

Conspiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

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Conspiracies

THE GRAVEYARD OF EMPIRES EILAF FARAJALLAH.....	3
A NARROW FELLOW STEPHANIE PAULSELL.....	5
HDS KEHILLAH SUKKOT NOON SERVICE.....	7
CPE POEMS NICOLE NEWELL.....	8
COMPASSION: MORAL IMAGINATION AT WORK MARY HUNT.....	11
FRIDAY HALAQA	12
AFTERLIFE CASSANDRA MONTENEGRO.....	13
THE WEAPONIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY JUDY BEALS.....	14
CONNECTING WITH THE ANCESTORS: HALLOWEEN AS A MEXICAN JEW FRANCESCA REZNIK.....	16
HDS OFRENDA.....	17
RAIN BOOTS ABIGAIL LOUISIN	18

THE GRAVEYARD OF EMPIRES

EILAF FARAJALLAH
MTS

Eilaf Farajallah, MTS, wrote this essay on the morning of August 17, 2021.



Photo Credit: Majid Saeedi, Getty Images, 2010.

If you are American, politics is something you are advised to abstain from at fancy dinners and polite exchanges with strangers. If you are from the Middle East, then politics is not a choice, it is a reality.

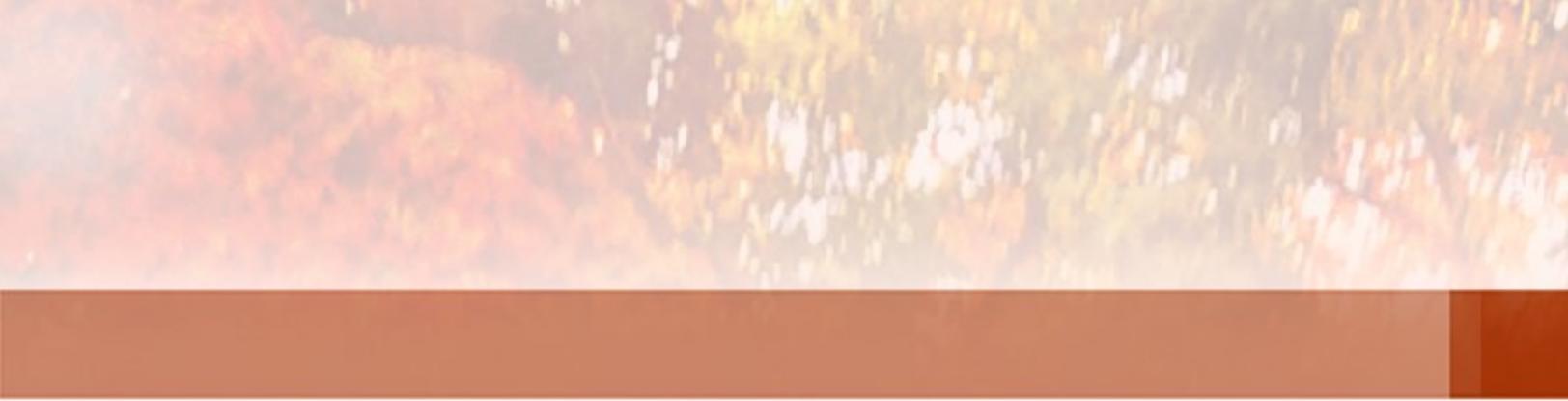
When so much of your life is dictated by decisions by people you do not see, it is only fitting to spend a lot of time wondering why those decisions come to be. Unexpected perk? Before you are old enough to drive a car, you get good at guessing agendas.

If you had access to a television this week, you saw what I saw and your blood probably ran cold too: the Taliban regaining power in Afghanistan. The men on the television had murder on their minds. Their eyes were open but they saw nothing, said

nothing and as they continue to consolidate power in the coming days they would probably feel nothing.

As more and more shocking footage comes out of Afghanistan, gunshots fired into crowds, children clambering over the walls of airports, people hanging onto airplanes taking off into the sky, we see how the war on terror had resulted in even more terror. Theirs as well as our own.

The reason why this hurts is because we know what will come. The strong will devour the weak and women and girls are especially vulnerable. Poverty is the biggest motivation for radicalization and the political repression can only sweeten the deal to the millions of people who have less reasons to live and more reasons to die.



