world. To try and build bridges and build understanding and work to build the more beautiful world we all know is possible.

And, I do NOT want to engender any guilt or shame, because we here in Lafayette didn't rise up in a collective and communal response, rejecting that hate towards that Jewish couple. We can each only do so much. And, it is important that we stay in for the long haul. That we find ways to make our lives sustainable, keep our own wellsprings full, keep our spirits nourished, so we have the strength and endurance to stay in it for the long haul.

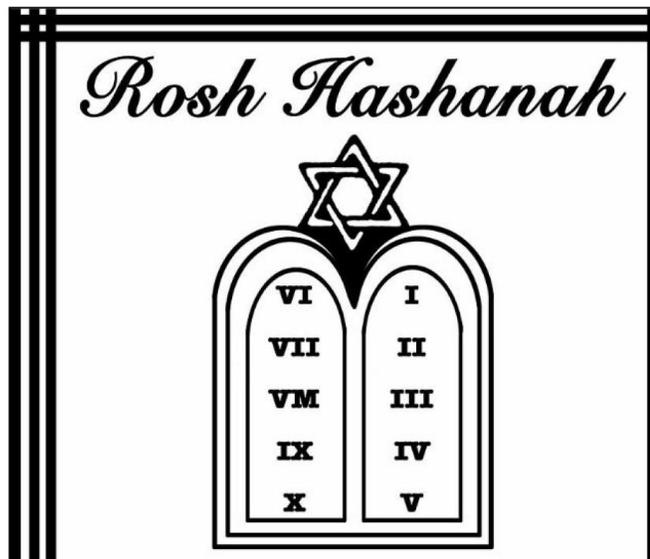
I want to come back to the Jewish High Holy days, and the Days In Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These days for a spiritual practice of self-awareness and right relationship. A ritual to begin the new year.

What is your spiritual practice of right relationship? At a workshop this weekend, attended by a good group from this congregation, and almost 100 UUs from the Front Range, our UUA Pacific Western Region consultant, the Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kwong, reminded us of the four aspects of a spiritual practice:

Intention | Attention | Repetition, and | Accountability

What would it be like for you, as a Unitarian Universalist, for us, as a congregation, for us as a faith, to have a yearly practice of amending our relationships, doing all we can to come back into covenant, with those in our lives?

I come back to Marcia Falk's poem for the Jewish New Year:



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I invite you to this practice ... of self-reflection and awareness, and of taking constructive and mindful action towards mending relationships. Is there an estrangement in your life that you've been waiting for the right time? Maybe now is the time.

I am wishing for you in these days an ease of heart, the grace of clarity, and the courage of action.

Peace, my friends.

Peace, Salaam, Shalom.

POSTLUDE "Peace, Salaam, Shalom" by Emma's Revolution

BENEDICTION