

Not In God's Name
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This past summer, I travelled to Israel with a group of Boston-area Christian ministers on a trip sponsored by the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC). I did the same thing about six years ago. You may recall my speaking about that trip, or perhaps you remember meeting one or another of the ministers with whom I travelled. That trip was a very uplifting experience for me.

And so, it was no surprise that I was looking forward to the trip this summer. What could be more fulfilling than helping to guide such a group to Israel? For Christian clergy are religious leaders whose faith connects them deeply to events that took place in the Land of Israel, and they address hundreds of parishioners each and every Sunday. Think of the impact a trip like this can have on our non-Jewish friends and neighbors! Particularly given the bad publicity that Israel so often receives in the press, trips like these pose a great opportunity to present a balanced picture.

Most of the clergy had not previously been to Israel. Some had, but, ... well, I like to put it this way: they may have travelled to the Holy Land, but they hadn't necessarily ever reached Israel. What do I mean by that? Well, if you travel to Israel with a church group, you can find yourself travelling by bus to Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Bethlehem, East Jerusalem and so on – without ever encountering, much less having an exchange of ideas with, ordinary Israeli Jews. Not only might you not see any of the Jewish holy sites, but you might not ever be exposed to an articulation of the Zionist dream, the Jewish narrative of national renaissance and return that led to the creation of the State, and that explains so much about how we feel about Israel. A JCRC-sponsored Christian clergy trip like ours exposes participants to the deep Jewish connection with the Land, to the tremendous social and cultural accomplishments of the State and to the complexity that is modern Israel today.

Our trip started off beautifully. We visited the Conservative synagogue in Haifa where we met with an imam who, at great risk to his safety, is a staunch proponent of dialogue and coexistence, and Assaf Ron, the director of Beit Ha-Gefen, a Jewish-Arab cultural center in Haifa. (Incidentally, Mr. Ron is coming to Boston in October with a 17-year-old Christian Arab girl and a 17-year-old Jewish girl; watch ComingUp@Aliyah for details); we travelled to the Lebanese border where we spoke with the young IDF soldiers and officers guarding the border; we visited a hospital in Nahariya which has been quietly treating wounded Syrians for months. We went to Yemin Orde, a youth village in the north, and spoke with a truly inspiring Ethiopian Israeli woman about the marvelous work done there to help kids coming from dysfunctional families.

We travelled to Nazareth and toward the Hill of the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes is the name of that beautiful passage in the New Testament (Matthew 5) in which the Sermon of the Mount appears, with words like:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

...

One of our ministers explicated that passage for us. He translated that word “blessed” as “**fully satisfied.**” That, he said, is how he tries to feel each and every day, appreciative of all of God’s blessings.

That’s how I was feeling that day: **fully satisfied.** There I was, with good people, men and women of faith whom I was getting to know, in a land that I love.

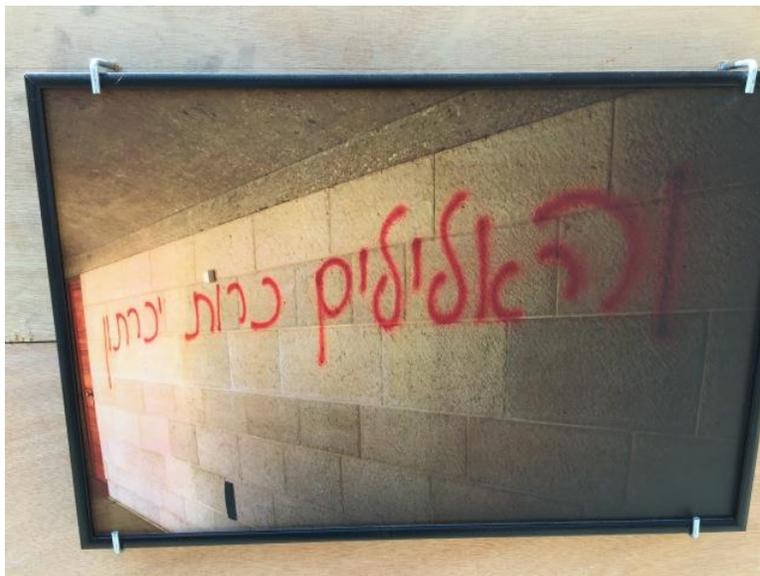


But then we travelled to the Church of the Loaves and the Fishes near the Sea of Galilee.¹ The name comes from the famous passage in the New Testament describing how Jesus multiplied a few loaves and fishes until there was enough to feed five thousand people.² There's been a church on that site for over 1,500 years.