EILAF FARAJALLAH MTS

What could possess someone to hang onto a plane as it took off into the sky? Terror, plain and simple. We do not need to guess what will happen. We have already seen it before. The broken and the damned will proceed to break and damn what has not been broken and damned. Girls will stay at home. Boys will return to “religious” studies. Twenty years from now we will be arguing as to where this all went wrong. We must face this fact: The war on terror begot more terror. There are no winners today. Even the Taliban will struggle to rule a people that got a taste of freedom.

And as fingers here are pointed as to which US president is most to blame, we must not forget that fingers there are pulling triggers, killing innocent people, given license by a chaos from a Pandora’s box that we opened. America again is in a difficult position, caught between what is easy and what is right, between what is manageable and what is moral.

As America and Americans scramble to wonder what the war was for and if it was worth it all, we must reflect on the utility of war in solving conflicts at all. We must reflect on how a nation takes pride in taking in refugees has now created hundreds of thousands more in a humanitarian crisis unfolding in the weeks to come. We have given new meaning to the term Pyrrhic victory and we must think reflect on the arrogance that possessed us to join the British, the Soviets and the Mughals and wage war on a stretch of mountains historians have called the Graveyard of Empires.

A NARROW FELLOW

PROFESSOR STEPHANIE PAULSELL



Stephanie preached this sermon at the ecumenical Tuesday Morning Eucharist on September 14, 2021.

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met him? Did you not
His notice instant is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted Shaft is seen,
And then it closes at your Feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre—
A Floor too cool for Corn—
But when a Boy and Barefoot
I more than once at Noon

Have passed I thought a Whip Lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled And was gone—

Several of Nature's People
I know and they know me
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

That's Emily Dickinson on what it's like to come across a snake. Sometimes you catch a glimpse of the "narrow fellow" unbraiding himself in the sun, but sometimes you just see the grass opening and closing, dividing as if being parted by an invisible comb. This past summer when I was visiting my parents, a snake slid out of a lawn and onto the sidewalk, so close to my feet that I almost stepped on it. Emily Dickinson finds the words for that experience: it creates "a tighter Breathing/And Zero at the Bone." Even thinking about it now, I feel a little cold. It's startling to cross paths with a snake.

To see a snake, or even sense a snake moving in the grass, Emily Dickinson also suggests, you have to be looking down. By contrast, to see the snake in our readings today, you have to be looking up. In the story Heather read for us from the book of Numbers, after the people of Israel complain about the food God leaves for them scattered in the dew each morning—"we hate this miserable food," they say—God sends snakes into their midst—a plague like the one he visited on the Egyptians who had enslaved them—and some of them are bitten, and some of them die. When they ask Moses for help, he prays for the people God has put in his care—and God answers, although maybe not in the way that they hoped. Instead of sending the snakes back to wherever they came from, God tells Moses to make an image of a poisonous snake and mount it on a pole, so when someone gets bitten, they can look up at the image of the snake and live.

It's a strange, even shocking little story—and we never hear any more about the snakes or the bronze serpent Moses created to heal people who had been bitten until the eighteenth chapter of II Kings. The snake on its pole emerges from the tall grasses of scripture, appearing as a relic venerated in Jerusalem. People burned incense in front of it, made offerings to it. And when King Hezekiah began reforming Judean worship, he broke Moses' bronze serpent into pieces, giving Moses's teachings against the creation of idols over his own creation of an idol.

PROFESSOR STEPHANIE PAULSELL

The relic was destroyed but the story of Moses's bronze serpent on its pole lived on and is invoked by Jesus in today's reading from the gospel of John: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," Jesus says, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." You can see what the gospel is getting at: Moses lifts up the serpent to heal the people who have been bitten by snakes; Jesus will be lifted up on the cross to heal us all. Two terrifying images that come to be venerated and even worshiped—the kind of thing that would have made Hezekiah very nervous. In many church calendars, today the feast of the cross, the instrument of torture on which Jesus was executed transformed into a holy object. This feast has its roots in the story of the Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, finding a relic of the "true cross" in Jerusalem in the years after her son looked up and saw an image of the cross in the sky in the midst of a battle and knew he would defeat his enemy.

Our chaplain Kerry Maloney once organized a speaker's series on contemplative prayer, and I still remember the definition of prayer that our writer in residence, Terry Tempest Williams, offered: for me, she said, contemplative prayer means not looking away, no matter what.

