

SOURCE #4, WISDOM FROM THE TEACHINGS OF
JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Rev. Kit Ketcham

We've examined, to this point, three of the sources of Unitarian Universalism. Let's turn in our hymnals to the page where all of the Sources are listed and read together the list we've considered so far.

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources:
Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;
Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.

Today we come to our Fourth Source, probably our most basic source and, for some a challenge to understand and to acknowledge. Let's read it together:

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The challenge I refer to is not this simple statement which focuses on ancient teachings of hospitality and inclusiveness, but the challenge of examining and taking to heart the wisdom of religions which have struggled to survive modern culture with integrity and grace.

Judaism and Christianity, as well as their Abrahamic cousin, Islam, have been beset by the fervor of fundamentalist thought and have diverged widely from the original teachings of their major prophets. Because of this muddying of authentic teachings, it has been hard for Unitarian Universalists to see clearly the depth of meaning in these two foundational religious traditions.

I hope that my thoughts today can take us to those depths, can help us see the profound impact that monotheistic Judaism and Christianity have had on our Unitarian Universalist sensibilities.

Let me read you an ancient text, Micah 6:verses 6-8, a passage in the Jewish scripture which is so well-known and well-loved that it appears in our hymnal as a selected reading.

In the passage, a Hebrew seeker for truth is asking a question: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will God be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression? The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

And the Hebrew prophet Micah answers the seeker: “God has told you, o mortal, what is good... and what is required of you (is) but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Now, to me, a young girl in the 50’s, struggling to figure out what I believed---the fantastic stories of Jesus’s miracles or the Ten Commandments, or the small town norms prohibiting nice Baptist girls from dancing and movies---these words came as a huge relief when I discovered them.

Even a teenager beset by boy troubles and zits could understand them: be fair, be kind, be humble.

The law and the prophets in a nutshell. A guide for living a moral and ethical life. I'm reminded these many years later of Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum's small essay, "All I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten".

I didn't know at the time any of the historical or literary significance of these prophetic words in the book of Micah. I didn't know the Seeker had recited a prioritized list of the possible ways for the Jews to honor their God with sacrifice. I didn't know that this was a reference to a famous judicial verdict based on a covenant between the Jews and their God. I hadn't been listening hard enough in Sunday School up to that point to absorb the knowledge that this is a perfect summary of what prophets from many world religions have said is true religion: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly.

All I knew was that it was music to my ears. It answered a good many of my questions in language that was very clear to me. It said nothing about dancing or movies, but that was okay---at the time, nobody was asking me to dance or to go to a movie. However, people were inviting me to be unfair, unkind, arrogant and egotistic.

This passage became kind of a blueprint for my life. It was the internal plumbline that I came to depend upon as I made decisions. Later I added that famous quotation from the teacher Jesus in the Christian scriptures, when Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and that the second greatest is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This seemed to me to be a restating of Micah's truth: that our relationships with God as we understand the concept of God, our relationships with our neighbor, and our relationships with our selves must be of the highest and most loving quality.

These two Bible passages, one from the Jewish scriptures and one from the Christian canon, seemed to me to be the essence of living right. And I eventually decided, over the years, that these two teachings summed up all of the Ten Commandments, all of the intent of Jewish law, all of the original wisdom of Christian doctrine.

I didn't see a need for anything else, not hashing and rehashing the finer points of Christian creeds or the literal interpretation of ancient purity laws which seemed unrealistic in the 20th century. It seemed to me that theology, a word which literally means "knowledge of the Divine", theology had to be based on life in the real world and had to be accessible to all, regardless of education, reading level, brain power, nationality or age.

So when I found that Unitarian Universalism seemed to think the same thing, I was hooked! For a religion to focus on justice, kindness, humility, and love seemed to cut through the doctrinal hype and get to the heart of human living.

I was looking for a faith that made sense, that took the ancient teachings, validated them where it was reasonable to do so, and let go of the rest. So much of the ancient doctrine in religions was based on cultural norms that simply didn't work in the 20th century and I wanted a faith that worked fulltime, in my life.

