

ENDURING VALUES OF JUDAISM

We “goyim” owe a sizable debt to Judaism. The word goyim is the plural form of a Jewish designation for non-Jews. It’s slightly derogatory in character (somewhat like the term “honky”) and probably originated in a similar manner as a response to the persecution experience. I deliberately use the term this morning to impose a bit of self-inflicted poetic justice upon all of us who’ve been a part, consciously or not, of the social history that has visited terrible injustices upon the Jewish people.

It’s been especially inappropriate, indeed, downright absurd, for those who call themselves Christians to display anti-Semitic attitudes, for Christianity owes to the Jewish community its entire Bible (which was written by Jews), most of its theological ideas, its patterns of worship, and of course, Jesus himself. This latter act is one that many of his followers only grudgingly admit—as evidenced in the story of the little girl who came home from Sunday school greatly distressed and asked her mother, “Is it true that Jesus was a Jew?” The mother replied reassuringly, “Yes, dear, but don’t you fear, God’s still a Christian!”

The fact that there’s more truth than humor to that tale was demonstrated when the Vatican Council, not so long ago, thought it necessary to “exonerate the Jews of deicide”—that is, to proclaim, after all these years, that the Jews weren’t really responsible for the death of Jesus. What generous hypocrisy! What they should have done was ask forgiveness for even nurturing such a notion for 1900+ years and contributing thereby to the cruel persecution of the Jewish people. The gas chambers of Nazism were psychologically built on that tardily corrected theological error.

But my purpose this morning is not to discuss anti-Semitism but to indicate the enormous indebtedness of western civilization to Judaism for the original contributions it's made to our thought patterns and value systems. And today I'm also launching my exploration into three pivotal world religions: Judaism, followed by Christianity, then Buddhism.

Max Dimont, in his spirited, fascinating book, *Jews, God and History*, claims that "the furniture in the Western world may be Grecian, but the house in which we Westerners dwell is Jewish!" I would concur. The ancient Israelites were not distinguished for their technical, military, or artistic skills, yet the writings they produced are singular in their lofty spiritual outlook and incomparable for beauty of expression. The Jews have simply been ethical and religious giants. And we Unitarian Universalists especially have borrowed extensively from the treasures and foundations of Judaism. Let me tell you how.

First, the crucially important idea of *ethical monotheism*. The Jews were the first people to articulate with clarity and fullness of expression the idea of one god. Monotheism means that all humanity, all nations, all living entities are unified under the same rule of law. We live in a uni-verse more than a multi-verse, says the monotheist. Or as we Unitarian Universalists put it: "we affirm the interdependent web of all existence."

And the most significant thing about the Jews' conception of one God is that Judaism characterizes the deity, at its best, as a moral being that desires from human beings not burnt offerings and pious prayer but wants in the prophet Amos' words that "justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The *thoughts* of God, said the Hebrews, are unfathomable, exalted as high above the thoughts of humans as the heaven is above the earth. (Isaiah 55:9) Indeed, the closest Moses ever got to God was a view of the “hind-parts.” Yet the *commandments* of Yahweh were considered near and clear. “The word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.” (Deuteronomy 30:14) You see, for Judaism, there’s no faith without morality, no mystery without commandment, no significance of the beyond without the value of the here and now.

In no other ancient religion has there been any greater concern for social justice. Ethical behavior has always been the fruit and flower of the Jewish faith. The prophets insisted that everyone—including kings, high priests, army generals and people of wealth—must be held accountable for their personal and social behavior. Not feelings, not attitudes, not even convictions, but the deed itself was decisive. The pivotal question for Christians has usually been: “What must I believe?” The primary concern for the Jew is always: “What must I do?” Notice our own emphasis as Unitarian Universalists upon deeds not creeds.

Ethical monotheism leads us to the second key concept contributed by the Jews: a *dynamic view of history* as the unfolding place for the purposes of a moral God, purposes in which we humans also share and thereby fulfill our own lives. We Unitarian Universalists also claim to be history-makers, who focus upon this world and this lifetime. We, like the Jews, contend that the meaning of history is still in the making, still up for grabs, still undetermined. Therefore, every day you and I have another chance to retrieve history from the brink of destruction, to make this earthly realm more beautiful and loving. Not only a chance; it’s our very duty to do so.

This focus on history was a radical departure in the religious climate of the day. The religion of the ancient polytheists centered primarily upon nature not history. For the Jewish people, history was neither an illusion nor a circular process of nature. It was the arena where the divine and the human collaborated to produce justice and mercy.

Furthermore, in various religions salvation is a highly individual matter. The devout seek to disassociate themselves from the corruptness of this world by achieving union with an external divinity. Hence, there's little responsibility for making the world a better place in which to live. In sharp contrast to this was Judaism's insistence that to share in the building of a more compassionate world was the very reason for the existence of religion. Being an integral part of the meaning of history is the way we gain enduring significance for our days on earth.

We can do this as individuals and as a group, which is what the Jewish idea of the "*covenant*" entails. The Jews saw themselves as a "chosen people": chosen not for privilege by a God who played favorites but called to a high destiny, in the sense that all those who serve the moral purposes of existence are "chosen."