Maybe that is how we are being invited to observe the feast of the cross today: as a way of keeping our attention on what is being lifted up. Something else that the snake and the Son of Man have in common is that they are so often hidden. Snakes hide in the grasses, camouflage themselves in their landscapes. What the gospel of John calls the Son of Man is hidden all around us in plain sight—the endless and glorious manifestations of our humanity, the uncountable ways human beings reflect the image of God. Humanity's suffering is hidden away too—in hospitals and courtrooms, prisons and refugee camps, parting the grass of our attention from time to time, but then closing up again. Looking at what the cross lifts above hiddenness is to feel what Emily Dickinson described as "tighter breathing/and Zero at the bone" and yet not to look away. To keep looking and to allow our gaze, our studies, and the movement of our bodies through the world to be guided into the many hidden places where the one who came not to condemn the world but to save it waits for us to see him.

SUKKOT NOON SERVICE

HDS KEHILLAH: A JEWISH STUDENT COMMUNITY



Gathered around the sukkah on the Campus Green for Noon Service on Wednesday September 22. The service was hosted by HDS Kehillah: A Jewish Student Community for the festival of Sukkot. *Photo Credit: Kristie Welsh.*

CPE POEMS

NICOLE NEWELL
MDIV '23



Nicole Newell, MDiv '23, wrote this poem cycle during a summer unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in an acute care hospital in 2021.

First day of new things

First day of new things:
Tubes. Trachs. Infections.
Beds raise and lower.
Nurses. Fluorescent lights.

Charts, beeps, curtains
enclosing worn
faces and unwashed hair.
Gowns and booties.
Straws in cups.
Catheters.

Here, fragile human
impermanence,
whirr of machines
and flurry of medical teams.

The feelings that whirr through me
as I sit with patients—
sorrow, apprehension,
irritation, tension—
families and their divisions.
How empathy comes hard sometimes.
How coming into relation with others
in their heightened fragility
feels so tiring
and scary
and so maybe I must do it.

In each room,
I mirror emotional states.
On this day I learn a new word:
degloving, cause for amputation,
ghosts of life and limb.

My body, affected.
my hands, newly sacred.
And all these bodies,
and these sterile things,
Sacred also.

Things that are...

Leonidas, a tiny
infant, swaddled
and dead.
held by mother
and blood relatives
They say goodbye
peace in their slow movements,
in the loss, which they knew
was coming.
Seeds of grief
at the corners
of their eyes
and mine.
My instinct is to reach out
and touch and hold.
Anoint and bless,
praying for his welcome
home.

Essie, whose multiple
cancers have not
ravaged her soul
No, she is good,
she tells me as I
sit by her raised bed
as if a child at her feet.
She testifies:
how she met her life partner
in high school
and raised children, grandchildren,
and survived so many cancerous cells—

And here I remember the advice
of Monica, a nurse:
that Essie's is a life in which I am
now just a mention
in the third paragraph
on page 468.
And she is here in mine on this page.

NICOLE NEWELL
MDiv '23

The lives we, briefly,
touch and hold.
The grief we carry—
our own.
The stories that linger
in our bodies
when we go home.
The people who hold us.
All of us moving through the world.
We come alongside each other for
but a brief moment.
But oh, what grace
that moment is.

Compressions

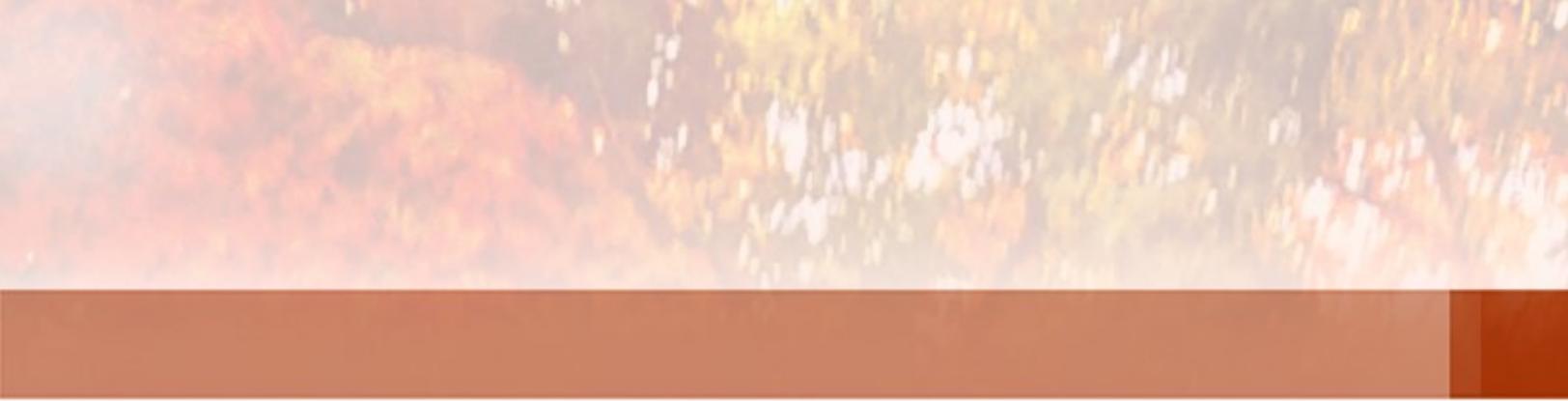
5:51 AM, the phone rings
for a mother and father
telling them in a language foreign to them
to come right
away because their
son is actively
trying to die.
I saw the nurses, the team,
doing everything
they can to convince him
not to go.
someone living moves up and
down beside his bed,
bobbing in an
automatic rhythm
compressing the boy's chest.
Ribs crack, blood vessels
break.
lungs refuse to
inflate, heart
stopped.
a half an hour past,
and still a rotation of the living
continue futile, but existentially
necessary compressions
because he is too young to die.
His parents arrive and I
greet them with a

