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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768/ Sept. 12, 2007
Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA
“Ever read the Bible?”

One Sunday during the summer a couple of strangers rang our door bell. This time it was two young handsome well-dressed African-American men. They greeted me warmly and asked if I ever read the Bible . . .

“Actually I do,” I said, “pretty much every day.”

I could tell they weren’t expecting that answer, but anyway asked if they could leave me a brochure about their religion.

“No thanks,” I said, pointing to the mezuzah. “I’m Jewish and quite happy with that.” I don’t think they knew what a mezuzah is, and one of them looked a little alarmed.

“Don’t be afraid,” I smiled, “I’m just a Jew – you know, me and Jesus – both Jews.”

“ohhhh, oh yeah,” one of them said kind of quizzically, and then he said, “Could I ask you something just for my own education?” I nodded, and he asked, “what is your Bible? I don’t know what Jews read – is it the Koran or our Bible or something else? I’m just asking because I don’t know and I’d like to learn.”

I asked to see his Bible and I opened it to the table of contents and ran my finger down the Old Testament listings and stopped as I got to the New – “our Bible is the same as yours,” I said, “except we stop here – We stop with what you call the Old Testament.”

“Oh, he said, interesting – good to know.” And then he asked a question I didn’t quite know how to answer: “Why? Why do you stop there?” “Um, good question,” I said and paused, “well, Jesus stopped there too . . . ummm, I guess that was enough for us.”

I said that, but of course that was a little disingenuous on my part – it’s not like Jesus had the New Testament around to reject (or even our version to accept – not exactly as we know it, anyway). Besides the New one quotes Jesus a lot and makes much of him – surely he would have liked some of that! – even if much of it would have taken him by surprise. In fact, there’s plenty in the New Testament that I like too, and probably even more if I really studied it. But I choose not to. And most of you choose not to too. . . . Come to think of it, despite my frequent nudging, most of us in this room don’t much read the original version – our version -- let alone really study it. Nonetheless, we take some of its stories as our own.

Which begs some questions: how do we choose our stories, and of what significance are they really in our lives? And what place do other people’s stories – other religions’ stories and teachings and traditions have in our lives? What place should they have?

Just two weeks ago, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of our own Union for Reform Judaism, gave a news-making speech to the Islamic Society of North America [ISNA]. Rabbi Yoffie gently reprimanded them and us for not knowing each others' stories, and for allowing that to lead us toward thinking God might approve of only one set of those stories. "Surely," Rabbi Yoffie suggested, "[this] God is big enough to accommodate a range of thinking and an inescapably plural religious reality. And surely, because God is God and we are not God, we can recognize that other religions have much to teach us. "It is our collective task," he told the Muslims gathered there, "to strengthen and inspire one another as we fight the fanatics and work to promote the values of justice and love that are common to both our faiths."¹

In the audience at Rabbi Yoffie's address was a man named Eboo Patel, founder and director of a forward-thinking Chicago-based, international organization called the [Interfaith Youth Core](#) (spelled C-O-R-E!, by the way]. Dr. Patel, an American Muslim of Indian heritage, is a Rhodes Scholar Oxford Ph.D. in the sociology of religion.²

In a recent on-line essay Patel writes of a friendly encounter he had at that same conference where Rabbi Yoffie spoke:

I ran into a Muslim high school kid I know.

"Good summer?" I asked.

"Great summer," he said. "I went to a Muslim camp."

"Yeah, what did you learn?" I asked.

"To love Jesus," he said.

Dr. Patel goes on to remind us that Muslim tradition views Jesus, and Moses, and Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, among others, as prophets and teachers whose example of mercy and monotheism are part of Muslim teaching.

Dr. Patel and Rabbi Yoffie, in their call to share our learning with one another, echo and perhaps also add to a famous teaching found in the Talmud:

It seems that the students of two famous Jewish teachers – Shammai and Hillel – were in a 3 year dispute with each other. Each school –Shammai's and Hillel's – claimed that the LAW – halakhah – was in agreement with their views.

Finally a voice rang out from heaven (a bat kol) and announced:

"These and these are both the words of the Living God"

eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim hayyim

That caused a lot of raised eyebrows, and even more when the voice continued, both of these are the words of the living God, and the law is according to the School of Hillel."³

Got it so far?

[pick out people] You're right and you're right, but ...we're going with you.

"Why?" You might ask [point at one]...and [point at the other] you might ask.

And the Talmud asks that too – if they're both words of the Living God – what's the deal?
Why does Hillel win?

