

Being Me without Dissing You

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Psalm 133
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Hineh mah-tov u-mah-na'yim shevet 'achim gam yachad

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a rabbi of the Jewish Renewal movement, once told this story, and not too long ago:

The Messiah finally arrives. Jews and Christians, after waiting for so many centuries, rush to meet him. The Jews cry out, "This is the first time You have come, is it not?" The Christians, raising their voices above the Jews, insist, "This must be Your second coming that we have been waiting for!" The Messiah smiles wearily and waits for the noise to subside. Then, in a quiet and gentle voice, longsuffering, He says, "My dear, foolish children. I have come not once, nor twice. I have been here hundreds of times. But you have all been so busy fighting with one another you have never even noticed."^[i]

This Thursday is Yom HaShoah, the Day of the Calamity.^[ii] As the story for our children about the French village of Le Chambon reminded us, it's worth remembering not only its terrors and victims, but also the people who, like the Christians of Le Chambon, resisted and saved thousands. Nonetheless, as painful as it is, we must also recall Christian complicity in laying some of the theological groundwork for such a calamity.

And it's timely for another reason that I speak about this, today, on the second Sunday of Easter, because the roots of this theological anti-Judaism run deep in the Christian tradition. We are far from having moved beyond those ideas and perceptions that helped to fuel the Shoah. And it's precisely during the season of Lent, the re-enactments of Holy Week, and the proclamation of resurrection that I experience these problems, these tensions, most fiercely, every year.

How can I be me without dissing you? That, friends, is the heart of the problem. How can I self-differentiate from others without judging them negatively? How do I be me and let you be you? This is a question that won't let go of me. And it threatens to keep me wandering in that Lenten wilderness.

I learned a long time ago that no congregation, liberal or otherwise, can avoid the temptation to "diss," to dismiss, those from whom we have separated to save our own souls. Most liberal Baptist and UCC congregations I know are full of people who, like me, have parted from some other, usually more conservative, religious tradition. Such realities are much closer to us than Christian anti-Judaism perhaps, but we cannot afford to underestimate the connections between them. It's hard to resist dissing the old when we embrace the new.

It's not that we *want* to perpetuate the idea that Christianity has superseded or corrected Judaism, or rendered it irrelevant. It's not that we *want* to encourage anti-Semitism. The problem is that most of us simply don't understand Judaism, ancient or modern, well enough even to see when we're being anti-Jewish.^[iii] Even some liberation theologians, historical Jesus scholars, liberal biblical interpreters and theologians—many of whom have helped me deepen my own faith, and whom I love—have perpetuated anti-Jewish trends.^[iv]

They've done so, in essence, because it's hard to be me without dissing you. It's hard to proclaim liberation, inclusion, forgiveness, and resurrection without assuming that the Judaisms in Jesus' day offered none of these things.^[v] And this only shows how little we understand of the Jewish contexts in which Jesus and his earliest followers lived.

And so we have misunderstood the arguments we find in the New Testament: about the Sabbath, about the sacrificial system, about purity and impurity, about the "law," the Torah.^[vi] And, to be honest, some New Testament texts themselves have set up Jewish straw men—falsely exaggerated portrayals—to serve as foils for the ostensibly truer, more liberating, more perfect, Christian witness.^[vii]

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When we misunderstand, oversimplify, or disparage ancient Judaism, we cut ourselves off at our very roots. And when we make our particular truth universal, we drift so easily into absolutism, imperialism, oppression, and death.[\[viii\]](#) Calamity.

