

Jewish Gifts

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Chant and Hymns: Hineh Mah Tov; Voice Still and Small; When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place

Pastoral Prayer follows the sermon text here

Reading

...from Albert Einstein, the 20th century theoretical physicist who gave us the Theory of Relativity. Born in 1879 in Germany, he immigrated to Europe and then the United States in the 1930s, after the Nazis fired all Jewish professors and scientists. Through political connections he got hundreds of other scientists out of danger and into positions in Turkey, Britain and North America. As a new citizen of this country, he spoke against racism, calling it America's "worst disease." He said it was "handed down from one generation to the next." He wrote on spiritual topics as well.

Strange is our situation here upon earth.
Each of us comes for a short visit,
not knowing why,
yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose.

From the standpoint of daily life, however,
there is one thing we do know:
that we are here for the sake of others;
above all, for those on whose smile and well-being
our own happiness depends;
and also for the countless unknown souls
with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy.

Many times a day I realize how much my own
outer and inner life is built upon the labor of
others,
both living and dead, and how earnestly I must
exert myself
in order to give in return
as much as I have received and am still receiving.¹

Sermon

At key times in life, some people speak of being called. Have you ever felt a calling? A calling...to a new occupation or field of study? You might have sensed a call to make a fresh start in a new location, or an opposite one to put down roots. Perhaps there's a calling toward a relationship, rearing a child, or another family endeavor. Some folks feel a call to find community, to give back, make a difference, pay it forward. We are called to oppose injustice, protect the vulnerable and show mercy. We are called toward love.

This experience of calling—and our modern way of thinking about it—is a gift of the Jewish religion. In his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill speaks of this idea of a voice calling us, or speaking within the heart of any one of us, and he traces it back to the relationship of pivotal characters in the Jewish Bible with God, the Almighty.² Another Jewish invention is that of monotheism—the concept that it was only one source of creation, who brought into being all that exists, and that the same creator continues to guide and govern the universe. In Judaism and later the Christian faith and the Islamic faith, this universal and invisible God overtook and replaced the many deities worshiped by local groups for local needs. The Jews were the first ones to experience God not only as creator and protector, but also as lawgiver and judge. Hence, Judaism gave to western civilization the concept of ethics and morality. Judaism invented the idea of a transcendent source of moral judgment under which all people are accountable. But first, Cahill credits Judaism with giving us the world view that time is not cyclical, but linear. Time is moving forward.

The earliest religious cultures in the world thought of divine activity and human life in terms of the cycles of nature. Their stories and rituals had to do with seasonal patterns of nature, the phases of the moon, the shifting of constellations. Religious practices would honor deities who control the forces of nature. Think of holding a bonfire to bring back the sun at the winter solstice, dancing or singing to bring rains to the fields, or setting the first fruits of

¹ Quoted by Chaim Stern, *Day by Day: Reflections on the Themes of the Torah* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

² Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews* (New York, 1998: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday).

the harvest on the altar to honor a deity of agriculture. Imagine a circle of people, weeping ritually to mourn the waning of the moon and invoke its rebirth. Such rituals re-enacted a cosmic drama, and brought people into the drama. They ensured a return of blessings. Nature-based rituals have endured into our own time. For example, watching the groundhog's behavior in February has its roots in the cyclical celebration of Imbolc. In five weeks, our Sunday service honoring our departed loved ones will touch on themes of the pagan ritual of Samhain. Today around the globe, indigenous or tribal traditions continue to see life by the cycles of nature, marking the seasons of the year and seasons of life. Many Unitarian Universalists celebrate earth-based spiritual practices, and we consider them to be a key source of meaning and connection in our UU tradition.

Long before Judaism, in the Ancient Near East, what we call the Middle East now, the Sumerians invented writing and other tools. Yet as Cahill says, they did not see their tools as inventions but as ever-present gifts of the gods. In their world view, writing had always existed. This reflects that repeated cycle of life, which offered a sense of stability and predictability. All the world was a spiral. Into that world, the Jewish religion brought the view of time as linear; it brought the ideas of a history and a future. The future will depend on actions taken in the present—both human choices and acts of God. Time goes forward. This world view was created by the Jews, four thousand years ago, give or take a few hundred. This concept of time shaped Western civilization.

Right now, the Jewish calendar is marking the Jewish High Holy Days. Last Wednesday and Thursday was the Jewish observance of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. Rosh Hashanah commemorates God's creation of the Universe. Hence, the date for the age of creation—a date traditionally cited but not understood literally—for this new year is 5777. This Jewish holy day shows the forward movement of time—the idea of a past, a present and a future possibility.