Since that time, my education has included a detailed look at both Jewish and Christian scripture. In seminary, everyone studies the Bible.

Whether we are Christian or Jewish or Buddhist or UU or whatever, we live in a Judeo-Christianized society and it is essential for a minister to understand the Bible, whether it is our favorite sacred text or not! So many literary and cultural references originate in the Bible that we neglect its words to our own detriment.

As I have studied the Bible and have looked at its wisdom through the lens of my Unitarian Universalist faith, I have sorted out the importance of its stories, its laws and directives, and the credibility of its prophets by holding them under the lights of justice, kindness, humility, and love, examining my own attitudes and behavior in the same ways.

And what I've come to believe is that beneath the trappings of modern Judaism and Christianity there beats a heart of goodness and mercy. We often don't see it in our world which is so convinced that fundamentalist Judaism or Christianity are true examples of these religions.

When presidential candidates tout the doctrines of their faith rather than the bedrock on which those doctrines are loosely stacked, the world sees only the doctrines, the picayune trivia which distinguish denominations and sects from one another. The world does not see the character of the candidate, only the candidate's desire to suck up to a certain political base. And, of course, that says something right there about the character of the candidate.

Are there other teachings from Judaism and Christianity that we UUs have incorporated into our faith tradition? I think so. I think there are moral examples in both religions that we have absorbed and taken to heart. They are portrayed more in stories than in adages and proverbs.

The history of Judaism is the history of a people who have consistently spoken truth to power, whether we see that in the Hanukkah story of the Maccabees or in the tales of the prophets who spoke the words of justice and righteousness to a wayward nation. The Jews have lived out the story of the quest for religious and cultural freedom.

Oppressed and persecuted, the Jews continued to come back, to persist, to overcome adversity and thrive. This has not made them popular with everyone because victims are supposed to continue to be victims, at least according to conventional, but unspoken, so-called wisdom.

But the lesson of faithfulness to a cause, to a principle, to a concept of right behavior and right relationship---this is something we have taken to heart in Unitarian Universalism, even though we do not live it out as successfully as we might.

The story of Hanukkah is a good example of this faithfulness. Let me offer the essence of that story as told by my colleague the Rev. Debra Haffner. She writes:

_In (the year)167 (before the common era), a Greek leader named Antiochus attempted to institute a Greek state religion. He ordered the takeover of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, had a statue of Zeus built on its altar, and called for ritual sacrifice there and in other Jewish temples throughout the countryside.

(In protest) Mattathias (a Jewish leader) killed the first (person) who came forward to offer a sacrifice (plus) a state official, and Mattathias and his five sons were forced to escape to the hills. Together, they organized first a small band of rebels to resist Antiochus, which grew to a 6000 person army that retook Jerusalem and the Temple.

Three years from the day that the statue of Zeus was erected, Judas Maccabeus and his followers rededicated and purified the Temple in an 8 day celebration. Chanukah has been celebrated more or less continuously for 2,170 years. __ Chanukah is the first recorded battle for religious freedom and against efforts to have a minority religion assimilated into a larger whole, reason enough for us to celebrate it in today's world where religious fundamentalists claim that theirs is the only truth. _

_ “But the legend of Chanukah also speaks to me (as a UU). According to a very short passage in the Talmud, the Maccabees came into the temple and after purifying it, went to relight the eternal flame. They only had enough oil for one day. Pressing new oil from the olive trees would take another week. Miraculously the oil lasted for the entire eight days. The Rabbis who wrote the Talmud transformed the telling of the history from a heroic military battle into a story of God’s miracle and grace to the Jewish people. They moved it from a story based on the facts to a story based on the universal need for faith and hope and redemption.”

In addition to the story of Hanukkah, we remember the courage of Moses who spoke the truth of oppression and injustice to the Egyptian Pharaoh, forcing the Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people escape slavery.

We remember the story of Job, who lost everything and railed at God for the injustice of God’s treatment. Job and God had a major argument, according to the story, and in the end, Job was restored to good health and long life, despite his terrible losses. God got in a few choice words but God did make amends.