Related to the motifs of covenant and chosen people is the concept of "*suffering servant*", the role to which Isaiah called his people centuries ago. I like to think of suffering servanthood in the following way. I believe that suffering and success often go together. If we succeed in some endeavor at social progress without suffering, it's probably because someone has suffered before us. And when we suffer without triumph, it's often so that someone may succeed after us. There's seldom progress, I've grown to feel, without someone accepting the burden of its price. And those who do become "chosen".

One can't reflect upon Unitarian Universalism's indebtedness to Judaism without stressing our common devotion to *freedom of conscience*. The whole structure of our guarantees of free speech that allow us to condemn wrong on the basis of our commitment to conscience, rests upon the ancient Jewish idea that individual freedom is a sacred right and responsibility.

While in other nations (as recently as the 19th century), the king was regarded as divine, and his word was law, in Israel a prophet could stand before the most powerful of political figures and condemn their wrongs. The Jewish community supported the idea that there was a higher moral law, before which even kings and queens must bow.

Thus, when Martin Luther King, Jr. exposed the cruel injustice of racism in the 1960s, or when Jessica Mitford exposed the rampant abuses in the funeral industry in her book *The High Cost of Dying* also some 40+ years ago, these two brave individuals stood in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets.

Another undergirding notion of Jewish life has been the concept of *Sabbath*. We take it for granted, but the idea isn't self-evident. Even as late as the Roman period, the Jewish Sabbath was condemned as the outcome of superstition, that led people to fritter away a seventh part of their life in idleness and indolence.

Today, at our healthiest, we recognize that the Sabbath has inestimable value for the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of our lives. The Sabbath is a visible affirmation that each and every person is more than simply a cog in the economic machine, that we have a right to ourselves: to our own bodies, time, and souls.

It's no exaggeration to say that the spiritual survival and moral creativity of the Jews during 2000 years of persecution and humiliation would hardly have been possible

without the one day in the week when even the poorest and most wretched Jew was transformed into a person of dignity.

For the Jews, the Sabbath isn't only a day denoting the absence of work. It's also a day to celebrate joy and pleasure, contemplation and meaningful conversation, rest from all practical and mundane concerns. Think of our Sunday worship services in the same sense: as equalizers of our inherent dignity and as renewers of our weary spirits. On the Sabbath we live with no other primary task other than to be more fully human.

There's yet another pervasive motif in Judaism: the capacity to allow, indeed embrace, the *paradoxes of existence*.

With regard to the subject of war and peace, the Hebrew scriptures, for example, support pacifism in Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4 where "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." Yet those who prefer militarism can find biblical support for their position in Joel 3: 9-10 where the command reverses to "beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears." Faced with opposite views on practically every subject, with variant grades in between, we rational liberal religionists have been quick to dismiss the Hebrew scriptures as a literature of competing contradictions, and therefore, irrelevant.

But I ask you: is not life itself full of niggling opposites? Do not, in fact, paradoxes constitute the setting for our daily human lives? I say "Yes". I believe that the Hebrew scriptures wisely sidestep the hobgoblin of foolish consistency by claiming that a full depiction of human existence cannot afford not to be paradoxical. We Unitarian Universalists would agree that there's usually more than one side to an issue and that

truths must be balanced in the authentic religious quest. Or as my tennis buddy reminds me: “there’s a yin and yang to every thang!”

Furthermore, the Hebrew scriptures, while being the most authoritative element of Judaism, aren’t the only one. Just as the scriptures were preceded by tradition, so they were soon followed by more tradition, the “Oral Law” that strives to interpret and apply the standards of the Bible to all of life’s activities. This tradition was ultimately established in the Talmud. *But* as the Talmud often remarks, every epoch has its very own interpreters, a reality that’s happily conveyed in the legend of Moses who hears Rabbi Akiba expounding the Torah, and Moses doesn’t even recognize it as his own Torah!

The Bible remains the Bible, the Talmud came after it, and after the Talmud came religious philosophy, and after that came mysticism, and so it went on and on. Judaism has never become a completed entity; no period of its development has provided its totality. Judaism remains an unfinished faith, experiencing continuous renaissance. You can hardly miss the clear-cut similarity with Unitarian Universalism on this matter of being an ever-evolving faith.

I can’t conclude on the enduring values of Judaism without emphasizing their passion for storytelling. The Hebrew people have always felt that stories are more durable and revealing of the human struggle than abstract, propositional doctrines. Stories instruct, comfort, judge, and transform a people like no other religious genre.

And that’s perhaps how the Jewish people have survived on four continents in six major civilizations. They had no home base, they were a wandering people, but they were

carriers of stories: stories of faith and love, terror and hope, usually filled with humor. Stories about where they came from and where they were going. And, most importantly, stories that reminded them precisely *who* they were.

Therefore it's only fitting that I close with a Jewish story about stories as retold by Elie Wiesel:

When the great Rabbi Israel Bal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen I don't know how to light the fire, but I'm still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more would go into the forest and say: "I don't know how to light the fire, I don't even recall the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I'm unable to light the fire, and I don't remember the prayer; I can't even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient, for God made human beings because God loves stories!

Our Unitarian Universalist story, as you can tell, is profoundly interwoven with and deeply indebted to the overall story of Judaism. May we always remember that fact, and may we be brave enough to live out, in our daily lives, the beautiful and beloved stories we cherish in common.

Tom Owen-Towle
September 21, 2008