

What Is Sacred?

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It was something of a shock to me that the first call to prayer came around 5:20 each morning.

In Jerusalem and Istanbul, each day began—
before I really wanted it to—
with the piercing sound of the *adhan*—
the soulful chant in Arabic calling out from minarets across the city.

Allahu Akbar – God is great.
There is no God but God, and Muhammed is his messenger.
Come to prayer. Come to success. God is great.

I still think it's ironic that the desk clerk at each of our hotels asked if we would be needing a wake-up call during our stay. . .

Even with jet-leg, there was no need.
Even with drapes drawn and windows sealed shut,
the sound could be alarmingly loud at the crack of dawn.

Now, being on sabbatical,
I had figured I might enjoy at least occasional opportunities to sleep in.
But that was not to be, at least not in Israel and Turkey.

While I've known, intellectually, for years
that *salat*, the cycle of prayer five times a day,
is one of the Pillars of Islam,
there is nothing quite like living through it—
hearing the call to prayer intoned throughout the day,
a frequent and irresistible reminder of the commitment and submission
at the heart of the Muslim faith.

One of the clearest acts of such devotion I witnessed repeatedly
was the ablutions before prayer, the ritual washing
of one's face, and hands, and feet
that is required before kneeling down before Allah.

While I had seen this ritual performed in mosques before—
while I had seen people remove their shoes and run cold water
over their feet and hands, and then splash their faces,
never had I seen anyone do it outdoors in below freezing temperatures.

Maybe doing it five times a day in winter toughens one up,
but I was pretty well convinced then and there
that I don't have what it takes to be Muslim,
at least not in Istanbul in February in the snow.

Another snapshot, another experience that stays with me from sabbatical
is watching the Sabbath unfold over Jerusalem.

On Friday afternoon,
the horrendous traffic and the crush of pedestrians in the markets,
give way at dusk to a radically different way of being:
suddenly shops and restaurants and grocery stores are closed,
public transit shuts down, elevators don't quite work,
and even the musak in the lobby of the hotel is switched off.

And, then there is a palpable stillness.
And candles, and wine, and spontaneous singing.
For all of it's quieting effects,
what I most remember about spending the Sabbath in Jerusalem
was the sporadic outbreaking of joy.

It's not a feeling always felt, or seen, or heard in Israel,
so it stood out to me whenever and wherever it appeared.

Several of you have asked how I enjoyed my sabbatical.
While it was wild and wonderful in many different ways,
the truth is it wasn't always enjoyable.

Earlier on that same Friday in Jerusalem, Bob and I were eating lunch
on the roof of a falafel shop in the Christian Quarter of the Old City.

We had a marvelous view of the Temple Mount, with the iconic gold top
of the Dome of the Rock a few hundred metres away.

And then, unexpectedly, we had a marvelous view of violence,
as we heard gunshots and then saw puffs of white smoke.

When the helicopter began circling overhead,
we wondered if this was just a typical Friday in Jerusalem.

But, the actions of our Arab waiters suggested otherwise.
They ran to the railing and stood on tip-toe,
and then began calling and texting their friends.

What we couldn't quite make out was that Israeli Defence Forces
had moved on to the Temple Mount in an effort
to quell a riot that followed Friday prayers in the mosque.

Rocks were being thrown—from the Temple Mount down to the Western
Wall, where Jews were gathered in prayer—
apparently in retaliation for escalating rhetoric over the prior two weeks
from Orthodox Jews planning to retake the Temple Mount.

What we learned later that evening,
when footage was shown on the news,
was that the riot had involved hundreds of people, throwing rocks,
and plastic chairs, and anything that could be used as a weapon.

After Israeli Forces moved in,
with stun grenades and tear gas and rubber bullets,
it still took more than an hour for the confrontation to subside.

(Now, as you might recall, this is how the Second Intifada began in 2000,
with a similar provocation and Ariel Sharon and a thousand Israelis
moving on to the Mount.)

