

A Joint Message from Pastor Erica and Rav Julius

Introduction

Last Fall I shared with you Rabbi Julius Rabinowitz's *Rosh Hashanah* sermon about the Middle East War. I quoted him in several of my sermons, particularly as we were becoming aware of the rise of the influence of Christian Nationalism in our nation's political discourse. Last year many of you read Amanda Tyler's 2024 book with me, *How to End Christian Nationalism*. Rav Julius' sermon was informed in part by Rachel Havrelock's 2020 book, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible*, a book examining the modern day interpretations of the Book of Joshua, and its application to modern international geopolitical conflicts.

Rav Julius of Congregation Beth Jacob and I realized that our paths were aligning. We are launching a short, collaborative study which we hope will be mutually beneficial for each of our congregations. **So, we are thrilled to formally announce that the two communities will engage in the Bible Study informed by these issues in May and June.**

We have set aside three sessions to study the Book of Joshua, and one session at the end to consider modern applications.

First Session: Rahab the Prostitute and the Spies

We open with Joshua standing at the threshold of the Promised Land. Informed by Moses' earlier strategy of sending spies ahead. Joshua's decision is not merely tactical; it is a test of whether this new generation can approach the land with courage rather than anxiety.

The spies' encounter with Rahab the prostitute, is the narrative's turning point. Was this a place where strangers could blend in unnoticed? Or does the text deliberately highlight God's ability to work through those whom society marginalizes?

Rahab's actions are astonishing. She shelters the spies at great personal risk, and aligns herself with the Children of Israel - a people she has never met. Her declaration - "Your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth below" - is nothing less than revolutionary.

In both of our Jewish and Christian traditions, she stands as a reminder that faith is revealed not by status but by courageous action in the world -- and that God's purposes often unfold through unexpected people and connections.

Second Session: Fall of Jericho and Achan's Sin

For our second session, we transition to the broader stories of conquest. When Israel crosses the Jordan into Jericho, the narrative shifts from individual courage to collective action, and we will learn about the uncompromising demands of what the Bible calls *herem*. These stories stand at the heart of the book's first half, where Joshua is portrayed

as leading a swift and divinely guided conquest of the land, but sharply undermined by the reality of the land remaining largely unsettled.

Achan's taking items from Jericho designated for God alone -- results in communal guilt. The narrative raises questions about collective responsibility and the moral compass of the ancient world.

- Why should an entire people suffer for the wrongdoing of one individual?
- How do we understand a system in which holiness is so absolute that a single violation threatens the whole community?

Third Session: Farewell Addresses

After having taken a few weeks off, we will return with an examination of farewell speeches across the sweep of Scripture and history. Moses, Joshua, Jesus, and George Washington each present final words revealing what they believe will sustain their communities once they are gone.

Moses frames his farewell as a covenantal crossroads, insisting that communal flourishing depends on fidelity, justice, and collective responsibility. Joshua, his successor, echoes these themes but with sharper urgency, acknowledging both the fragility of covenant loyalty and the necessity of choosing it anew in every generation.

Jesus' farewell address in John's Gospel, shifts the register from national covenant to spiritual communion, emphasizing neither land nor law -- but presence in the beloved community. Where Moses and Joshua warn of idolatry and assimilation, Jesus prepares his followers for persecution and misunderstanding, grounding them in a love that transcends fear.

Washington's Farewell Address, though thoroughly secular, belongs in this lineage, speaking of unity, moral responsibility, and the dangers that threaten the body politic relinquishing power to strengthen the community's future.

Fourth Session: Biblical Teachings and Today's World

Our final session turns to Rachel Havrelock's *The Joshua Generation*, a work that invites readers to reconsider how sacred texts shape modern political imagination, and that Biblical texts enter history through the ways communities read them.

In the early decades of the State of Israel, the first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, convened military and political leaders to study Joshua for the purpose of generating a unifying national story for a diverse population returning to its land. This risked the shaping of political imagination more by Biblical archetypes than by the complex realities of the modern lives of those emigrating. Ultimately inviting those shaping the emerging identity of the new country to read Joshua not as a blueprint for action, but as a mirror that reflects the dangers of mythic nationalism.

We will include references to Amanda Tyler's *How to End Christian Nationalism*. Tyler carefully distinguishes Christian Nationalism from Christianity, arguing that resisting

Christian Nationalism is an act of faithfulness to the Christian tradition. She encourages courageous conversations within congregations, affirming engaged and courageous Bible Study, a commitment to the separation of church and state for the well-being of each, and to interfaith community partnerships.

Conclusion: Ground rules for Interfaith Dialogue:

As our two communities explore the Book of Joshua and its meanings, we are entering a shared space shaped by curiosity, trust, and the excitement of learning alongside one another. To guide us, we're using principles inspired by Leonard Swidler's *Dialogue Decalogue*, a foundational approach for interfaith conversations.

We will establish ground rules for dialogue at the beginning of our time together: **our purpose is to learn together, not to convert each other**, with a deeper understanding of the Bible and each other's perspectives, knowing that true learning encourages personal growth. We meet as **equals**, respecting the dignity of each tradition, no matter the size or status in our community.

Each person represents themselves and their own beliefs. Instead of telling someone what their faith "really" means, we listen to how they see themselves in our discussions. This requires us to be **honest, sincere, free from hidden motives**, and open to reflecting and examining our own biases.

We try to compare **ideals with ideals** and **actions with actions**, avoiding unfair comparisons -- like judging one tradition by its best qualities and another by its flaws. We welcome the opportunity to find common ground, without merging our distinct traditions. True dialogue keeps differences intact while building relationships.

Lastly, we commit to a spirit of trust and respect. Together, we will honor Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions, avoid supersessionist, antisemitic, or any prejudiced interpretations, and appreciate the depth and variety of meanings within sacred texts. We will support each other in these efforts, and forgive each other if we misspeak, giving space to one another if we need to restate what we are trying to communicate.

We look forward to travelling on this journey with you, as we deepen our faith, understanding of the Bible, and community partnerships.

Pastor Erica and Rav Julius