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*Hate is hate. Hope is hope.*

### *The Language of Hope*

I thought I was on solid ground recently, when visiting with an longtime friend, I lamented the shooting in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and the recent uptake in hate calls to temples here in New Hampshire. I thought we would agree about the unthinkable prospect of anti-Semitism rising in our country, but my friend didn't see it that way. "That shooting," she said, "was no different than any other hate crime – no different than a school shooting or the shooting in that black Charleston church."

Her take on these events surprised me – not that the shootings didn't distress her (they did), but her bundling them together felt dismissive of specific issues and of the historical suffering of specific groups of people for centuries of religious and racial injustice. While I saw in Pittsburgh a story of stunning anti-Semitism and in Charleston a very different story of racism and white supremacy, for my friend hate was simply hate. The difference in how we understood these events made for a feeling of distance between us. It's easy to feel far apart from each another and not so easy to close the distance.

I've been aware this season of religious and cultural differences and the extent to which they can create distance. Many traditions are celebrated at this time, but we will look today at the December holidays of Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanzaa. While people who observe them come together in everyday living – in neighborhoods, on line and on the street, at work and school – the rituals observed on these three holidays have specific meaning to specific people, who separate themselves out from the whole to observe them. They light candles and speak words that are very different from one another. And while all three traditions tell stories and recite prayers about hope, our openness to them can vary.

Consider the lighting of the menorah just now, abundant with reverence and beauty. What happened within you as those candles were lit, as ancient syllables of prayer, which have been repeated through the centuries, were spoken? What will you remember of this ritual?

Maybe, if you grew up in a Jewish household, you felt held. Maybe you felt tender, remembering loved ones and repeated blessings which may be part of you. Maybe you felt pride or solidarity, as you stood together. Those watching may have felt curious. Or distanced. Moved, perhaps, or even envious of this rich tradition. Whatever feelings might have come up for us, I would guess that something else happened too. For a few moments, time stopped. What of that ritual will remain in your heart?

Now imagine that we had an Advent wreath here at UUFES. Many UU congregations do. An Advent wreath has four candles that are lit the three Sundays before Christmas – in many Protestant churches the first symbolizes expectation, the second (today) hope, the third Love and the fourth, on Christmas Eve, Joy. In the Christian tradition, this candle-lighting ritual celebrates a specific event, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, an event as central to that religion as the rededication of the Temple is to Judaism.

Many Unitarian Universalists grew up in Catholic and Protestant churches and are more familiar with Christian Christmas stories and liturgy than with Jewish rituals. For some of us, the Christian rituals may evoke similar reactions to the lighting of the menorah – tender memories, a sense of shared experience. For others, it might bring up discomfort or resistance. How curious that opening ourselves to a Hanukkah ritual might come more easily to some of us than opening to the Christian story of Christmas, although the words, learned long ago, may still be part of us.

Once-memorized prayers remind me of a UU friend, brought up Catholic, who sometimes finds herself thinking the words of the Hail Mary when trying to get to sleep at night. She has noticed that at a certain point in the prayer, her head automatically bows....

Kwanzaa celebrates African heritage in African-American culture. Central to the celebration is a candle-lighting ritual with seven candles, representing seven principles. The first three principles are about people – one for self-determination, one for economic cooperation and one for creativity. The second three principles are about the struggle and the hope that comes from the struggle – one for collective responsibility, one for purpose and one for faith. The seventh principle, and the center candle, symbolize unity.

Kwanzaa was founded in the 1960s by Maulana Karenga, an African-American activist and professor of Africana studies. Sadly, given its lofty principles, Kwanzaa is less known and less widely celebrated than Hanukkah or Christmas, although its ritual of naming struggle and hope is as relevant to and important for life in America as any.

As different as these three candle-lighting rituals are, as specific as their stories and prayers are, they all speak of hope. Pausing to acknowledge and honor all of them offers us, often so distant from one another, a collective sense of hope – an invitation to move from “this is how we’re different from each other” to “let us come together and speak with each other the language of hope.” Hope, after all, is hope.

I love Diana Eck’s words in the reading Andy just presented...that Advent is about “the not-yet, the face of expectation.”<sup>1</sup> When we look around, we see the “not-yet” unfolding everywhere. We see it in recent elections and in new and diverse legislative bodies. We see the “not-yet” in asylum seekers walking north toward the US border, the hope of something better in their eyes. We see the “not-yet” in the flickering menorah flames before us.

A week ago, when the huge menorah in New York City was lit, Rabbi Shmuel Butman spoke. He’s director of the Lubavitch Youth Organization, which first put up the menorah four decades ago.

“Everybody is hurting now,” he said. “We are all Pittsburgh survivors, and we’re hurting because the ugly head of anti-Semitism is now showing and, unfortunately, it’s contagious...the menorah delivers a message of strength, of inspiration. The menorah says, ‘Listen, if things are not that good today, tomorrow is another day and a brighter day, and tomorrow you are going to light another candle.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Eck, *Encountering God*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/02/nyregion/hanukkah-worlds-largest-menorah.html>

Michelle Obama, on a book tour, lifts up hope, too. "My grandparents' lives," she says, "were affected by Jim Crow. We mistakenly thought that Barack Obama was going to erase hundreds of years of history in eight years. That is ridiculous. But we are putting down markers, we make progress and going backward doesn't mean the progress wasn't real. It just means that it's hard. What we are trying to do is shift culture." "Putting down markers" – that's the language of hope.

This past week, the memorializing of President George H.W. Bush has returned, over and over again, to the nature of public discourse today. Words like *integrity* and *honesty* and *uprightness* have rung out in barely veiled contrast to what has become the norm today. A pundit on the radio show "1A" suggested a reframe. Rather than interpret these eulogies as "a lament of times past," rather than despair of the state of things today, he said, "there's a void [today] that we will fill." An opportunity for positive change. A void where hope can reside.

You may have seen on line the display of light last Sunday on the George H.W. Bush aircraft carrier. It's a time lapse of everyone on this huge ship, going about their tasks – it looks like a day full of activity in a small town. The video ends at nighttime with everyone, hundreds of people, appearing on the deck, lining up and waving flashlights in the dark.

We don't need to be a member of the military services, following orders and lining up with a flashlight, to be moved by this image of light in the darkness. Not any more than we need to be Jewish to want to hold the lighting of this menorah in our hearts. We don't need to be Christian to find meaning in the ancient prayers of hope, joy and love that are being spoken today in churches everywhere. And we have all we need, the more we learn and understand our collective whiteness, to hope – and to long for – blessing upon blessing for people of color.

Let the light not go out, and let us pause every time a candle is lit. Let us feel the intention, the seriousness of the moment. May candles be lit, and may their lighting remind us that hope can bring us together and open our hearts.

So may it be.