doctor who tells them
through a translator
that their son
has just died.
his mother falls
to the floor and screams
and here there are no words,
only full-bodied mourning
and wails of desperation
her whole body a fire and a flood at once.
people try to compose her
gather her, and
I wonder why we cannot tolerate
this rational decomposition
in the face of such a vast loss.
the boy's father hangs back, emotions
quivering across his face
but never breaking the surface
of disbelief

seeing them beside their fifteen-year-old son,
whose skin now has only the slightest
yellowish cast
his body still warm
his face unshaven,
shaking nurses bring thin blue blankets
perhaps he's only sleeping as the
dawn breaks into the hushed room
But the monitors do not lie.
His breath does not grace
his mother's cheek
as she leans in.
His way of thinking, being, his memories,
his consciousness—gone.

Patient expired. Family present.

Monday morning,
8 AM and I've only just arrived,
8:01 I enter the meeting room
8:04 the pager buzzes
I offer to take it.
It's the emergency department:
"Patient expired. Family present."



NICOLE NEWELL
MDIV '23

But I arrive and the
patient is
a ten-year-old boy.
the patient has not expired—what
masking, clinical language—
a beloved son and grandchild,
a bright young future,
whose bones were still growing
so his grandma could
measure his height every year
on the door frame,
and whose brain was still rapidly assimilating
new neural networks
so he could one day become whom he would be.
He who knew how to make his
father's face crinkle in laughter,
and how to be the darling of his mother's eyes,
has died inexplicably
and far too soon
and unspeakable anguish rolls from his
father, mother, aunts, and cousins
over his exposed face
and blanketed body

which they are not allowed to touch
because the autopsy
that will be done
to determine the cause of
his expiration
requires that he remain
undisturbed,
tubes still spilling
out from his mouth
never to speak again.
Forever four-foot-six on
the door frame,
a brightness
too soon ashen
and faded by an
unrelenting god
whose name we cannot say.

COMPASSION: MORAL IMAGINATION AT WORK

MARY HUNT



Mary Hunt is the co-founder of [WATER \(the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual\)](#). She wrote this essay for WATER's online meditation gathering on September 14, 2020.

Many people I know are at wit's end with the morally hideous things that are happening in our world. I will not rehearse them as we are bombarded with them daily in the media. Scientists tell us there are few if any acts of god, only acts of humans. So whether racism or wildfires, disease or poverty, human beings--we and our species--cause the very problems we lament. That means we can and must solve them.

Compassion pays a key role. A popular mantra in spiritual circles is "practice compassion." Certain politicians are said to "lack compassion." Our world is said to have a "compassion deficit." These may be true, but what to do to make compassion a resource for collective survival? How do we learn and teach others how to "co-suffer," or to "feel with" or to "feel as" another? These are all roots of the word 'compassion.'

One way to embrace compassion is to imagine. Imagination is what allows us, indeed compels us, to 'be' the other, to walk in their shoes, to weep in their place, to hope in their stead, to rejoice in their victories. Imagining is a step on the way to creating something new.