And the Psalms are full of angry and agonized fist-shakings at God. Why are you doing this to me, the psalmist asks. The Psalms really give it to God. And we do too, questioning the goodness of a God who tolerates the cruelty of the world.

In addition, we find the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year which begins a period of ten days of self-examination and repentance and culminating in Yom Kippur, a time of atonement and reconciliation, to be valuable reminders of how important are our relationships with the Divine (however we conceive that), with each other, and with ourselves.

We may not celebrate these holidays as do our Jewish friends and neighbors, but this wisdom---of self-examination, acknowledgement of mistakes made and forgiveness given and received---is implicit in our seven Principles.

And what is it about Christianity that we find inherent in our UU faith? We often are so repelled by the behavior of some who call themselves Christian that we fail to see the goodness in this religion which is our closest spiritual ancestor.

At our conversation evening this coming Saturday, I want to spend time talking about our concerns about Christianity, about the sense of betrayal some of us have as we see our childhood religious heritage turned into something that feels wrong, feels unwise, even foolish and foolhardy, and sometimes cruel.

Leaving aside the supernatural aspects of Christianity, which are problematic in themselves, we are deeply troubled by the message of many more conservative Christian denominations.

We see the teachings of Jesus set aside, ignored; his behavior of inclusiveness overlooked in favor of branding an outsider as sinful.

So we feel angry and resentful. We may remember unkindness and prejudice directed at us or at our friends and family by so-called Christian leaders who were cruel and exclusionary, unable to offer compassion because of adherence to strict doctrinal laws.

We may know of the hypocrisy of perverted adults who misused us or our family and friends for their own pleasure. We may feel scorn for those who refuse to acknowledge scientific understandings as reasonable. We may wonder at those who are not reflective or introspective about religious teachings and prefer an unchanging dogma.

All these attitudes can really get in our way when it comes to appreciating the contributions of the teachings of Jesus, because we conflate those legitimate teachings with the hybrid conglomeration of ancient purity laws, exclusivity, sanctimonious piety, and political conservatism that characterizes many Christian denominations today.

There is more than one kind of Christianity out there. There is politically conservative Christianity, there is mainline middle-of-the-road Christianity which takes few positions, there is liberal Christianity, like many of the denominations which support such social causes as marriage equality and other justice issues, there is Unitarian Universalist Christianity, which studies and lives out the teachings of Jesus as seen through a 21st century lens. There may be others too!

But the Christianity that has fed our Unitarian Universalist faith is the religion that, taking a lesson from Judaism, offers radical hospitality to the stranger, to the outsider, to the one who is different, whose behavior is not mainstream.

Our Christian roots go deep into the soil under Jesus' feet, as he spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven being within each of us, as he chided the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, as he spoke of peacemaking and humility. Our Christian roots get nourishment from the parable of the Good Samaritan, the story of the prodigal son, Jesus' kindness to the children he met on his travels, the courage he and other prophets displayed as they faced death as punishment for their idealism, for speaking truth to power.

And we see, in the legends of resurrection, the certainty of love that does not die; in the stories of a miraculous birth, the miracle that is every child's birth. In the love and loyalty of his parents, the love and commitment of parents everywhere.

Legend has it that Jesus lived a perfect life. We are inclined to believe that Jesus led a perfectly normal human life, but lived it with greater integrity and vision than his peers.

We have much to revere and celebrate in our Jewish and Christian roots. We may look askance at the distortion and violation of Jesus' teachings by some groups, but we ourselves have a great deal to live up to because of our those roots.

Our seven principles reflect the respect for human life, compassion and justice, liberty and community which are the bedrock of essential Jewish and Christian faith. We are wise when we acknowledge and revere these teachings and live them out in our daily lives.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN # 248, " O We Believe in Christmas"

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, pondering the gifts of the ancient religious teachings of Judaism and Christianity. May we see past the superficialities that trouble us and behold the heart of faiths that sprang from a deep desire to honor the Divine and to care for our fellow human beings and the earth. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.