

The Faith of Unitarian Universalist Jews

It was a gusty, rainy night in September in Atlanta, pounded by steady storms from a Florida hurricane. Still there were quite a few cars in the parking lot of the Unitarian Universalist congregation, many of them belonging to people attending the Yom Kippur service. This Jewish High Holy Day service that took place in a UU sanctuary allowed a group of Jewish people, most of them also members, to observe a significant holiday within their religious tradition of origin without returning to a synagogue. During the hour-and-fifteen-minute service, different participants led prayers, recited blessings, and read passages from the service program, some of it in English and some in Hebrew, taken from traditional and contemporary sources in Judaism. There were narrative explanations of each element in the service, which had been co-created by Jewish lay members. The liturgy included translated traditional Jewish songs from *Singing the Journey*, the UU hymnal, taken from the section on the Days of Awe: “Oh Sing Hallelujah” and “Who Can Say.” All of those present read responsively “A Litany of Atonement,” written by a UU minister.

A large majority of those Jewish people, in fact most Jewish members and friends of Unitarian Universalist congregations, come from interfaith families, either by birth or marriage. They are searching for respectful and workable ways to honor two different religious or cultural backgrounds and retain what is meaningful to both.

Jewish people who cross the threshold of UU communities, many coming from interfaith families, bring with them pressing questions: What in Unitarian Universalism aligns with our core theologies? What is to be gained by being part of a more diverse faith tradition? Will we feel a cultural and social fit? Will I find in Unitarian Universalism the emphasis on prophetic witness, on reason, on individual inquiry and right of conscience that Judaism may still offer me?

Is this the place to call a new home?

—Rev. Marti Keller, editor

I am a Secular Humanist Jew who rejected patriarchal humanism as soon as I was old enough to see gender bias all around me. I don't belong to a Unitarian Universalist congregation but I love what Unitarian Universalism stands for. I love the myriad of social justice projects that UU congregations undertake, the focus on diversity and environmentalism and Humanist principles.

—Faith Oremland, Minneapolis, MN

Raised as an observant Reform Jew, I find much resonance between my birth religion and Unitarian Universalism, especially in regards to ethical teachings and social justice. As my faith journey moved away from Judaism, I felt torn by my loyalty to honor my Jewish heritage and the history of my ancestors who struggled and sacrificed to practice their religion. As a Unitarian Universalist, I have found the freedom to incorporate the Jewish wisdom and practices that hold deep meaning for me into the greater whole of my religious experience.

—Rev. Jay Wolin, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Quad Cities, IA

Unitarian Universalism has helped me gain access to my own wholeness as a modern UU Jewish person. As a life-long UU and Jew, I find that Unitarian Universalism provides a welcoming home for religious pluralism. This is invaluable and has helped me reconnect more powerfully with my Jewish roots by challenging me to honor my own “pluralism within” and helping me appreciate the blessings of both of my born religious traditions.

—Rev. Dara Olandt, Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Blacksburg, VA

I have always found room in Unitarian Universalism to embrace the many traditions that are meaningful to me. The High Holy days, in particular, have resonated with me in a deep way since I was young. This period of celebrating new beginnings while going through the intentional process of reconciling with the year gone by always brings me back to the core of who I am and the person I want to be. It was through the sound of the shofar ringing through our congregation's sanctuary that I discovered a deep connection with my Jewish heritage that continues to shape my identity as a Unitarian Universalist.

— Jaclyn Kottman,
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship, Appleton, WI

Growing up in a UU and Jewish family, I got used to fielding questions by repeating what my mother told me: I am both. It's ok to be both. But I always felt like an impostor, too complicated for my own good. It was in my twenties that I encountered the story of Rabbi Solomon Hirsch Sonneschein. Intrigued by Unitarians, he helped launch a national conversation about the merging of the Reform and Unitarian movements and even considered becoming a Unitarian rabbi. The rabbi confirmed what I was too insecure to see in myself: He was both Unitarian and Jewish. So am I. There's nothing wrong with complexity. In fact, Unitarian Universalism has always welcomed and celebrated it.

— Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg,
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship, Appleton, WI

It took many years to consider naming myself a UU as well as a Jew. I still struggle every time I hear the word *church* even though I have to admit that every now and then I use the word myself, for convenience's sake. I was attracted to Unitarian Universalism by the seven Principles, principles by which I already lived my life. What keeps me connected is the people, the wonderful minister who has a "Jewish heart," and the love my congregation has for Jewish ritual and wisdom.

— Bonnie Zimmer, First Parish
Unitarian Universalist, Arlington, MA

My quarrel with the Judaism of my childhood was (and is) mostly about theology, so when my husband and I discovered the Unitarian Church in Westport, Connecticut, in 1960, I never felt the need to abandon my love for my Jewish cultural heritage, for our brave and compelling history, for our festivals and music and edibles. My Jewishness is wrapped in the embrace of my family of origin, whom I dearly love. I am an unambiguous Jewish UU and loving it. L'Chaim.

— Denise Taft Davidoff,
Unitarian Church, Westport, CT

Jewish rituals take on a new meaning within a UU context. The annual Seders at my UU congregation where we link the Exodus to Civil, Human, and LGBT Rights are more meaningful to me than arguments over what particular grains are permitted during Passover. Being a UU has made me a better and more appreciative Jew.

— Paul David Wadler,
Second Unitarian Church, Chicago, IL

MARTI KELLER is a lifelong, self-described Jewnitarian whose parents left religious Judaism and found a home for their family in a UU congregation in Maryland and later California. She is a parish and community minister in the Southern region. She is also past president of Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness (UUJA) and co-editor of *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism*.

For More Information

Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness, uuja.org

Leah Hart-Landsberg and Marti Keller. *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism* (Skinner House).

Available from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop, uua.org/bookstore