Children have vivid imaginations. Sometimes older people leave their imaginations behind. In the quest to become a functioning adult--to learn to think like a lawyer, act like a teacher, behave like a team player--imagination is often sloughed off like a shell. But we need imagination to be compassionate. Compassion is impossible without a vivid imagination because we have to imagine so many things that we do not experience directly.

Compassion is a route to justice. After all, justice is a work of the imagination not something we experience every day. In our world, injustice is the default--greed, poverty, illness, loneliness, lack of housing, access to education. Justice is the rare,

highly prized experience like what happens that makes us say "justice was done," or "she got her just reward." So we have to imagine what someone is feeling or suffering in order to act humanely toward them. Otherwise, their experience is so foreign that it is hard to sustain commitment to changing it with them.

It is hard to imagine a different, a just world. We cannot be what we cannot imagine. Compassion is an exercise of moral imagination. Let's try it. Focus on the things that touch your heart. I offer a few that have touched mine of late:

- a 10 year old rape victim in Brasil whose abortion was condemned by Catholic bishops
- prisoners in Mississippi who live in state-sponsored squalor
- people of color, especially Black people, witnessing the continued oppression of themselves and their children
- thousands of people evacuated in Oregon due to fire
- victims and survivors of Covid-19 along with their caregivers
- people waiting in food lines around our cities
- forests destroyed by fire

Compassion, suffering with, is what compels me to be those people, even to be a tree in a forest. I get a feel, a smell, a taste of their reality, the more concrete the better, so that I want to change the situation as if it were my own.

For this meditation, use your moral imagination. Focus on a real person, or a situation, even a place, an animal, or a plant. Put yourself there in your imagination, and let your meditation take you to a wellspring of compassion that will give you energy to keep seeking change in these deeply troubled times.

Imagine if our political leaders did this before each meeting, if our children did it in school, if we did it every day. How different our world might be. How different we can make it, starting with our moral imagination.

FRIDAY HALAQA

HDS MUSLIM ASSOCIATION



Friday Halaqa on the Commons in early October.
Photo by Mashal Farrukh, MTS '22



*Read at the HDS Convocation,
September 30, 2021.*

CASSANDRA MONTENEGRO MDiv '23

Will it merely be another mark on your wall of literary academic poetic ascendancy; or an ascension of the Spirit of Heart-Mind? Both or neither? Something else entirely.

What is it, this paper privilege you shall soon find yourself holding—its sheen wearing thin, not wearing you; knowing this, will you let it spill into a prism more sacred than any papyric incantation bringing you through what is deadened in this life,
heart poised, measured against the softness of a feather in the weighted balance
healing, heeding, what is calling you into your next Source of Truth.

To Jason, my Poetry Sherpa, on Graduation Eve

What does it mean to graduate a Master, anyway? Should we even be striving for the Master anymore? To be a Master of any one, any thing? I think we know the answer to that: conflating mastery with dominion only brings misery.

My friend Claudia says we shouldn't confuse knowledge with knowing. And she's right.

Let us instead seek to confer degrees of kindness, of compassionate concern.
Of the kind some knew possible.

For it is possible to meld the heart and the intellect.

Otherwise, your paper is nothing more than a cheat sheet on how to supplant your heart with a scarab, instead of proffering the soft means to mend it.

Otherwise, all we have are priests in power and pharaohs in ruins, salvaging scripture and holy reason at the expense of the Real.

Sure, it's a marker in time. A degree conferred. A paper that might mean purported paper or pleasurable pastime or petty profession if you let it.

So how will you let it
bleed itself into becoming
something more than what you were promised?

THE WEAPONIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY



Judy Beals preached this homily at the ecumenical Tuesday Morning Eucharist on September 28, 2021.

JUDY BEALS
MDIV '23

The readings of the day:

Zechariah 8:20-23

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.’ And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him.”

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”

Psalms 87

He has founded his city on the holy mountain. The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwellings of Jacob.

Glorious things are said of you, city of God:
“I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’”
Indeed, of Zion it will be said,
“This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.”
The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:
“This one was born in Zion.”

As they make music they will sing,
“All my fountains are in you.”

Luke 9:51-56

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village.

I am in a reading group this semester. It’s called Decolonizing the Syllabus on Palestine/Israel: What does Religion Have to do with it? And it includes a remarkable group of intellectuals, activists and novice learners like me.