I'd been looking forward to going to that church. It's a beautiful church—but that day it looked awful. The reason is that several weeks previously it had been partially destroyed by a fire that was set by Jewish arsonists. Not only did it *look* awful; it *smelled* awful. It reeked of charred timbers. One of the African-American ministers on our trip, for whom the idea of firebombing a church is all too familiar, put it like this: “The smell,” he said, “was the smell of hate.”

We walked by photographs taken on the night of the fire. Most showed the flames shooting up into the sky, but there was one large picture of graffiti, in Hebrew, that had been sprayed on the walls of the church.³ It was in clear, cursive Hebrew script: *v'ha-elilim karot yikareitun*; “And false gods shall be utterly destroyed.”

Does that phrase sound familiar? It should. It comes from the Aleinu, a prayer we recite at the end of virtually every service. It's in the second paragraph, not the paragraph that we recite out loud, so it might not be as familiar as, say, a phrase like, “*she-hu noteh shamayim, v'yosed aretz,*” or any of the other passages that we generally sing out loud.



The phrase happens to be really familiar to me because in the shul I attended when I was growing up, it was the practice to recite those words out loud:

We therefore hope in Thee, O Lord, Our God,
that we may soon see the triumph of your might,
when idolatry shall be uprooted from the earth,
and false gods shall be utterly destroyed.

Seeing that graffiti was very upsetting to me. It was of course upsetting to see the damage done to the church. But what was most upsetting was realizing that those responsible were Jews, religious Jews, who committed the crime inspired by the words of the Aleinu.

I grew up saying the Aleinu. Most of us did. Has anyone ever suggested to any of us that we should take those words as a mandate to go ahead and set fire to a church? We certainly don't teach that here. That's not our Judaism.

When I saw that passage from the Aleinu written on that wall, I felt as though something precious had been taken away from me, from all of us. Someone took the Aleinu and used it to justify an attack on a peaceful church.

But do I have the right to be so upset? After all, the words were quoted accurately, weren't they? That's what the prayer says, doesn't it? Do I have the right to be angry that some people took those words as a mandate to do exactly what the prayer says, to try to "utterly destroy" what they understand to be an idolatrous house of worship?

But if so, what then does it mean for me—for any of us—to say the Aleinu? Does it mean that somehow we are *complicit* in crimes like this? What are we saying when we recite the Aleinu? Is this, really, the religion that we believe in?

That was Thursday morning. By Thursday afternoon, we had arrived in Jerusalem.

As we prepared to check into our hotel, we realized that the annual Pride Parade in Jerusalem was about to begin right around the corner. Our clergy group had about an hour before our next commitment, so our guide gave us a choice: we could either go up to our rooms and crash for an hour, or, we

could walk with him to where the Pride Parade was going to begin, and walk with the parade back to our hotel. About half our group decided to check out the parade.

The atmosphere couldn't have been more relaxed. The air was festive, and joyful rainbow colors abounded. We met some young people who worked at the American consulate wearing colorful Pride T-shirts produced there.



We bought some paraphernalia, like the flags we are holding in this picture:



As the parade was beginning, I did notice a small group of protesters, just on the other side of the square (*Kikar Tsarfat*). They held up signs protesting what they called, the *Mitz'ad HaToevah*, the “Abomination Parade.”⁴ But the police were keeping the demonstrators far away from the marchers, so everyone was relaxed.



(The sign reads, "Jerusalem of Gold -- and of Red and Yellow and Pink and Purple and Green." About a half dozen members of our group can be seen in the background.)

We slowly made our way down the block toward our hotel.

Then, all of a sudden, it was as though a force field opened up in front of us. It's hard for me to describe it in words. Suddenly, there was a hush, and the air took on a different feel. Voices ceased. I heard popping noises. I heard shouts: “*Eifoh ha-mikhabel?*” “Where's the terrorist?” and “*Hovesh, hovesh!*” “Medic, medic.”

I saw a man with his cheek pressed against the pavement. I was confused: was he a perpetrator or a victim? The man was dressed in black, in the attire of the ultra-Orthodox. I didn't process the fact that he was the only one I saw dressed that way. Our guide asked me to get everyone back to the hotel and wait there. And so I ushered my colleagues to the sidewalk and down the half block to our hotel. From there we watched as the ambulances came and went.

