

CUUC – Sunday, September 15, 2013

Welcome – Board member Rosemary

Service Coordinator – Peter Scales

Prelude - Janet Yonge, piano: Psalm 118 (verse 24) of the Hebrew Bible is the source of *Hava Nagila*. The melody was taken from a Balkan folk dance-song. The commonly used text was probably composed by Abraham Zevi Idelsohn in 1918 to celebrate the British defeat of the Ottoman Turks in Palestine during World War I.

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting (Jazmin) – #634, Now is the time for turning [autumn & Yom Kippur]

Hymn #104 – When Israel Was in Egypt's Land: "Go Down Moses" is an American Negro spiritual from sometime before July 1862. It describes events in the Hebrew Bible, specifically Exodus 7:26: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses, go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, thus saith the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me", in which God commands Moses to demand the release of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

Story for all ages – Moses gets the Commandments

Joys and Concerns, then "Pebbles fall..."

Hymn #1038 – Psalm 23 – Jewish tradition holds that this was written by King David, whose life is conventionally dated to c. 1040–970 BC, his reign over Judah c. 1010–1002 BC, and his reign over the United Kingdom of Israel c. 1002–970 BCE. Christian tradition holds that the poem is about God and Jesus. Psalm 23 is often recited at Christian funerals in North America. During the September 11th attacks twelve years ago, airplane passenger Todd Beamer used the airphone on hijacked United Airlines Flight 93. His call would not go through so he was put in contact with a manager at the phone company GTE. As he realized how dire his situation was, he began to panic. To calm his nerves before he rushed the cockpit, he and GTE supervisor Lisa Jefferson together recited Psalm 23. According to Jefferson, Beamer's last audible words were "Are you guys ready? Okay, let's roll."

Offertory merging into Meditation - "Kol Nidrei" [Wikipedia: Kol Nidrei is an Aramaic declaration recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on every Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Though not a prayer, this dry legal formula and its ceremonial accompaniment have been charged with emotional undertones since the medieval period, creating a dramatic introduction to Yom Kippur. It is written in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Its name is taken from the opening words, meaning all vows.]

Sing: "From you I receive..."

Homily: Lessons from Torah – Peter Scales - Jewish scripture forms the basis of three major faith traditions in Canada – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and by extension Unitarian-Universalism. Unitarians continue to take lessons from Torah, the foundational narrative of the Jewish people. Sources of Unitarian-Universalism include (see hymnal) "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves."

A few definitions:

- Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible, sometimes called the Five Books of Moses: the English names for the books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Further books of the Jewish Bible are grouped under Prophets (including Joshua, Isaiah and Ezekiel) and Writings (including Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Ruth). Today I'm only talking about the Torah, the first five books.

- Torah is not Law but is "instruction"; Torah contains the history of the universe, history of humans, history of the Jewish people; includes the 10 Commandments... and 600 rules for kosher living.

Parts of the Creation story and Noah's flood in Torah were largely adapted from Babylonian stories. Torah was written by at least four authors and one editor; compiled in different forms through the centuries.

Some people believe that there are esoteric or secret meanings in the Torah, which can be found by those who know what all the symbols and numbers mean. Even though I took a course in Jewish mysticism from Rabbi Justin Lewis [whose in-laws are with us today], I'll leave that for another speaker.

In my research I have learned of a usage of terminology that trips us up, as UU's. If we refer to the "Old Testament" we are using Christian-centred language, because only the believers in the "New Testament" refer to the Jewish works as "old". I've learned that "Jewish Bible" is acceptable and that Torah can refer to the first 5 books or all of the Jewish books. But "Old Testament" is Christian-speak.

I want to talk about three Torah sections that will likely have passing familiarity to most of you. In the event that some folks might not know, I'm going to try and take care in how I describe them. The three sections are Creation, Man & Woman, and the Ten Commandments.

Creation: I mentioned earlier that there were at least four authors of the books of Moses. Here is one clue: the Creation is described twice, in different terms... [read from Kenneth Davis, "Don't Know Much About the Bible", pp 42-43]

Man & Woman: Just as the Creation was described twice, the origins of the first man and woman are also described twice, in different terms... [Davis, pp 43-44]

Ten Commandments - The texts commonly known as the Ten Commandments are given in two books of the Bible: Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:4-21. [Wikipedia] In Judaism, the Ten Commandments provide God's universal and timeless standard of right and wrong. Christians believe the Ten Commandments have divine authority and continue to be valid, though they have different interpretations and uses of them. Through most of Christian history, the Commandments have been considered a summary of God's law and standard of behavior, and have been central to Christian life, piety and worship. Where Catholicism emphasizes taking action to fulfill the Ten Commandments, Protestantism uses the Ten Commandments for two purposes: to outline the Christian life to each person, and to make each person realize, through their failure to live that life, that they lack the ability to do it on their own.

[Herbert Bardwell Huffmon, Professor of Old Testament, Drew University, Madison, NJ...]

[Wikipedia] Huffmon considers the Ten Commandments ... are not as explicit or detailed as rules and regulations or many other biblical laws and commandments, because they provide guiding principles that apply universally, across changing circumstances. They do not specify punishments for their violation. Their precise import must be worked out in each separate situation.