Because, the Talmud answers, the students of Hillel were kindly and modest [some say, amiable and forgiving], they studied their own views and they studied those of the School of Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the views of Shammai before their own views.⁴

Whether a true story or not, as long ago as the 6th century, Jewish tradition teaches that there is more than one way to interpret sacred texts. A fact that all Jews know, and that liberal Jews especially seem to appreciate. And, just as Rabbi Yoffie and Dr. Patel teach today, all those centuries ago what was even more important than one's interpretation was one's willingness to study the views of others, and respectfully to include their teachings -- with kindness and modesty – and finally with the knowledge that both views – eilu v'eilu might just be the words of the Living God – divrei Elohim chayim.

Six years and one day out from 9/11 (and still around to count), I feel a more pressing obligation to learn with others – to tell our stories and listen to theirs – to bring our worlds together, to bridge our worlds, to remind ourselves that our worlds need live together in this -- our one world.

This world. . . this world. Not just olam hazeh, as Talmud calls it – the opposite of olam ha-bah – “the world to come.” But this world – as we know it today – the one we're living in... I was talking recently with a fellow baby-boomer who remarked that a huge difference between our generation and any to follow is that our generation – the baby boom generation – was the last to grow up feeling like our children will inherit a better world than we did. I question that assessment – perhaps every generation of parents hopes they will leave a better world to their children, but surely many generations – especially Jewish parents -- have questioned whether this was so. I know my own parents -- the memory of them is such a blessing – already well into adulthood during WWII – hesitated for many years before having children, thinking this was no world to bring children into. Perhaps the oldest of the boomers, or the youngest of my parents' generation, briefly thought we were all headed in the right direction –
But when exactly was that?
Perhaps post the founding of the State of Israel and pre-the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Or before WWII perhaps?

One of my colleagues tells us that just before WWII American Jews of Yiddish descent believed in -- three worlds -- drie velten:
this world -- die velt –;

the next world -- yene velt --;
and Roosevelt.⁵

And then there's what we now know about Roosevelt refusing Jewish refugees and much more...sigh I sometimes wonder if Tisha B'av -- the annual Jewish fast day of mourning for all the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people -- wasn't invented simply to remind us that every generation has faced tough times and still kept Judaism alive, and still gave birth to yet another generation.

At the end of that Talmud discussion about the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai comes a disturbing epilogue. Our Rabbis taught: For another two and a half years the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel were again in dispute, Shammai asserting that it would have been better had humans NEVER been created, and Hillel maintaining that it is better that humans had been created.

Finally, both schools took a vote and decided that it would have been better had humans NEVER been created, but since they were, let each person investigate his/her past deeds or, others say, let each examine his/her future actions. [Eruvin 13b]

And there we have -- for all time -- our annual assignment for these Days of Awe and the month leading up to them -- to investigate our past deeds AND examine our future actions. To use our past to change ourselves in order that we might create a better future.

It quite saddens me, frankly, that the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel both decided it would have been better had humans NEVER been created -- how sad that well before humans inflicted global warming or global warfare on our planet, we had already done plenty to make our sages wary. But Shammai and Hillel's response -- their mutual response -- to nonetheless reflect and take action -- now that inspires me.

So suppose for a moment we are forever-post-feeling-like-we're-going-to-leave-behind-a-better-world-than-the-one-we-came-into, it takes us back to the charge from both Hillel and Shammai: nonetheless here we are -- so what are we going to do about it?

Tomorrow morning we will read and hear again that annual challenge -- the unetaneh tokef reflection -- powerful words, powerful music, dramatic recitation before the open ark of a God judging each of us, a litany of life's uncertainties.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die...

Verse after verse, it's easy to be hypnotized or frightened by the stunning, scary poetry. But the verses are not really a prayer offered to God, not a plea for mercy from on high, but a call to action. The unetaneh tokef is about Hillel and Shammai's charge to us -- do tshuvah, tefilah, tzedakah says the prayer - investigate our past, examine our future; and pray; and do what is just.

Which leads us to another verse of the Unetaneh Tokef -- a less noticed verse: "You [God] will open the book of remembering -- v'tiftakh et sefer ha-zikhronot -- and it will read itself

u-mei-eilav yikarei, and the seal of every person's hand is in it – v'khotam yad kol adam bo.

This is not God writing your name in a book of life – this is God exhorting us to investigate our past. This is you & this is I signing our own names in a book of remembrances – it is each of us, signing off on having investigated our past – on coming to terms with it, on resolving to make use of what we have seen and done and learned. And it is all of us together – you & I -- signing up for the future.