Six marchers were stabbed that day; one was a sixteen-year-old honor student at the high school adjoining the Hebrew University named Shira Banki, who later died of her wounds.⁵ That ultra-Orthodox man whom I saw on the ground was in fact her murderer.

Imagine the scene, if you will: There I was, with a group of Christian clergy, men and women of faith. All of us had just been exposed to religion at its worst—for *the second time that day!* Religion used to hurt people, rather than support them; to divide people rather than unite them; to justify desecration and violence, rather than to condemn it.

What we witnessed is part of a broader phenomenon. So much intolerance, hatred, and violence is now associated with religion—most obviously, of course, in the horrifying killing fields of Iraq and Syria, but really, all over the world—that religion itself is often seen as the problem.

Shortly before his death, Oliver Sacks wrote a beautiful memoir in the Sunday *New York Times* magazine. His mother was an observant Jew, and when she found out he was gay, she said to him, “You are an abomination. I wish you’d never been born.” Fairly or not, his reaction was to hate not his mother but religion, for its capacity to inspire “bigotry and cruelty.”⁶

Too often these days religion is seen as a force for evil, *and for good reason*. Religion is increasingly being hijacked by **fundamentalists**, who are as sure that everybody else is wrong as they are that they are right, and by **religious extremists**, who have no hesitation acting on such beliefs to punish unbelievers. The combination is lethal.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote a book entitled, *Not in God’s Name*, in which he grapples with religious extremism. People who care about religion, he says, have a duty to clarify the distinction between good religion and bad religion. If all we do is wring our hands, we are allowing indecent, intolerant, and even hateful people to hijack our faith. We essentially become enablers of their pathology and their criminality, reinforcing their incorrect and dangerous ideas about religion.

A few months ago I posted a piece in which I pointed out that in several ultra-Orthodox publications, the official portrait of the new Israeli government was doctored so that the female faces were blurred, or even eliminated.⁷ One person—not a member of our congregation—responded angrily. “Some of my best friends,” she wrote, “are ultra-Orthodox Jews.”

I wrote back and said, “Well, some of *my* best friends are ultra-Orthodox Jews, too!” But that shouldn’t make a difference, should it? Should we be ignoring the dangers that we see before our eyes? Should we be saying, as

long as someone is a nice person, as long as he or she is a pious Jew, it doesn't matter that he or she holds intolerant or misogynist or racist views? So long, say, as the object of prejudice is not *me*, or my community, or my gender, or people of my sexual orientation, I can simply ignore those views? Why should that be OK?

Some of us are frankly too nostalgic and sentimental and willing to look the other way when we are approached by people whom we think of as *authentic*, or *real* Jews. That man who stabbed six people in front of me at the Pride Parade in Jerusalem had a very long beard and very long *paves*. Does that make him any less of a criminal? Does that make his religiously motivated hatred of gay people any less loathsome?

In a recent book entitled, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*, the scholar and writer James Carroll lays out the differences between good religion and bad religion.

First, good religion celebrates life, not death. Let me remind you of the climax of today's Torah reading: God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, and Abraham does everything he's supposed to do to accomplish that, but the story ends not with death but with life, and *vayel'chu yachdav*: Abraham and his son Isaac walk down the mountain together. (pp. 310-311) That's what we celebrate: life, not death.

Second, good religion recognizes a fundamental unity among all God's creatures. Every great religion, Carroll writes, defines compassionate love for one's neighbor as the surest sign of God's presence on the earth. (p. 311) But good religion goes further than that. Good religion is pluralistic. It acknowledges and respects the differences among us. As Jonathan Sacks puts it, "Our common humanity precedes our religious differences." (p. 264).

Third, beware of holy wars and the religious leaders who promote them! Good religion doesn't inspire or justify violence in this world by seeing it as a precursor to either an eternity of suffering or an apocalypse at the end of time.

Fourth, good religion knows nothing of coercion. Conscience cannot be forced. Not even God, Carroll writes, forces the human conscience. "If God does not coerce, how blasphemous that any person or group should be coerced in God's name." (p. 313)

Finally, and most surprising, “good religion may ... have a secular character.” “Good religion ... recognize[s] the impulse toward transcendence outside traditionally conceived realms of the sacred.” Good religion doesn’t have to be theistic. It can look a lot like secular humanism.

