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Rabbi Joshua Hammerman has served as spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in Stamford since 1992. He is a former president of the Interfaith Council and the author of the award-winning blog On One Foot. Among his many other accomplishments, he currently serves on the Rabbinic Leadership Council, a select group of rabbis chosen by Chancellor Arnold Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS).

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Reverend Mark Lingle serves as Rector at St. Francis Episcopal Church in Stamford. He is the Executive Director of the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut and is actively involved in interreligious activities in Stamford. Lingle, who serves on the board of Building One Community, has written that "a willingness to engage with and learn from other traditions expands and deepens the practice of our own tradition."

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Dr. Kareem Adeeb, Imam and Founder of the American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, is the current President of the Board of the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut. An engineer by profession, he is also a scholar who has lectured on religious tolerance for twenty-five years. Since 2009, he has delivered a sermon every Friday at the United Nations in New York City.

Interfaith Seder

Forgiveness and Remembrance

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Passover Seder

The Passover festival commemorates the ancient story of God's delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In the era of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, 538 B.C.E.-70 C.E., the festival was celebrated with a pilgrimage to the city and a Passover sacrifice in the Temple on the afternoon before the festival began. After dark, the celebrants ate the roasted sacrifice with matzah and bitter herbs. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. brought these sacrificial rites to an end.

In place of the Passover sacrifice, telling the story of the Exodus received increasingly greater emphasis. Today, besides eating foods that evoke the experience of bondage and liberation, we continue to recount the story at an evening celebration known as a Passover Seder. Seder means "order," and as you will see, a Seder encompasses a set of rituals, conversations, prayers, readings, and songs that take place before and after a festive meal. As a guide through the Seder, we use a text known as a Haggadah - literally, "the telling."

The Steps of a Seder

1. Kadesh (sanctification of the day)
2. Urchatz (handwashing with no blessing)
3. Karpas (eating the green vegetable)
4. Yachatz (breaking the matzah)
5. Maggid (telling the story)
6. Rachtzah (handwashing with a blessing)
7. Motzi (blessing before eating matzah)
8. Matzah (eating the matzah)
9. Maror (eating the bitter herb)
10. Korech (Hillel's sandwich)
11. Shulchan Orech (eating the meal)
12. Tzafun (eating the afikomen)
13. Barech (blessing after eating)
14. Hallel (songs of praise)
15. Nirtzah (conclusion)

Four Questions

1. How does your tradition understand forgiveness?
2. Are there offenses that ought not be forgiven? How do we forgive in ways that both tell the truth about the wrong that has been done and deal seriously with the possibility of future harm?
3. Given the command in all three Abrahamic faith texts to "love God and love neighbor," how are we to respond to this current moment of unspeakable violence?
4. Is it possible to forgive and never forget? What does remembrance mean in light of the possibility of forgiveness?

1. How does your tradition understand forgiveness?

Judaism

"I hereby forgive all who have transgressed against me, whether on purpose or by accident, whether in this lifetime or on any other plane.... Let no one be punished on my account." – Jewish Prayer before the evening Shema

"In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm generates harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion or forgetfulness of breaking the sequence. Forgiveness breaks the chain. It introduces into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace. It represents a decision not to do what instinct and passion urge us to do. It answers hate with a refusal to hate, animosity with generosity. Few more daring ideas have ever entered the human situation. Forgiveness means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past. It would not be an exaggeration to say that forgiveness is the most compelling testimony to human freedom. It is about the action that is not reaction. It is the refusal to be defined by circumstance. It represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative of the past and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future...In the face of tragedy, forgiveness is the counternarrative of hope. It is not a moral luxury, an option for saints. At times it is the only path through the thickets of hate to the open spaces of coexistence." – Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (pp. 178-179)

"For God's anger lasts a moment; divine love is lifelong." – Psalm 30

Christianity

"Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and

they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." – Matthew 18:21-35

"Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus[e]there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']" – Luke 23:33-34

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." – Ephesians 4:31-32

Islam

Islam describes forgiveness as a noble behavior, which uplifts the forgiver spiritually and liberates him/her from the lowest instincts that tend to control human behavior; namely, the urge to retaliate, rage, anger, fear. Furthermore, Islam conveys 3 attributes of perfection to the Divine (among 99) related to forgiveness: The Forgiver, the excessively Forgiver (action), and He, whose nature is to forgive. Last, but not least, Islam describes forgiveness as an act of mercy.