It all leaves me feeling betrayed by my own tradition. Apparently even more radical than loving one's enemies is loving one's own troubled family.[\[ix\]](#)

Now, there is no shortage of peacemaking and justice concerns to occupy our attentions and energies these days. And please hear me say that I am grateful to be connected with a community so attentive to so many pressing matters. I'm grateful that, unlike many in liberal Christian congregations, we have not given up on paying attention to the scriptures of ancient Israel—what we usually call the Old Testament—that was the only scripture Jesus and his earliest followers knew. I'm also grateful not to be the first to direct our attention to the theological questions raised by the Shoah: Marc Mullinax asked us in the fall of 2009 whether there could be “Easter after Auschwitz.”[\[x\]](#)

But this is not just one more issue. This is the very ground we stand on. In light of our commitment as a Peace Church to what we've called the “inner work” of peace—the work of recognizing our complicity in “the culture of violence that surrounds us,” according to our Peace Church statement—I want to remind us that these anti-Jewish tendencies can crop up even in our discourse about what it means to be Christian, about who Jesus was and what he stood for.[\[xi\]](#) I want us to be careful not to keep poisoning our own well, hacking at our own family tree unawares, as so many Christians over so many centuries have learned to do.

I want to urge us to keep asking: how can I be me without dissing you? And I think that, as odd as it might seem at first glance, Psalm 133 offers some wisdom on just this question.

It is the fourteenth of fifteen such songs all grouped together that carry this header: “A song of the steps, of David.”[\[xii\]](#) Precisely what this means, as with much of the ancient poetry of the Bible, is up for grabs. But several recurring features in these fifteen “step” songs—most notably the frequent mention of Zion—suggests they may have served as songs for “going up.” Going up, that is, to Jerusalem, to the Temple, for the three pilgrimage festivals: Shavuot (Pentecost), to commemorate the giving of Torah at Sinai; Sukkot (Booths), recalling the wandering in the wilderness; and Pesach (Passover), celebrating liberation from slavery.[\[xiii\]](#)

*Hineh mah-tov u-mah-na'yim
shevet 'achim gam yachad*

*Look! How good and how pleasant [musical, sublime]
(is) the dwelling [resting] of kindred together—*

How good indeed when Israel again comes together as in that formative wilderness time in tents, gathered around the Presence of God, attuned to the rhythms and rituals of the holy.

And now for the metaphors:

*Like the best oil on the head, coming down over the beard,
Aaron's beard that comes down over the opening of his robe.*

Such kindred dwelling together, says the psalmist, is like the running down of the oil of hospitality, poured on the head of the honored (if perhaps dusty) guest.[\[xiv\]](#) We are still alive! We are together again! What else to do but celebrate our extravagant, joyful welcome of one another!

But, you know, says the psalmist, really getting into it now, it's even better than that oil of hospitality: it's like the running down of the oil of consecration, poured on the head of the sons of Aaron, our priests whose very beards so flourish that they, too, run down over their vestments like the oil on their heads![\[xv\]](#)

More than hospitality, then, we celebrate the sacredness of our togetherness! Beyond what our priests do for us, says the psalmist, we remember that we, as a nation, are in effect “priests,” collectively, whose ministrations mediate God's blessing to the whole world (whether the world knows it or not).[\[xvi\]](#) This indeed is why we come together: to re-enact the stories of our particular liberation and wandering and covenant with God.

But our poet is really on a roll, now, for there's yet another metaphor, which then leads us to the coda:

*Like the dew of Hermon that comes down on the mountains of Zion,
For there God ordained the blessing: everlasting life.*

At first glance, “there” would appear to refer to Zion, the Temple, that mythical navel of the universe, and a visual, architectural poem itself about the structure of creation—all of which, of course, is filled with God’s presence.^[xvii] But there’s something odd here, too.

We might not notice this at first, mostly because we’re soft on geography. Mount Hermon towers more than 9,000 feet above sea level.^[xviii] It sits some twenty miles west of Damascus, which puts it maybe 120 miles (or the driving distance from Asheville to Charlotte) far to the north of Jerusalem (Zion).

So our poet may really be reaching for effect here: kindred dwelling together in the presence of God’s hospitality and holiness are like Mt. Hermon’s dew, so abundant that it spreads its sustenance across a dry land, even as far south as the hills around Jerusalem. This is pretty striking for another reason, too: a mountain in Syria, at the very edge of the northern tribes of Israel, waters the mythical source of living water itself, at the center of the southern tribes?

