

A Wholly New Year

Jamaica Plain, September 16, 2001, Rev. Terry Burke

Bismillalah, il Rahman, il Rahim – "In the name of Allah, the infinitely merciful, the infinitely compassionate."

I begin this sermon with a standard Muslim prayer in order to make the point that there is no more connection between the values of Islam and this week's killers than there was between the values of Christianity and the suicidal cult of Jim Jones.

Traditionally, this is our church service where I talk about the High Holy Days of Judaism, and we install our church's Standing Committee with a laying on of hands. Yet, we must speak and act today in the light of the carnage of the past week.

On Monday, the Shofar or ram's horn will sound the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah begins the Days of Awe which culminate in Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. The Days of Awe are a time of individual and community repentance, a time to seek a closer relationship with God. In Judaism, essential themes include the centrality of humans' relationship with God, the freedom and dignity of the human person, and the joy of studying and living by the Torah.

The sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a reminder of the same trumpet sound of the Torah's Jubilee year, to be celebrated every 50 years. The Jubilee Year was to be a time of shalom or peace (salaam in Arabic) a time to let the land lie fallow, a time to redistribute the land to its original

This Rosh Hashanah we have not a holy new year, but a wholly, completely new year and world as Americans. Today we say the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for dead, and remember that in the Talmud it says, "when you kill a person, a whole world dies." The

press proclaims September 11th as a "New Day of Infamy." However, the old "Day of Infamy," the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, was a surprise attack on military personnel – not on the civilians of the city of Honolulu.

Last Spring I traveled in Russian and Poland. During World War II, Russian civilian casualties were over 15 million people; Poland lost a quarter of its population. The United States has been very fortunate that almost none of our civilians were killed in the wars of the 20th century. Now, this week, over 5,000 people are dead, killed in a horrific way. It is a new year.

We gather today in that reality to speak about the High Holy Days, and hear today's lesson on God's calling Moses to be a leader of his people. Near Mt. Horeb,(Mt. Sinai),God speaks to Moses from the burning bush. The experience of the burning bush calls Moses to lead Israel from slavery and oppression to justice and community. This week, burning buildings and burning planes have been our endlessly televised images.

The terrorists used their hijacked planes to attack symbols of American power and authority – the Pentagon, the World Trade Center, and Camp David, the last location possibly because the Middle East peace accords were signed there. Through murder and mayhem they have tried to change our lives, and to make us afraid.

During the Days of Awe, people are called to examine their lives and their relationship to the Holy, to repent and do justice. How are we being called to change in this new year by the burning planes and buildings?

People seem to be judging their activities more in the light of what is truly important. The reality of our own mortality, and the possibility, however remote, of sudden death, have a great power to focus one's attention. I ask myself, "what do I want my life to say, what do I want my life to have been about, when viewed from the other side?"

Somehow, even in these times, I believe that we are called to try to love. The day after the attacks, I was walking my daughter to school when we stopped to talk with an elderly neighbor. As she often does, she was sitting outside on the sidewalk in a lawn chair. Pleased to see my daughter, she said, "I love you. I love everybody." Then my neighbor pointed at me, "He loves everybody, he's a minister." At that point I must admit that I didn't feel much like loving everybody. Yet our faith tradition, and the teachings of Jesus, Dr. King, and Ghandi say to love our enemies. Truly, this is a difficult spiritual practice. However, I believe that we are called to try to love, to resist the impulse to hate – to seek justice and not revenge, lest we become like the people who led these attacks.

The Jewish tradition and the Days of Awe speak of the need to serve the cause of greater justice. Our congregation's Chuck Collins and his organization United for a Fair Economy speak of the widening gap between our country's "haves" and "have nots." As this gap also widens between the countries of the world, so does it help to fuel international hatred of our nation. Unless the United States wishes to become the international equivalent of a gated suburban community, we must follow the advice of Catholic Worker Peter Maurin who said, "Live more simply, so that others may simply live."

In the spirit of repentance we need to carefully consider what is done in our name; our country armed the Afghan Taliban regime so that they could fight the Russians. Certainly I didn't bother to be informed about that at the time. And I will never think about our air strikes in the same way after seeing the images of this week.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are especially called by our living tradition to service and dialogue. Our church has begun collecting funds for the relief work of the Red Cross, and the combined relief fund of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. We also need to stand up against the hatred directed towards Muslims and people of Middle Eastern background.

A church member told me that Muslim students are staying away from classes at her college because they are afraid. Last week, at a monthly clergy meeting, my friend and colleague Lucinda Duncan asked us to invite members of our congregations to take part in a Unitarian Universalist/Muslim dialogue. I hope that some of us will take her up on that offer. After this service, I invite you to gather back in the sanctuary to talk about our possible responses as a congregation to the crisis, or to simply talk.

This terrible new year is a time of fear and uncertainty but, ultimately, somehow, this is God's world: the bush burns, but is not consumed. Judaism teaches that relationship with God is central for us as humans.

Christian author C. S. Lewis wrote that the only thing a religious person should be truly afraid of, is doing things that separate oneself from God.

We are blessed with the gift of being part of a spiritual community, this congregation, and we support one another in our sorrow and joy. In a moment we will perform the ancient rite of the laying on of hands for our church Standing Committee. We remember and give thanks for the work of Bob LaVallee, our Chairperson, away in Buffalo visiting his Mother, who is gravely ill. These leaders are serving the First Church in Jamaica Plain, Unitarian Universalist in troubled times; may they wisely lead this congregation as it responds to the call to embody God's love and justice.

This Rosh Hashanah, during these unsettled and painful times, may we remember the words of the great prophet Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "We must become ministers of the sacred, or slaves of evil."