Given this history, when it appeared things were over,
no one in our restaurant was quite sure what to do or where to go.

The Old City of Jerusalem is not a very big place.

Though we were at a relatively safe distance from what had just happened,
it was hard to know where things were headed.

So, Bob and I decided to leave the Old City and go into East Jerusalem,
up beyond the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane.

For the rest of the afternoon, we heard gunshots and fireworks at a distance.

At one point, though, the noises were far too close for comfort, and I told Bob it was time to turn around because, as I reminded him, I had promised our president, Margaret Kohr, that I wouldn't end up in a place like that.

Sadly, we learned later that night that a young Palestinian man had been killed that afternoon, as the violence spread out into the eastern part of the city.

He had thrown a firework at an Israeli soldier and was then shot in response.

While security in Israel is certainly more intense than anywhere else I've ever travelled, there was a noticeable increase in the number of young soldiers milling about with machine guns in the following days.

There was talk in the papers and the media, wondering aloud whether this event marked the start of a third intifada.

Time will tell, I suppose. More likely, this was simply another skirmish in a millennia-long story.

As any student of history is well aware, Jerusalem—quite literally translated “The City of Peace”—has known precious little of it in its history.

A few days later, to get away from it all, Bob and I decided to head into the West Bank around Bethlehem.

We passed through the separation wall that Israelis call a “security barrier” and Palestinians call the “racial segregation fence” or the “apartheid wall.”

On the other side, apart from the urban goat herders, the piles of garbage, and the obvious poverty, what really caught my attention was the relative lack of pressure.

In ways I still struggle to explain,

the tensions I felt in Jerusalem seemed to evaporate in the West Bank.

After standing in line for a very long time in the Church of the Nativity
all for the privilege of seeing the silver star
that marks the spot of Jesus' birth
(though we, as good Unitarians, were entirely skeptical),
we found an amazing and articulate guide
to take us to the refugee camps on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

These camps, still run by the United Nations,
were established to take in the Palestinians who—
depending on who is telling the story—either fled
or were forced to leave their homes during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948.

Three generations have now grown up in these camps.
The camps have, in many ways over the past 64 years,
merged into the fabric of the city of Bethlehem itself,
though they are still ringed by walls and watch towers.

On the camp walls today are painted countless murals,
each depicting a village that most of the people living there
have never actually seen, but that is known to them as “home.”

Over the gate to Aida Camp, the largest of the three,
is a massive key, some five metres long.

A reminder of the keys to homes in Israel
that Palestinian families pass down from one generation to the next,
in the hope that one day, their children or their grandchildren will return
and unlock the door that no one in the family has seen for decades.

The most haunting image I carry with me from these camps
was the striking view from the rooftop of a run-down apartment building.

On one side of the eight metre wall that seems to indiscriminately snake
through the neighbourhood around the camp,
what I could see was sheer squalor—
and a stunning array of graffiti meant for Western eyes
calling for a Free Palestine.

And, on the other, was a grove of beautiful olive trees,

and settlements that have been recently built on the hillsides.

It was an uncomfortable if eye-opening view on to the tensions that have been, quite literally, carved into the landscape.

My fear in going to Israel and Palestine was that I might only see a sanitized version of life there.

For better and for worse, I'm grateful we were able to witness a bit of the harsh reality that lies at the heart of that troubled part of the world.

I feel that I got what I went for.

And as a student of comparative religion, I can say that there is no other place on the planet quite like the Holy Land.

There were times when I felt like I was in a religious Disneyworld—though not always in a good way. . .

It's a cauldron of religious fervor—
a magnet for True Believers of differing faiths,
all largely living in parallel,
though often completely incompatible universes.

It's not an easy place to be a Unitarian, or for a Unitarian to be.

In fact, there were a number of times when I thought about writing a *Spiritual Skeptic's Guide to the Holy Land*.

But, then, I realized it was a book no one would actually ever read.