What falls to chance and what do we have a hand in? Judaism clearly does believe we have a hand in changing, in healing, in working toward a better future.

I want to accept Rabbi Yoffie's charge, and I want you to join me. In the months and years to come let's take action – let's have more interaction with people who have stories different from ours.

We've actually begun this already. In the past year BCC members Jerry Nodiff and Michael Halstater, along with a number of helping hands, put together an amazing series of Interfaith studies called Bridges to Understanding, those focused mainly on Muslim-Jewish dialogue. Sharing stories, texts, teachings – you know the routine – as an LGBT inclusive Jewish congregation, we've spent years already coming to understand how stories – personal and cultural – help overcome prejudice and establish friendships. And we have a lot still to do -- even dialoguing and sharing between the L's and G's and B's and T's and straight-but-not-narrows within our own community. Let's not forget to do that part – to talk with each other.

We've also, as a congregation, begun to share with other diverse Jewish communities as well. Through Davi Cheng's and then BCC's association with B'chol Lashon – “In Every Tongue” -- the Jewish institute that brings together Jews from varied ethnic and racial origins, as well as interracial and interfaith families -- we've begun to widen our perspectives, broaden our outreach, welcome in more and different people to be a part of our community.

For me - until now - this kind of outreach and inreach, learning and sharing, has been primarily because it's fascinating and fun – a pleasure to develop new friendships, to move beyond the safe little LA Ashkenazi Jewish queer community where I am blessed to spend most of my time. But I don't think I realized until recently – until my New Testament friends rang my doorbell, until Rabbi Yoffie spoke, until I bumped into Eboo Patel on the internet – I didn't realize that the invitation I'm issuing to all of us tonight is really a matter of saving the world -- every bit as urgent and compelling as our necessary response to global warming.

In fact, what I'm calling on us to do is to promote global warming – a good kind of global warming! Some glaciers ought to be melted – like the ones that freeze people out of communities, the ones that separate people of different religions, and put up icy walls of prejudice, ignorance, hatred, or just indifference.

When I think of all the things I don't know about Christianity, let alone Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or any other so-called major world religion, let alone other value systems that people – maybe people right next door to me, maybe people right in this sanctuary – take on as their own . . . We know so little about our neighbors.

And for starters anyway – not to get nations to the peace table – but just between friends and neighbors, what is needed? What will it take really?

When I mentioned the missionaries' visit to some serious Christian friends of mine, they were appalled at the young men's lack of knowledge about Judaism. And they were surprised I gave them as much time as I did (it wasn't very much time really – a few minutes).

My friends' astonishment made me think – but where would those guys have learned what I wanted them to know about Judaism? I hadn't yet learned what they wanted me to know about Christianity. Perhaps the only place for each of us to learn what the other wanted us to know would be to do exactly what we did – have a brief, earnest, respectful, humble, amiable, forgiving conversation with each other.

For after all, what do we need to know about each other in order to understand and respect and appreciate each others' stories and faith and beliefs? Perhaps if we join in a mutual “investigation of our pasts, and an examining of our hopes for our future” we will -- eilu v'eilu– each of us and all of us -- come to hear - divrei Elohim chayim – “words of the Living God.”

Will you join me?

Shana tova u'metuka Ramadan mubarak [let's take the overlapping of our two holy days this year as a sign].

May it be a sweet year of open hands and open hearts, a year of learning and of bringing peace to God's good earth.

FOOTNOTE 1 <http://urj.org/yoffie/isna/index.cfm> Remarks to the Islamic Society of North America 44th Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois Friday, August 31st, 2007 By Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie President, Union for Reform Judaism

FOOTNOTE 2 Eboo Patel is founder and executive director a Chicago-based international nonprofit that promotes interfaith cooperation. His blog, The Faith Divide, explores the tensions between religious pluralists and religious totalitarians.
[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/eboo_patel/]

FOOTNOTE 3 [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin end of13b]

FOOTNOTE 4 So, the Talmud text goes on to ask: Since, however, ‘both are the words of the living God’ , eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim hayyim, what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the halachah fixed in agreement with their rulings? – because, the text answers, they were kindly and modest [some say, amiable and forgiving], they studied their own views and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the views of Beit Shammai before theirs.

FOOTNOTE 5 Rabbi Harry Danziger to the CCAR 6/19/06

http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=762&pge_prg_id=4108&pge_id=1001