In a few more days Yom Kippur will take place—the Day of Atonement. From sundown

Friday till sundown Saturday, people reflect on ways they may have made mistakes, missed the mark, fallen short of ethical intentions, or sinned against their God. They seek forgiveness, a new heart, and a clean start for the year.

Judaism shaped Western worldviews not merely through the idea of just one God, but of a just God. This deity makes ethical demands of human beings—of both individuals and communities. Of course, people always have argued over the meaning and practice of the rules, laws, and commandments of religious texts. Jewish scholars in particular have debated them and written conflicting interpretations for centuries. And many non-theists don't believe in a divine source of ethics and morality, yet they still explore ethical questions. What the Jews contributed to religion, philosophy and literature/ was the idea of ethical norms in the first place.

Scholar Robert Seltzer writes: "Of the living [major] traditions in the world today, Judaism is ... perhaps the very oldest." Cultures that existed in the Ancient Near East before Judaism have died out or been absorbed by other cultures. Judaism has persisted. While Confucianism and Buddhism have been around for 2,500 years, they are centuries younger than Judaism. The earliest Sanskrit hymns of Hindu India are 3,000 years old, a bit younger than the reign of Saul as the first king of Israel.³

Judaism gave humanity the strange new idea of God as invisible. Not visible in an idol. Not localized in a shrine or mountain or other natural formation, but existing everywhere in creation and beyond it. God is described not as a person but as a spirit. Before Hindu or Greek ideas of the soul as the essence of human life, the God of Judaism was the *breath* of life.

The three faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share an understanding of Abraham as their founder and father. The book of Genesis describes the close relationship of Abraham to God—obeying God's demands and guidance, accepting God's promise of land, prosperity and future success for Abraham's many descendants.

³ Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York, 1980: Macmillan Publishing).

God makes a covenant with Abraham—an ongoing commitment of loyalty and love.

Abraham and God have conversations that are personal—and this was new in the evolution of religion. Rather than being merely a face in a crowd of many worshippers as a local priest honors a local deity, Abraham has an identity as a person, a sense of individuality. As an individual, his ears are tuned to hear the voice of his God. His heart aims to trust his God, who is the universal God.

Indeed, they are so personal in their connection, Abraham even argues with God. In one scene, God announces a plan to destroy the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, for the people there do not honor the Lord. Abraham asks: Destroy them? What if there are 100 righteous people there? Would you kill 100 innocent people just because you're angry at some of the other ones? God and Abraham go back and forth with questions like this. Finally, God agrees that if there are as few as ten innocent people there, the towns will be spared.

The Jewish people shifted the religious emphasis beyond that of ensuring survival from one season to another, or one harvest to the next, to this question: how shall we live together? This is the purpose of the Ten Commandments in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy and the Priestly codes in Leviticus—three of the five books of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Torah simply means *teachings*.

In these ancient books, Judaism evoked the demands of a higher source of law. Coming well after Judaism, the Christian and Islamic faiths likewise imagined that source of law as the one God. In later centuries, secular philosophers—non-theists, that is—debated what the source of ethics might be, yet there still was the sense of a higher law to which human communities are held accountable. In 1776, for example, the U. S. Declaration of Independence put it this way: it was “the laws of nature and of Nature’s God” which gave the American colonies the right to have a separate and equal station in the world to that of England.

Several books of the Jewish Bible are noted for their themes of scolding. In some cases, God shames his people for failing to honor the codes and commandments God set forth in covenant. In many

other cases, prophets presume to speak for God. They condemn hypocrisy, greed, violence, abuse of the poor, and other forms of oppression. They envision a better future, demand a greater practice of mercy and care than the people have shown before.

For example, the Prophet Isaiah gives us images of peace on earth. He writes that “nations will beat their swords into plowshares.” People will turn their weapons into farm tools, in other words—will turn from taking life into sustaining life. Isaiah is inspired by God to pursue justice and freedom. He says:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me.
The LORD has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.

The “year of the Lord’s favor” was the jubilee year, in which debts were to be forgiven, to give the destitute a fresh beginning.

As we hear this lofty scriptural message, it must be noted that the Jewish Bible also attributes murderous actions to God that are not worthy of a just lawgiver or loving creator. Cahill writes: “There is no way of attributing mass carnage and vindictive slaughter to a God worth believing in.”

So, what is his explanation? He says the atrocities recorded in the Bible are “the work of human beings who believed that God was on their side,” and wrote it that way. This makes sense to me. So many centuries later, it still breaks our hearts to see how easily self-serving claims of God’s allegiance are made by those who oppress, torture, kill or terrorize other people.