This is a different way of relating to our own religion and that of others than many of us were raised on. There is no place in good religion for triumphalism, for saying that “We’re better than they are!”⁸ For all religions, ours included, include elements of good religion and bad religion. Instead, we have to reach out beyond our traditional boundaries and comfort zones.⁹

You know who gets it? The Pope.

A few months ago, Pope Francis, who later this week will be visiting the United States for the first time in his life, issued a powerful encyclical focused on the environment. He called on all men and women—not just all Christians, but all men and women—to join together with him to do nothing less than save the planet.¹⁰

And guess what? A few weeks later, several Muslim leaders came out with a statement of their own, also urging us to unite to protect and preserve the environment.¹¹ Jewish leaders have done the same, including Dr. Arnold Eisen, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who endorsed the Pope’s message in his High Holiday message.¹²

The Pope and all those religious leaders share a vision of people of faith—whatever that faith happens to be or, in the case of secularists, not be—respecting one another and working with one another to address the needs of humanity.

Let’s respond to the Pope’s call. Let’s join with other adherents of “good religion,” whatever their faiths happen to be—and secular women and men as well—to try to arrest the destruction of our planet, and to fight poverty and injustice and other social ills as well. That’s good for the world—an ultimate concern of good religion.

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But, what are we going to do about the Aleinu? Do we dump it? Do we embrace it? What do we do?

The clue is already present in the words of Jonathan Sacks and James Carroll. We have to be smart about religion, just like we have to be smart about every other choice we make in life.

Our religion is nearly 4,000 years old. Over the years, it's accumulated a variety of thoughts and opinions and attitudes. Some are elevating; others are odious. There is no one and only one interpretation of "What Judaism Says" about anything. To pretend that there are no aspects of our tradition that we find offensive is unrealistic. In the same way, some of the insights and advice we got from our parents and our grandparents we continue to live by, and some of their ideas we walked away from a long time ago. When we look to our past, we have to make good, smart choices.

The short answer is this: if we understand the Aleinu to be mandating the burning of churches, then we shouldn't be reciting it.

But there's another approach we can take.

As Jonathan Sacks rightly points out, (p. 219), "the sacred literatures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all contain passages that, read literally, are capable of leading to violence and hate. We may and must reinterpret them."

When we say the words, '*v'haelilim karot yikareitun*,'—which, incidentally, allude to Isaiah 2:16, written many hundreds of years before the birth of Christianity and over a thousand years before the birth of Islam—we read them in context. They point to the very next phrase, which calls for "perfecting the world in the image of God's kingdom." That's the "*tikkun olam*" we're always talking about.

But, are there indeed idolatries that we want to see disappear? Of course there are. "Terror," after all, "is the epitome of idolatry." (Sacks; p. 265). What about the idolatries that bring about and sustain poverty and misery and injustice and violence, in places like Syria, North Korea, along the Russian-Ukrainian border, throughout great swaths of Africa and Asia ... unfortunately, in so many places around the world? Wouldn't it be great if everyone appreciated the right of human beings to live in free, just, and

humane societies? *We can't wait* for those idolatries, which are preventing the world from truly being in the image of God's kingdom, to disappear. That's how we can and should be reading the Aleinu: as an expression of our hope for the future and frustration with the present; not as a holy justification for committing crimes.

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Right after the stabbings at the Pride Parade, my colleagues and I stood in front of our hotel, watching as the medics tended to the wounded, and the ambulances evacuated them.



As the parade continued, in a quiet, subdued, yet determined way, my Christian colleagues and I talked about religious extremism, about people willing to take the name of the Lord in vain, about seeing such vivid evidence of religiously inspired evil.¹³ As you can imagine, we were all sad, we were all upset, but at the same time, I felt so fortunate, so appreciative, to be with and to talk about what had happened and what it all meant with that wonderful group of thoughtful religious leaders with whom I was travelling. Sharing the aftermath of what we had witnessed reinforced my own appreciation of the importance of religion, *good religion*, playing a positive, constructive role in our lives and in our world.

Our conversations reminded me of a beautiful verse from the Book of Malachi (3:16), that is part of the *haftarah* we read on Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat immediately preceding Pesach:

אֲזַנְדַּבְרוּ יְרֵאֵי יְהוָה אִישׁ אֶת־רֵיעֵהוּ וַיִּקְשַׁב יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע וַיִּכְתֹּב סֵפֶר זְכוֹרוֹן לְפָנָיו לְיְרֵאֵי יְהוָה
וַלְחֹשְׁבֵי שְׂמוֹ:

“Then, those who revere God, who love God, talked with one another.” The image is of men and women of faith—perhaps different faiths—not killing one another but talking to each other and listening to one another, face to face, heart to heart.

