UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

When to Not Tolerate Intolerance?
Insights from the Jewish Tradition

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

24 September 2017

fredericku.org

In the Jewish tradition, we are in the midst of the High Holy Days, also known as the "Days of Awe," which run from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah literally means "the head" (the beginning) "of the year." **Whereas the secular calendar celebrates New Year's Day on January 1, the Jewish calendar celebrates New Year's on Rosh Hashanah.** So by the traditional Jewish reckoning it's not 2017, but 5778. So—for those who celebrate: *L'shanah tovah!* (which means, "for a good year"). One among many ways to celebrate Rosh Hashanah includes eating apples dipped in honey to symbolize hope for a "sweet new year."

This year, Rosh Hashanah started this past Wednesday evening at sunset, and ended on Friday. **Days on the Jewish calendar begin with sunset in a tradition derived from the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, whose cadence describes each new day as "there was evening and there was morning, the first day**…. There was evening and there was morning, the second day" and so on.

The High Holy Days culminate with Yom Kippur ("the Day of Atonement"), the holiest day of the year in the Jewish tradition, a time for repentance and fasting. This year, Yom Kippur will begin this coming Friday at sunset and end at nightfall on Saturday. The traditional greeting on Yom Kippur is *Gut Yontiff*, meaning "Good Holiday."

For more than ten years on many Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, Kol Ami, a Reform Jewish congregation, has worshipped in this sanctuary. We have a good relationship with that congregation. But **there is also a strong tradition of *Jewish* Unitarian Universalists.**

Indeed, the fourth of our Six Sources is "Jewish and Christian teachings." Note that our Fourth Source is not "Judeo-Christian teachings," which has often had a bias of *starting* with Christianity, then emphasizing things that Judaism has in common with Christianity—as opposed to respecting the legitimacy of both traditions on their own terms.

Over the past few years as your minister, I've preached quite a few sermons about ways to interpret various texts in the Hebrew Bible. And although I may still explore with you from time to time a particularly interesting way of interpreting the Hebrew Bible, **I am also interested in what we can learn as UUs from the much broader Jewish tradition.** And in future years, I look forward to sharing with you about influential Jewish figures such as Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), the founder of the modern study of Kabbalah and the first Professor of Jewish Mysticism at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; about the plurality of Jewish identities over time; and about the diversity of Judaisms.

As a whole, Unitarian Universalism tends to have a bias toward the *future*. To quote a line from one of our historic hymns, we celebrate "A freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more." In contrast, our Fourth Source is a reminder of the beauty, power, and meaning that can derive from history, ritual, and tradition that accrue not only over years, but over millennia. To quote the Cohen Brothers: **"Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax, You're [darn] right I'm living in the past!"**

All that being said, many months ago when I first planned to preach about the Jewish tradition this morning, my intention was to speak about "Sinai & Zion," inspired by an influentialbook of the same name by Jon Levenson**,** a Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School. A symbolic shift in spirituality can happen when you move *from* a transformative, first-hand experience with the Sacred in the wildness (such as happened atop Mt. Sinai) *to* second-hand debate about the meaning of such experiences that can happen when **the divine begins to be primarily experienced—not in desert wildness—but inside a Temple, brokered by a priestly caste** (91-93).

But as I reflected this past week on the Jewish tradition, I felt increasingly compelled to share with you a different insight from the Jewish tradition than the archetypes of Sinai and Zion. When I first scheduled this topic many months ago, I had no idea that **over the past few weeks**

we would witness emboldened and virulent strains of antisemitism in this county. And as we reflect Jewish tradition amidst the High Holy Days, I would be failing to name the elephant in the room if I neglected to remind us that barely a month ago

- On August 14 — two days after the nation watched in horror as hundreds of well-armed neo-Nazis and other white supremacists held a violent rally in Charlottesville, Virginia — a 17-year-old boy in downtown Boston…picked up a rock and [shattered] one of the six tall glass towers that make up the New England Holocaust Memorial.
- A day later, an unknown person shattered the glass doors at [a] synagogue in Queens, New York — just hours after the nation watched in disbelief as the President of the United States described the unrest in Charlottesville as "very fine people on both sides."
- Across the country in Alameda, California, on August 17, a security camera captured another unidentified vandal throwing rocks at Temple Israel, shattering multiple windows…..