Under the ecological overtones here, I think we have an implicit call to political unity.^[xix] In other words, there’s a recognition here of the very present reality of difference, of conflict, in such a gathering.^[xx] Certainly Zion is privileged as the place to go up to, but the water of Zion’s blessing comes from Hermon, far in the north. We can’t experience these blessings without one another.

I guess conflict in and of itself, need not indicate some fundamental problem within the family—maybe it just signals disagreement. As the rabbis have long insisted, “There’s always another interpretation.” How else can we come closer to truth than by opening our minds, in all their differences, to one another? Argument about Scripture and faithful living is part and parcel of the broad tradition from which we come. It’s right there in the New Testament (whether we get it or not). And it’s crawling all over the Old Testament (not to mention the Talmud)!^[xxi]

I guess, too, that sometimes, as in the story of Le Chambon, something helps us transcend our differences—though not by erasing or ignoring them. Did you know that as late as the fourth century, there were communities of Jews and Christians who persisted in coming together to observe their respective holy days and worship God? Together. It drove some bishops and rabbis crazy!^[xxii] They’re not supposed to do that, you know. They *can’t* do that. Aren’t they forgetting what distinguishes them?

Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe they knew something else worth remembering. Something the psalmist knew long, long before: “For *there* God ordained the blessing.” *There* God spoke forth “everlasting life.”

“There” may not refer to Zion, per se, at all.^[xxiii] Let’s go back to the opening line, to which all these metaphorical expansions refer: “How good and how pleasant is the resting of kindred together.”

Could it be that it’s the coming together itself—in rest, in worship—that mediates the blessing? That opens our eyes to new life breaking forth? Coming together not because we see everything the same way, or agree on all the same ideas and rituals, or intend to strong-arm one another into our way of seeing, being, or doing, but because we have fully embraced the particular covenants through which we have come to know, and be changed by, this God.

So what kind of coming together are we called to? Like our wrestling ancestor Jacob, at the very edge of daybreak, will we refuse to let one another go until God blesses us?^[xxiv] How might we engage our differences openly, risking conflict with both close and distant kindred, religious or otherwise? How might we be who we are without dissing those we’re not?

Amen.

Notes

[i] Retold by Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, “Redemption: What I Have Learned from Christians,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 275. For more information on the Jewish Renewal Movement (and Reb Zalman), see <https://www.aleph.org/>.

[ii] For many, *shoah* (Hebrew, “calamity” or “catastrophe”) is preferred to Holocaust because the latter term derives from a Greek word which evokes a whole burnt offering. Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, serves as a memorial to the six million Jews and millions of others (Roma, Slavs, gays and lesbians, dissidents, disabled, etc.) massacred by the Nazis in the 1930s-40s. This year, the day begins at sundown on Wednesday, April

18. More information is available online at the websites of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority).

[iii] See the bibliography for helpful and accessible resources, both historical and biblical, that explore both the Jewish contexts of early Christianity (and the New Testament) and the problematic consequences of contemporary anti-Jewish interpretations. I have especially appreciated the work of Paula Fredriksen, Jon Levenson, Amy-Jill Levine, and George Nickelsburg. A good starting place is *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*, eds. Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

[iv] Amy-Jill Levine, writing as a New Testament scholar, and Paula Fredriksen, writing as a historical Jesus scholar, have both called attention to these anti-Jewish biases in the work of some of their colleagues. In the bibliography included here, see especially chapter five, "With Friends Like These..." of Levine's *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (HarperOne, 2006).

[v] George Nickelsburg's *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins* (Fortress, 2003) surveys recent textual and other discoveries that have reshaped our understanding of the rich variety of Judaisms, plural, within which Christianity developed—and from which Christianity drew many of its ideas and practices. Kevin Madigan and Jon Levenson's *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (Yale, 2008) explores the ancient roots (and contemporary implications) of both traditions' understandings of resurrection.

[vi] Chapter four of Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, focuses specifically on these and other stereotypes (including the common, but mistaken, idea that all or most Jews expected a warrior messiah). Also helpful here, if much denser, are Fredriksen's *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Yale, 2000), and *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (Vintage, 1999).