"And vie with one another to attain to your Sustainer's forgiveness and to a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, which has been readied for the God-conscious who spend (in God's way) in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and hold in check their anger, and pardon their fellow human beings because God loves the doers of good." (Qur'an 3-134)

"And Allah said: The angels glorify and praise their Lord and seek forgiveness for those on the earth. Verily, Allah is the Forgiving, the Merciful." (Qur'an 42:5)

"Allah the Exalted said: Let them pardon and overlook. Would you not love for Allah to forgive you? Allah is Forgiving and Merciful." (Qur'an 24:22)

"The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, 'When Allah completed the creation, he wrote in his Book, which is with him over His Throne: Verily, my mercy prevails over my wrath.'" (Sahih al-Bukhari 3022, Sahig Muslim 2751)

2. Are there offenses that ought not be forgiven? How do we forgive in ways that both tell the truth about the wrong that has been done and deal seriously with the possibility of future harm?

Judaism

“The Jewish concept of teshuvah calls on the perpetrator to seek forgiveness from the victim before having any hope of absolution. Pittsburgh mourners “felt little instinct to forgive the person responsible for such horror.” Clearly, there is a difference in how the victims of Pittsburgh and Charleston approached similar calamities. ...Why does Judaism not encourage the unconditional embrace of your enemy? When you turn your cheek, you are no longer looking at your offender in the eye, face to face. True reconciliation can only occur when two human beings can truly see what is human in the other, and how each of us is created in the Divine image. But there are times when such authentic encounters simply can't happen. The Pittsburgh perpetrator showed no signs of remorse during his appearance in court, and it is doubtful that he will when he stands trial. It would be a grave injustice to blindly forgive him...” – Rabbi Joshua Hammerman, *Mensch-Marks*

Christianity

“To forgive another person from the heart is an act of liberation. We set that person free from the negative bonds that exist between us. We say, ‘I no longer hold your offense against you’ But there is more. We also free ourselves from the burden of being the ‘offended one.’ As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us or, worse, pull them as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness, therefore, liberates not only the other but also ourselves. It is the way to the freedom of the children of God.” – Henri J.M. Nouwen

“Because forgiveness is like this: a room can be dank because you have closed the windows, you’ve closed the curtains. But the sun is shining outside, and the air is fresh outside. In order to get that fresh air, you have to get up and open the window and draw the curtains apart.” – Desmond Tutu

Islam

Yes, Islam does not forgive arrogance, injustice and tyranny. Actually, it makes it a duty upon every Muslim to oppose, struggle and fight those who inflict them upon God's creation. It is of the utmost importance to note that, once these perpetrators have been defeated, Islam recommends and encourages forgiveness.

3. Given the command in all three Abrahamic faith texts to “love God and love neighbor,” how are we to respond to this current moment of unspeakable violence?

Judaism

“Forgiving’ enemies are not about letting them off the hook—it’s about looking them in the eye and telling them, loud and clear, that they have not succeeded in driving a wedge between groups. It’s about achieving a greater societal goal by suppressing base urges. In Charleston, Oak Creek, Orlando and now Pittsburgh, the ideology of hate was drowned in a sea of love. In Charleston, the victims’ supreme gesture of love yielded tangible results—the removal of the Confederate flag from the state capitol. One hate-driven young man accomplished in one evening what Martin Luther King could not accomplish in a lifetime, at least with regard to the shunning of this symbol of hate. One might say that for the bereaved of Charleston, forgiveness was the best revenge.” – Rabbi Joshua Hammerman, *Mensch-Marks*

Christianity

“The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.” – Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*