[Wikipedia] In Roman Catholicism, Jesus freed Christians from Jewish religious law, but not from their obligation to keep the Ten Commandments. They are to the moral order what the creation story is to the natural order. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church - the official exposition of the Catholic Church's Christian beliefs - the Commandments are considered essential for spiritual good health and growth, and serve as the basis for social justice. Church teaching of the Commandments is largely based on the Old and New Testaments and the writings of the early Church Fathers. In the New Testament, Jesus acknowledged their validity and instructed his disciples to go further, demanding a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees. Summarized by Jesus into two "great commandments" that teach the love of God and love of neighbor, they instruct individuals on their relationships with both.

- I. I am the LORD thy God; thou shalt have no other gods
- II. No graven images or likenesses
- III. Not take the LORD's name in vain
- IV. Remember the sabbath day
- V. Honour thy father and thy mother
- VI. Thou shalt not murder
- VII. Thou shalt not commit adultery
- VIII. Thou shalt not steal [or kidnap]
- IX. Thou shalt not bear false witness
- X. Thou shalt not covet

I have heard many Unitarians refer to the Jewish intention of *tikkun olam*, actions to perfect the world. I did a bit of digging, and *tikkun olam* is not in the five books of Moses; it's in a prayer by Joshua. More importantly for UU's, *tikkun olam* is not synonymous with our seventh principle, regarding the interconnectedness of all

living things, nor is it strictly about environmentalism. [Wikipedia] The phrase *tikkun olam* is included in the Aleinu, a Jewish prayer that is traditionally recited three times daily. The Aleinu, said to have been written by the prophet Joshua, praises God for allowing the Jewish people to serve God, and expresses hope that the whole world one day will recognize God and abandon idolatry. The phrase *tikkun olam* is used in the longer expression *l'takken olam b'malkhut Shaddai*, "to perfect the world under God's sovereignty." In other words, when all the people of the world abandon false gods and recognize God, the world will have been perfected. Alternatively, being that we share a partnership with God, humanity is instructed to take the steps towards improving the state of the world and helping others, which simultaneously brings more honor to God's sovereignty.

For Unitarian-Universalists today, lessons in Torah include (a) the importance of fighting slavery, (b) the importance of maintaining fidelity to one's religion, (c) the importance of having articles of faith clearly written down, (d) instructions on how to act in community, and (e) stark lessons about flaws and contradictions in written texts.

Let me say a few words about the importance of written texts. Five years ago a British theologian spoke at UVic on three successive evenings. On the first evening his topic was "Jews and Torah"; the second evening was "Christians and the Bible"; and the third evening was "Muslims and the Koran." He said that whereas many Christians argue for the inerrancy of the Bible – that is to say that there are no mistakes and all is unquestionably divine – Jews accept that Torah contains contradictions and that its texts must be studied and argued. Jews are impelled by the story of Abraham bargaining with God in Genesis 18... God says he's going to kill everyone in the town of Sodom... Abraham asks if God will kill everyone if Abraham can find 40 good men... God relents. In four steps of haggling, Abraham bargains God down to 10 good men. *This* is a side of Torah that most Christians might have a hard time with. I would like to suggest that it's a part of Torah that Unitarians might be *most* happy with!

Conclusions: I wanted to talk about three Torah sections: Creation, Man & Woman, and the Ten Commandments. I wanted to draw out some lessons from the Jewish source of Unitarian-Universalism. In a future homily I will try to do the same with our Christian sources. We cannot ignore our history. We can accept, reject or modify our sources but first we have to know what those sources mean to us. I hope that today's homily has re-started us on that path.

Hymn #1042 – By the Rivers of Babylon (reggae version)

[Wikipedia] The song is based on Psalm 137:1-4, a hymn expressing the yearnings of the Jewish people in exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BC: Previously the Kingdom of Israel, after being united under Kings David and Solomon, was split in two, with the Kingdom Of Israel in the north, conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC which caused the dispersion of 11 of the 12 tribes of Israel. The southern Kingdom of Judah, home of the tribe of Judah and part of the Tribe of Levi, was free from foreign domination until the Babylonian conquest to which *Rivers Of Babylon* refers.

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion... They carried us away in captivity requiring of us a song... Now how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" The name-sake rivers of Babylon are the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The song also has words from Psalm 19:14: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight..." It is one of a few pop songs whose lyrics come directly from the Bible (See also *Turn! Turn! Turn!* by Pete Seeger, *40* by U2, and *The Lord's Prayer* by Sister Janet Mead). The melody bears a strong resemblance to "How Dry I Am". In the Rastafarian faith, the term "Babylon" is used for any governmental system which is either oppressive or unjust. In Jamaica, Rastafarians also use "Babylon" to refer to the police, often seen as a source of oppression because they arrest members for the use of marijuana (which is sacramental for Rastafarians). Therefore, "By the rivers of Babylon" refers to living in a repressive society and the longing for freedom, just like the Israelites in captivity. Rastafarians also identify themselves as belonging to the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Closing Words & Chalice Extinguishing – 636, Bless Us With Peace

Linking Song: #123