You can learn more details about each of these incidents—as well as a horrifying number of related examples—on the website of the Anti-Defamation League.

But it is important to name that these acts are more than mere vandalism. **There is a historic resonance that makes the shattering of glass in Jewish buildings a hate crime**: "On the night of November 9, 1938, and into the next day, mobs in Germany massacred nearly 100 Jews and smashed the windows of Jewish businesses and synagogues. That evening became known as *Kristallnacht* ("The Night of Broken Glass") and was an early sign of what grew into the Nazis' attempts at genocide against the Jewish people.

Here in America, in the days leading up to the Jewish High Holy Days, there is a nonpartisan tradition for many years of the President of the United States holding a conference call with hundreds of rabbis. But this year was different: **four major Jewish groups all boycotted the call this year**: the Central Conference of American Rabbis and Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (both representing Reform Judaism), the Rabbinical Assembly (a coalition of Conservative rabbis), and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. In

highlighting this act of protest, my intent is not partisan; rather, it is in solidarity with our Jewish siblings and it is against acts that either actively or tacitly support antisemitism.

In the words of the joint statement released announcing the boycott:

> President Trump's statements during and after the tragic events in Charlottesville are so lacking in moral leadership and empathy for the victims of racial and religious hatred that we cannot organize a call this year. The President's words have given succor to those who advocate antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia. **Responsibility for the violence that occurred in Charlottesville, including the death of Heather Heyer, does not lie with many sides but with one side: the Nazis, alt-right and white supremacists…. There is no place for such pernicious philosophies in a civilized society.**

That last part can be particularly difficult to negotiate within the U.S. generally and Unitarian Universalism specifically, two traditions that cherish individual freedom of expression.

So what guidance might the Jewish tradition have for us? One helpful touchstone is the writing of the late philosopher, Karl Popper (1902 - 1994). **His parents converted to Lutheran as part of a cultural assimilation process, but all four of his grandparents were Jewish.** In 1945, the year World War II ended, Popper wrote an important book called The Open Society and Its Enemies. In particular, I invite us to reflect on a passage about what he called the **"paradox of tolerance"**:

> If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; **as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise.** But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer

> arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. **We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant.** We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal. (Vol. 1, Notes to the Chapters: Ch. 7, Note 4)

I will readily grant that these are treacherous waters to navigate. But we must be honest that we live in perilous times. I will say more about this dynamic in early November in a sermon about democracy in such a time as this.

In addition to the importance of responding to the call to be in solidarity with Jews everywhere in opposition and resisting antisemitism in any guise—just as we must respond to calls to resist racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and related forms of bigotry—I will also admit that I take the rise in antisemitism quite personally. As many of you know, my wife is Jewish, and we were married at Temple Oheb Shalom in Baltimore. The Jewish tradition is an important part of our family.

But as many of you also know, I was raised Southern Baptist. And **it has been a transformative journey to move from my childhood experience of mostly reading stories *about* Jews in the Christian Bible (in which the Jewish people were often depicted as "those bad guys") to increasingly meeting contemporary Jewish people who have almost nothing in common with those biblical stories.** Among other things, the Christian scriptures were written at a time in which early Christians were often defining themselves in opposition to Judaism. Moreover, two thousand years of Jewish history has happened since the period in which the Christian scriptures were written.

Indeed, the single biggest "aha!" moment I have had in regard to the Jewish tradition is the value of experiencing the Jewish tradition on its own terms. To cite one of the most prominent examples from the Christianity of my childhood, I often heard the Jewish practice of Sabbath described as a legalistic, restrictive burden. But if you talk to many actual contemporary Jewish persons—some of whom, of course, have experienced Sabbath as a burden—you find

many observant Jews who describe their experience of keeping Sabbath as "a blessing," who "feel that it is…liberating" to have permission to take a full day off for family, spiritual practice, and religious community (Levenson 1993: 40). Along those lines, I can recall a *New Yorker* cartoon from a few years ago, featuring a man wearing traditional Jewish clothing, saying on a cell phone, "If you need anything, I'm available 24/6."