It's safe to say that there aren't many UU pilgrims to be found over there, and I may be going out on a limb, here, but I'm pretty certain we were the first gay Unitarian couple most people there had ever seen traipsing through the Holy Land!

As I said briefly last week, this trip has filled me with a deepening conviction that the world desperately needs more Unitarian Universalism.

There is a pronounced need for a religion rooted in reason that celebrates human difference and honours the delicate thread of life.

This trip has also left me with more questions than I took with me.

One of the most gnawing of those questions
concerns what can be considered truly sacred in this world of ours.

In that contested stretch of land
sitting at the heart of three of humanity's great faiths,
are countless religious sites and shrines—
too often turned into tacky tourist traps with cheesy gifts shops attached.

But, still they draw pilgrims from around the globe,
desperate for a glimpse, hungry for a taste, determined for a touch
of something holy and real.

One of the most stirring sights for me was in the Church of the Holy
Sepulcher, the odd and ancient church that holds the supposed place of Jesus'
crucifixion, as well as the place Catholics and Orthodox Christians regard
as the site of Jesus' tomb and resurrection.

Just inside the entrance to this church, is a wide slab of pink marble marking
the spot where tradition says Jesus' body was prepared for burial.

That this stone was only installed in 1810
and is at least the third stone on this spot
matters little to the pilgrims who crowd around it,
anointing it with olive oil and rose water
and tenderly touching it with handkerchiefs and rosary beads,
and, in one shocking case, even a cell phone.

Many people rubbed their hands into the stone,
and then massaged their faces and hands with the oil.

As a bit of a germaphobe,
it's hard for me to imagine that kind of devotion.

Though there is something about the spiritual hunger behind it
that I do recognise in myself
and I overhear in conversation with Unitarians from time to time.

As I stood there for a good long time, watching people reach out

to what they deemed to be holy, I found myself wondering what we, as Unitarians, might regard as so very precious as to call it sacred—what we might see as so very precious, that it would inspire us to pilgrimage and devotion, and even sacrifice.

For most of us, the answer is not to be found in some particular stone. More likely, we reverence the interdependent web of being, or the spirit and force of life itself.

Our shrines are typically found in stands of ancient trees or through a telescope fixed onto the stunning glory of the cosmos we call home.

So often what we regard as sacred are the connections that link life to life.

Of all that I brought back from the Holy Land, my most sacred memory stems from a walk around the ramparts of the Old City in Jerusalem.

At one point, in the Arab Quarter, there is a fence that keeps paying tourists on one side of the wall and local residents on the other.

As I was strolling along, suddenly, there appeared through this wall a hole, and just a few metres in front of me, through that hole came a toddler, a little boy placed there by his older sister, who had clearly been charged with babysitting.

While it seemed she had imagined he might enjoy sitting on the other side of the fence, he was a little man newly on the move, and in no time, had gotten himself far beyond her reach.

She looked to me, and in Arabic, asked for help.

And, so I took the little boy into my arms and carried him back to the break in the fence, where I handed him through to the care of his sister.

She thanked me, and with his hand in hers, they made their way toward what I imagine was home.

I'm certain neither of them will ever give that moment a second thought.

But it has stayed with me.

As I carried that child, I wondered what would—
what will—come of his life in that complicated city.

I thought of the babies that I have held in my arms before,
the ones, as a minister, I have dedicated to the Spirit of Life,
and I said a prayer
in the hope that his unfolding life
might be filled with happiness and with peace.

As I returned him to his sister's arms,
my mind was flooded with the words to one of our most moving hymns:

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

I've shared with you this morning snapshots from my sabbatical
in the hope that they might plant in you
the vital question of what is sacred—
what it is that deserves our reverence and devotion.

For how we answer that question shapes our lives,
and as this trip as reminded me, shapes our world.

Let our answer, then, be for what is good and true,
for what serves the cause of justice and peace.
So may it be.