[vii] I think here of the recurring collective reference to "the Jews" in the Gospel of John, the unremittingly negative portrayal of "the law" in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and the explicitly supersessionist argument against non-Christian Jewish religion in the letter to the Hebrews. It's possible in some cases that these anti-Jewish readings may result more from our contemporary misunderstanding (taking texts out of context) than ancient intentions. In Paul's case, certainly, Romans 9-11 presents a much more nuanced, even unresolved, consideration of the relationship between Jews and the Christian gospel than appears in Galatians.

[viii] In his lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans, biblical scholar and Swedish bishop Krister Stendahl argued that "universalism is always the root of imperialism. . . . Although Israel thought of itself as a light unto the nations, it never had the idea that the only way for God to accomplish that was to make everybody a Jew. We usually downgrade particularism. We are universalists, as was the Hellenistic culture that forced itself on the world and that led, among other things, to the Maccabean revolt. There is a wisdom in particularism, in being peculiar and letting your light shine or your little lamp flicker, in being a presence that leaves the results to God." *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Fortress, 1993), 43-44.

[ix] An echo of the title of Harrelson & Falk's book, *Jews and Christians: A Troubled Family* (Abingdon, 1990).

[x] Marc S. Mullinax, "Is there Easter after Auschwitz?" *Circle of Mercy*, October 3, 2009. <http://sites.google.com/site/circleofmercy/Sermons/2009/is-there-easter-after-auschwitz>

[xi] "The Circle of Mercy Is a Peace Church," *Circle of Mercy*, June 6, 2010, last updated January 2012. <http://sites.google.com/site/circleofmercy/Home/peace-church-statement>

[xii] The translation here borrows freely from several English translations, in consultation with the Hebrew text as printed in *The Interlinear Hebrew-Greek-English Bible*, ed. Jay Green (Evansville, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1978), and with *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Associated Publishers and Authors, 1978).

[xiii] See Deuteronomy 16:1-17 for a formulation of the three pilgrimage festivals that presumes they must happen in one place only. Commentaries that most informed my exegesis of this psalm include James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994); Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003); and J. Clinton McCann, "The Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IV (Abingdon, 1996).

[xiv] Compare Psalm 23:5. Especially helpful on these metaphors is William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 130-31. See also McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1214; Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 260-261.

[xv] See Exodus 30:22-33.

[xvi] See Exodus 19:4-6.

[xvii] On the referent of "there" as Zion, see McCann, "Book of Psalms," 1214; Mays, *Psalms*, 414. On mythic understandings of the Temple, see the extended discussion in Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (HarperCollins, 1985), 111-84.

[xviii] Brown, 130, 249.

[xix] Brown, 131; Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler argue the same in their annotations in the *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford, 2004), 1432.

[xx] Moreover, as Mays (*Psalms*, 414) and McCann ("Book of Psalms," 1214) point out, the opening line itself ("kindred dwelling together") echoes another text, Deuteronomy 25:5, which presumes conflict. Patrick Miller, in his annotations in the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, revised ed. (2006), also cites Genesis 13:6 and 36:7.

[xxi] My reflections here are partly informed by Walter Ziffer's two sessions on "What Kind of Jew was Jesus?" offered at Church of the Holy Spirit in Mars Hill, March 7 and 14, 2012.

[xxii] Paula Fredriksen, "The Birth of Christianity," in *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism*, 29-30.

[xxiii] In fact, Robert Alter found the translation "Zion" itself so problematic—not only because of the geographic oddity, but because the phrase "*mountains of Zion*" appears nowhere else in the bible—that he emended the text to read *tsiyah*, "parched land," instead of *tsiyon*, "Zion." In his reading, "there" even more logically refers back to the initial clause. *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 463.

[xxiv] Genesis 32:25-27.

Bibliography of Resources for Christian-Jewish Understanding

**** Asterisks mark helpful, accessible places to begin ****

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