To give a more nerdy example: as someone originally trained in a Christian seminary, I'm aware of a fair amount of emphasis in such institutions on what is called "Biblical Theology," which seeks to draw out common themes throughout the anthology known as the Bible. But as Jon Levenson writes in his book, The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies, **there is essentially no Jewish equivalent to what Christians call "Old Testament Theology"** (33-34). It is not an approach to scripture that is prominent in the Jewish tradition:

- **The effort to construct a systematic, harmonious theological statement out of the unsystematic…materials in the Hebrew Bible fits Christianity better than Judaism** because systematic theology in general is more prominent and more at home in the church than in the synagogue.
- The impulse to systematize among Christians tends to find its outline in theology. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Tillich, and Rahner, to name only a few, have no really close parallels in Jewry….
- And the Mishnah (the first major written redaction of the Jewish oral traditions) has no good counterparts in the church….
- **Christians often have the impression that Judaism's belief system is too amorphous and ill-defined, and that its legal system is excessively precise and overdetermined.**
- **Jews often have the impression of Christianity that its ethical and liturgical life is dangerously subjective and emotional, and that its theology is too rigid and too abstract**….
- If you ask Asians to describe their religion, they will tell you about their *practices*; if you ask Christians, they will tell about their *beliefs*. Judaism is in

> this respect more like an Asian religion than like Christianity. (Levenson 1993: 51-52)

The qualification I would add is that what Levenson best describes is Orthodox Christianity, especially after the influence of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. In contrast, much of modern Progressive Christianity focuses on spirituality practices, beloved community, and social justice.

So when I consider the UU Fourth Source of Jewish and Christian teachings, there is a lot of fractured history between the two traditions, but there is also much beauty, wisdom, and meaning in both. Therefore, as contemporary UUs—open to drawing wisdom from the worlds' religions, balanced with the insights of modern science—we find ourselves in the middle of the High Holy Days in the Jewish Tradition. The ten total days, including the two holidays, are also known collectively as the Days of Repentance. And **even with all that has happened historically and today, including the seemingly never-ending waves of antisemitism, this span of time remains a particularly auspicious time to practice forgiveness and to seek atonement ("at-one-ment").**

That being said, it is important to be honest about what authentic, life-giving forgiveness is and isn't. **I'm not talking about cheap forgiveness that risks making us into a doormat.** One of the most crucial lessons these annual Ten Days of Repentance can teach us is that forgiveness is a practice—not that different from other *practices* like playing the piano, shooting free throws in basketball, or going to the gym. If we consistently practice forgiveness, we can get better at it over time.

The same is true of unforgiveness. We can also get better at holding a grudge over time if that's what we choose to practice. But as the proverb says, **refusing to forgive over a long period of time is a like "drinking poison yourself and wishing your enemy would die."**

In a few moments, I'm going to invite us to experiment with a practice of forgiveness. As preparation for doing so, I invite you to hear these word from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who learned a lot about the practice of forgiveness the hard way through his work on Truth and Reconciliation in apartheid South Africa:

> I will forgive you

The words are so small
But there is a universe hidden in them
When I forgive you
All those cords of resentment pain and sadness that had wrapped
themselves around my heart will be gone
When I forgive you
You will no longer define me
You measured me and assessed me and
decided that you could hurt me
I didn't count
But I will forgive you
Because I do count
I do matter
I am bigger than the image you have of me
I am stronger
I am more beautiful
And I am infinitely more precious than you thought me
I will forgive you
My forgiveness is not a gift that I am giving to you
When I forgive you
My forgiveness will be a gift that gives itself to me.

It is also crucial that for Archbishop Tutu, the final step of forgiveness is not necessarily the renewing of a relationship. It may instead mean the *releasing* of a relationship. In that spirit, I invite you to turn in your teal hymnals to #1037, "We Begin in Love." As we sing this song, I invite you to discern is there is a way that you are feeling called to experiment with forgiveness.

The autumnal equinox was Friday, marking the first day of fall. This time of falling leaves is also an auspicious time for experimenting with letting go. Or, in the words of the Buddhist teacher Noah Levine, perhaps what might feel most authentic to you right now might be to experiment with the intention of **"I forgive you as much as I can in this moment."**