

Loophole

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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This is one of those years when the “Big Three” Abrahamic traditions coincide in religious observances that invite enhanced spiritual practice. All three invite some contemplation about times of doing without: be it memorializing a legendary flight from Egypt, with little to carry on and no

time to leaven the bread, as is done during the Jewish holidays of Passover; or exploring a fasting practice during Lent in the Christian tradition and heritage; or committing to a full fast from dusk to dawn for a full month during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. All three of these have been going on this past week.

As we hear of the ice-storm that has affected parts of Quebec and Eastern Canada this past week, we also see that such inclement weather is not necessarily a deterrent to continuing such practices. And in the case of several Jewish families in Montreal, it was even a concrete reminder of the very occasion they were commemorating, as they sought to make-do with what they had and could offer others in their community.

During the past six weeks, the Lenten season’s invitation to enhance our spiritual practice could include us. This can often look like some kind of “fast” – in terms of reducing, or entirely doing without, something that we might be used to, or which has simply taken way more time and space in our lives than we’d like.

I’ve also suggested looking at the flipside of this practice and exploring things that we could do with more of, particularly in terms of enhanced

connection with others and our wider community, or a healthy habit that has fallen by the wayside, or which we've been meaning to take up for some time. Some of you have may have been called to do some version of that over this past season.

And if you have, you might have also been anxiously expecting the arrival of Easter, and the automatic dispensation that it can represent, from the additional effort that comes with doing something hard – doing without or taking up a practice. Because changing behaviour is hard – it requires discipline, including recognizing space to slip-up and try again... a practice. Whether it's been a long wait for chocolate since February, or the expectation of some newer freedom from being beholden to an additional self-imposed discipline, the feast of Easter can bring a sense of relief.

If you've gone the entirety of the Lenten period with your practice – first of all, that is quite impressive – but that would not have actually been necessary to fulfill the Lenten commitment. Because... there's a loophole!

Perhaps I could have mentioned that earlier, though some of you might remember that I talked about this some years ago. It turns out that the 40-day fast that is associated with Lent is shorter than the span of time between Ash Wednesday and Easter, which actually works out to a whole 46 days!

Where do those extra six days come from?

The answer lies in days like today – Sunday!

For thousands of years, Sunday, or some other Sabbath day, has been observed as a feast day, and feasting is the opposite of fasting. Each week, there is a “mini-Easter”, a day of feast, in which the Lenten practice allows for – in fact, calls for – respite from the work that comes from other enhanced spiritual practices. A regular opportunity for life renewal.

And the day of respite is a spiritual practice in itself; a spiritual practice of biblical proportions – literally, it’s right there at the beginning of Genesis, to rest on the seventh day (as the story goes, even God did it, setting an example for the rest of us). It’s even a freaking commandment!

Now, you might be thinking, that’s all well and good, but Lent is over – what are we supposed to do with this now? Will you have to wait another year, before being able to take advantage of this “Lenten hack”? Or maybe, this year simply didn’t feel like the time to take on the commitment of a Lenten practice in the first place, and any talk about it seems superfluous... at least until next year.

Well, it turns out, there’s *another* loophole. Just as there are moments of feast interspersed with times of fasting, there’s nothing stopping us from continuing to build a discipline of ongoing spiritual practice during times of feasting.

Lent was, after all, a time of spiritual *practice*. Even if we strayed from its discipline, or just happened to think about what we *might* want to do, this upcoming ordinary time has plenty of space to build upon any practices we might have picked up, or to nurture those practices which we wish we had taken up.

There is always some aspect of our lives that we can see as areas for improvement – Lent can simply offer a good excuse to get on with it. But the time for renewal in our life is still at hand, and we can still do with less of some things, and more of others.

Just as there is a bit of yin in the side of yang, there is a bit of yang in the side of yin. That is a rhythm of ever-renewing life. Even in the midst of Ramadan, those devoted to a fast will celebrate with a modest evening breakfast – *iftar*, which is often done as a communal fast-breaking.

When Jewish families in Montreal found themselves with less access to power this year, due to the most recent ice-storm, many of them also saw an opportunity to put their practice into action, as the Seder meal acts partly as a reminder of a time when people have done without – not even enough time to leaven the bread.

Passover also offers a time to remember people coming together in mutual support through difficult times. And the story of the Jewish families of Montreal in 2023 illustrates a time when rehearsing this tradition matured into being prepared to face a new time of difficulty with mutual support in community.

The Seder is a celebration of a bitter time – represented by the bitter herbs that come in a traditional Seder. It includes joy and sorrow, recognizing that these often come intertwined, and that we can give space to each of them. Even periods of fasting can have moments of feast, and days of feasting can use times of fast. It is not obligatory – nor advisable – to stay too long in either of these spaces or times.

In our community, we have space for joy and sorrow every week, and we see much of both throughout the year. Many of you have found opportunities for joy, even in the midst of difficult times – sometimes, it is amid those difficult times that you have sought opportunities to bring each other closer together and even find spots of feast to carry you along – emotional Sabbaths of respite, that help in dealing with ongoing sadness, grief, or isolation.

My friends, it is not a luxury to seek comfort during difficult times – it is a *duty*: a commandment of biblical proportions. It is not a “cheat” to seek balance, and opportunities for renewal, when facing challenges – be they unexpected hardships, or voluntary discipline. What I’ve been calling a “loophole” is actually by design. Not a bug, but a feature – a tool for ongoing life renewal.

And when times are good, it is helpful to keep a level of humility and compassion, remembering those times when things are different, to prepare for them, and to keep in mind all who may not be in the same fortunate spots. Part of the practice of Ramadan includes not only fasting, but also almsgiving. My friends, each of us, and our community, has opportunities of the sort throughout the year. And throughout the year, we continue to find opportunities to nurture those areas of discipline that may offer better life for ourselves and for those around us.

And so, my friends, we embrace this time of feast with gladness. And we allow ourselves to face the upcoming ordinary time with opportunities to embrace the apparent paradox of fast and feast, in balance. To continuously find spots when we may find renewal in life.

So may it be,
 In the spirit of feast among the fast,
 as life finds renewal,
 Alleluia!
 Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #269 Lo, the Day of Days Is Here

~)-| Words: From Frederick Lucian Hosmer, 1840-1929

Music: Robert Williams, c. 1781-1821, harmony by John Roberts, 1822-1877

(sing with EASTER HYMN from 61, 268)

Hymn #62 When the Daffodils Arrive

~)-| Words: Carl G. Seaburg, 1922-1998, © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: From a Hasidic tune

HASIDIM

Closing Hymn #27 I Am That Great and Fiery Force

Words: Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179

Music: Music Josquin Desprez, 1445-1521, adapt. by Anthony Petti, b. 1932

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