And what happens next? *“And God paid heed, and listened.”* This is what God listens to: human dialogue. According to Malachi, this is what God pays attention to. This is what God wants to hear.

And this is followed by, *“And concerning all of these (those who revere God and those who have respect for God’s name), it was written into a Book of Remembrance before God.”*

How do we get into the Book of Remembrance, the Book of Life? By talking humbly and respectfully with one another. By listening to one another. That’s what God listens to. That’s what God pays attention to. That’s what deserves to be remembered in the Book of Remembrance, the Book of Life, on Rosh Hashanah and every day.

Az nidbru Yirei Adonai Ish l’Reiyehu ...

“Then, those who revere God talked with one another.” The Hebrew is an unusual verbal form. Instead of the more common form, *“dibru,”* meaning to speak, the word is *“needb’ru,”* which is a reflexive form. It means to speak and to be spoken to. It means to converse.

That’s what my minister friends and I did on this trip. And that is what we hope to continue to do.

And that’s what I hope that all of us will do: talk amongst ourselves and with other men and women who share a commitment to good religion, whatever its name, about the positive role that faith can play in addressing

the many, many problems in this world in which we live. There's no shortage of problems! There's plenty to talk about!

As Malachi implies, let's not just talk, but also, through our commitment to our form of Judaism, act to promote peace and justice, and to bring food, clothing, shelter, good health and joy, to the world. Then, in the words of both the Aleinu—and also the Beatitudes, that inspiring address uttered on that hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee—may we be worthy of inheriting the *Malchut Shaddai*, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Shana Tova!

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Multiplication .

² Matthew 14:13-21.

³ It has since been removed.

⁴ They don't believe in calling it a *Mitz'ad Ha-Ga-avah*, a "Pride Parade," because they "don't believe that gay men and women have anything to be proud of." See interview with Lehava leader conducted prior to the Jerusalem Pride Parade: <http://tinyurl.com/prutty4> .

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As the newspapers later told the story, Shira herself was not gay; she had come along to support her gay friends. See: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3180270/Ultra-Orthodox-Jew-stabs-six-people-Jerusalem-Gay-Pride-march.html> .

⁶ "... [H]er harsh words made me hate religion's capacity for bigotry and cruelty." See: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html?_r=0 .

⁷ See: <http://tinyurl.com/nst5zmk> .

⁸ An example would be the words of another great Jewish sage, Mel Brooks: "Let 'em all go to Hell except cave 76!"

⁹ Learning from and with others beyond the boundaries of our own community is more traditional than we might think. Jonathan Sacks reminds us that the great 16th century Rabbi Judah Loewe, the Maharal of Prague, quotes favorably the great 12th century Muslim philosopher ibn Roshd (also spelled, "ibn Rushd;" known also as "Averroes"). Ibn Roshd believed that when presenting a philosophical argument one should always cite the views of one's opponents. The Maharal says that the same is true of religion: One should elicit the views of others with whom one disagrees and

engage in dialogue with them. Sacks sums up this principle by saying, “Religion is at its best when it relies on strength of argument and example. It is at its worst when it seeks to impose truth by force.” (p. 234-236) Coincidentally, on the day I read this, I learned an interesting fact about Salman Rushdie, the great writer who for many years lived in hiding because of death threats made against him in the name of religion. His father wasn’t born with the name, Rushdie; he chose it because he was an admirer of the ibn Rushd. See: <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-this-week-salman-rushdie-2015-06-01> .

¹⁰ For the text and a summary and analysis of the encyclical, go to: http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/how-pope-franciss-not-yet-official-document-on-climate-change-is-already-stirring-controversy/2015/06/17/ef4d46be-14fe-11e5-9518-f9e0a8959f32_story.html .

¹¹ For text and commentary by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, go here: <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/world-muslim-leaders-speak-out-climate-crisis> .

¹² <http://blog.jtsa.edu/chancellor-eisen/2015/09/02/high-holidays-message-from-chancellor-arnold-m-eisen-2/> .

¹³ Later that same day, we learned of the arson attack on the West Bank village of Duma. Three of the four members of the family have since died; a five-year-old girl remains hospitalized. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/world/middleeast/west-bank-arson-palestinian-toddler.html> and <http://www.timesofisrael.com/riham-dawabsha-26-mother-of-ali-has-died/> .