So which parts of the Bible have the mark of legitimacy—which ones have the coherence to convey the divine intention? Cahill takes his lens of discernment from God’s early act of the creation of human beings, individual human beings—each one of us made in the likeness of God, each bearing the invisible image of worth and value. Each one of us has the potential to create and to show love—or to withhold it, or worse.

According to Cahill, our Western ideas of democracy have grown out of that vision, that idea of human individuals as subjects of worth and value. Since God is invisible, if we are made in the divine image, it must be an image of creativity, generosity, and the choice to love.

Cahill writes that the Prophets of the Jewish Bible have articulated “humanity’s most extravagant dreams” for justice, peace, and love of neighbor. The reality of an invisible God was felt in the fact of creation and the blessings of life. And from human beings this God what wanted was something not visible, something that was in the heart—not a display of piety through smoke or sacrifice, through buildings for worship or towers and shrines—but a heart for justice and mercy, and a life that showed that you love your neighbor as yourself.

The Prophet Isaiah writes:

“I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
‘Whom shall I send,

and who will go for us?’ Then I said, Here I am! Send me.” (Isa. 6:8)

The original idea of discerning a voice, that sense of a voice calling to you, comes from the stories in the Jewish Bible. This experience—of being called—remains so powerful that you need not believe in God to sense a calling, to feel a vocation, to listen for that inner voice. Moreover, I can imagine that indigenous people have always felt such personal connections to aspects of nature, and have felt themselves called by the spirit of a lake, a forest, a river, a mountain. Even today we speak of being called by a place. Yet Thomas Cahill credits Judaism with the concept of a calling, and the urge to follow it and move into the future, hoping it will be better than the present or the past.

He notes that modern ideologies, secular ideologies, like those of “capitalism and communism, [owe] their framework to the Bible’s historical orientation.” Both ideologies of capitalism and communism have made lessons out of the past, out of history. They both put forward visions and promises for a future that will be different, new and better, rather than a recycling of current conditions.

To the Western mind the Jewish religion brought the idea that we live under a higher law than mere survival. As individuals, as communities, as nations we are held to account by ethics and standards of morality, including the original command, to love your neighbor as yourself.

Part of the Priestly Code in the book of Leviticus, this is a simple command, and such a hard one. And it might be easy to miss—it’s nearly buried in hundreds of more detailed instructions, prohibitions, and ritual requirements.

Over the centuries, rabbis and other scholars have argued over the stories and laws of the Bible. Instead of one standard interpretation of Scripture, they have generated volumes of conflicting commentaries. Through all the commentary, that simple commandment has persisted.

In the Jewish Talmud is a story from the first century BCE. Rabbi Hillel is confronted by a non-Jew who asks him to teach him the first five books of the Bible while standing on one leg. Hillel replied: “That which is hateful unto you do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole of the Torah. The rest is commentary. Now, go forth and study it all.”

The ancient but enduring tradition of Judaism is rich and complicated, and its volumes of sacred scripture and commentary can be conflicting.

Yet its gifts include the historical worldview of the western world and the future orientation of human action. Its challenges include the idea that our deeds matter to some larger sense or source of ethics, matter to an ever-present source of meaning and value.

Its gifts include the sense and the principle that every human being is a being of worth, with potential for creativity, generosity, kindness and courage.

Its challenge is to love your neighbor as yourself. Its gift is the freedom to take that challenge, and bring more love into the world, every year, every day, and every moment. So may it be.

Pastoral Prayer

Spirit of Life, Breath of Peace, breathe in us, now and in the days to come. For all those milestones, joys, sorrows and prayers we've heard, and those held in our hearts, we ask the blessing of encouragement.

Whisper of love and source of healing, be with all those who suffer and live in fear, especially the grief-stricken people of Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Gulf Coast and the Caribbean, and all places of disaster. Be with those grieving and living in fear in zones of conflict and oppression, whether in faraway lands or our very neighborhoods.

Divine roots of love, of community, of interdependence, hold us close together in time of joy and pain, times of clarity and confusion.

You small but still and steady voice of wisdom and understanding—help *us* to be still so that we may discern the ways of serenity and courage as we move into the days to come.

Call us to compassion, generosity, and love toward our neighbors, and stir in us an ever-new sense of what it means to be a neighbor. Sustain us in the work of justice and mercy.

Now may we take some time to restore our spirits. May we find a few moments to give thanks for the gift of life and for every good gift.