“Words offer little solace when innocents are murdered. But they can light the way forward, as Martin Luther King Jr. showed in the 1963 eulogy he delivered for the victims of another white-supremacist terror attack on a house of worship. He declared that the slaughtered did not die in vain, for ‘God still has a way of wringing good out of evil,’ and that the victims had something to tell us in their deaths. ‘They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism,’ King said. ‘They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.’” – Conor Friedersdorf, *The Atlantic*

“First, I believe Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, including our Muslim neighbors, and we cannot love them if we are gripped by fear. The distortions and hysteria regarding Islam since 9/11 is unfair to our Muslim neighbors and preventing Christians from loving them as we are called. I simply want to help the church move past fear to a posture of faith where love becomes possible. Second, I believe the message of Christ can stand on its own merit without having to

misrepresent other religions or showcase the worst elements of other faith communities or their pasts. Heaven knows Christianity has some skeletons in its history closet, and if we want to have a showdown between the worst expressions of Islam and the worst of Christianity, count me out. I’m not interested in defending Christendom/European imperialism. I’m interested in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” – Pastor Skye Jethani, “Why I Defend Muslims”

Islam

Islam describes its adherents in many ways. One of them is: he/she whom mankind is safe from his/her hand (meaning action) and tongue (meaning speech). Our response to this current moment of unspeakable violence should be interactive and strategic, not tactical and reactive. We should discourage, oppose and push against hate speech of political and religious leaders, because it leads to violence and genocide.

“those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, ‘Our Lord is God.’ If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God’s name is much invoked, would have been destroyed. God is sure to help those who help His cause—God is strong and mighty—” (Qur’an 22:40)

4. Is it possible to forgive and never forget? What does remembrance mean in light of the possibility of forgiveness?

Judaism

"Amalek is always one of us, I realized, because something of Amalek resides within each of us. The biblical Amalek, in fact, was Esau's grandson, the great great grandchild of Abraham and Sarah, and therefore a member of the family, one who was explicitly rejected and turned away. The battle against hate is internal as much as external." – Rabbi Joshua Hammerman, "Embracing Auschwitz"

Christianity

"Forgiveness is not always easy. At times, it feels more painful than the wound we suffered, to forgive the one that inflicted it. And yet, there is no peace without forgiveness." – Marianne Williamson

"Instead of hating the people you think are war makers, hate the appetites and disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed but hate these things in yourself, not in another." – Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

Islam

Yes, it is possible, yet very difficult, to forgive and never forget. Emotional wounds are harder and much slower to heal than physical wounds. Remembrance should be addressed from a perspective of analysis, aiming at avoiding the occurrence of similar violence in the future.

Remarks from New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern:

That quiet Friday afternoon has become our darkest of days.

But for the families, it was more than that. It was the day that the simple act of prayer – of practising their Muslim faith and religion – led to the loss of their loved ones lives.

Those loved ones, were brothers, daughters, fathers and children.

They were New Zealanders. They are us.

And because they are us, we, as a nation, we mourn them.

We feel a huge duty of care to them. And Mr Speaker, we have so much we feel the need to say and to do.

One of the roles I never anticipated having, and hoped never to have, is to voice the grief of a nation.

At this time, it has been second only to securing the care of those affected, and the safety of everyone.

And in this role, I wanted to speak directly to the families. We cannot know your grief, but we can walk with you at every stage. We can. And we will, surround you with aroha, manaakitanga and all that makes us, us. Our hearts are heavy but our spirit is strong.

A 28-year-old man – an Australian citizen – has been charged with one count of murder. Other charges will follow. He will face the full force of the law in New Zealand. The families of the fallen will have justice.

He sought many things from his act of terror, but one was notoriety.

And that is why you will never hear me mention his name.

He is a terrorist. He is a criminal. He is an extremist.

But he will, when I speak, be nameless.

And to others I implore you: speak the names of those who were lost, rather than name of the man who took them.

He may have sought notoriety, but we in New Zealand will give him nothing. Not even his name.