The reading group is giving me a deepened perspective on the modern state of Israel. In that context today’s reading from the prophet Zechariah and the Psalms hit me with force. Of course, I know that sacred texts have always been used to achieve great good and profound injustice. But confronting the ways that today - and increasingly - Biblical texts are used to justify and solidify the settler-colonial enterprise of the modern Israeli state leaves me gut-punched, sickened. I am horrified to see these texts used to forcibly displace, dispossess, and dehumanize Palestinians in East Jerusalem and elsewhere, all in the name of a singular god, a chosen people, an exclusivist land claim- Zion.

Of course, I know as well that there is wider context here, that there is no single story to what is unfolding in Palestine/Israel, there are vastly different - in fact, opposing - ways of understanding and invoking these texts. And yet . . .

This combination of nausea, righteous anger, and exhaustion is something I am feeling a lot lately. And, whether it be Israel Palestine, vaccine resistance, or the Texas abortion ban, I can’t help but see how the Bible is too often weaponized.

THE WEAPONIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

JUDY BEALS
MDIV '23

And then I look at the reading from Luke. Jesus - a Palestinian Jew - is on the road to Jerusalem, knowing what lies ahead. He needs rest. But the Samaritan villagers decide not to welcome him. Notwithstanding the reaction of James and John, Jesus declines to react, simply moving on to another village.

I try to imagine this scene now, in 2021. I expect that Samaritan village is now an Israeli settlement - either in Israel proper or in the occupied West Bank. And Jesus - visibly Palestinian - is, as a result of that identity - not only unwelcome but subject to discrimination and violence both in the village and in Jerusalem - at best a second-class citizen, more likely without any legal status at all.

What would he do, I wonder? I believe he would stand on the side of the oppressed, that he would most definitely speak truth to power.

But there's more to this than what side he - or we for that matter - are on. And it is here that I turn to the actual reading. What does Jesus do here? He decides to let this slight pass. He chooses to preserve his energy for the larger challenges that lie ahead.

This, I think, is the lesson for today. Which slights, which wrongs, which injustices do we respond to in the moment before us, and how?

This feels like a very personal question. I feel the weight of it all - Palestine/Israel, Texas, lack of access to vaccines globally while Americans resist, climate catastrophe. Sometimes, it all leaves me feeling paralyzed.

And then here we are, all back on this campus, trying to navigate all that means - getting out of our sweatpants and into this room, swabbing our nostrils, navigating mind-boggling administrative requirements and restriction, trying to be social again - all through masks.

It's all so wonderful. And it's all so hard. I feel the exhaustion in myself, and I see the stress in others. I've seen James and John reaction more than a few times - the readiness to call down some fire from heaven to prove a righteous point. I have felt it myself.

Jesus is in a similar situation. He's engaging the big challenges of the oppressed in the outer reaches of the Roman Empire and he's slighted by some villagers without really knowing what stresses or burdens they are under. He's able to distinguish the two - the big stuff from the small stuff. Even though he's tired, he doesn't react in frustration or anger. He pauses. And then he moves on. This isn't the same thing as conceding, ignoring or not caring. It's about keeping his center in the moment, choosing his battles with a longer-term vision in mind.

I'm grateful for Jesus's pause in this moment. It reminds me of one of my favorite wise sayings, written by the holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl:

"Between stimulus and response" he said, "there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

That space.

How many times have I reacted in the moment - in my mind if not my words? How well have I distinguished the big stuff from the small stuff? How well have I preserved my own ability to model the deep work of restorative justice, which is to practice it in every encounter, big or small?

This, I think, is what Jesus is teaching us in this passage. The power of the almighty pause. The importance of distinction. The freedom in choosing our response. The attention to tending our own inner resources, making conscious effort to continuously nurture our inner strength even as we march forward toward whatever it is that we call our Jerusalem.

My hope - my prayer - for myself and for each of us today is that we acquire the wisdom that Jesus shows in this passage from Luke - to see it all, to maintain our indignation at what is unjust and to never become immune to it, and still to have the wisdom to know which battles must be fought today or what our piece of it can be. To honor our own energies, knowing the work is never done. To always model kindness and the deep restorative work of justice, no matter what, no matter who, no matter where.

May it be so. Amen.

CONNECTING WITH THE ANCESTORS: HALLOWEEN AS A MEXICAN JEW



This article was originally published on the online site Alma.

FRANCESCA REZNIK
MTS '23

Growing up with one foot in Mexico and one foot in the United States, I am no stranger to the idea of straddling two cultures. In religious studies, we call this idea liminality. Vampires, centaurs, even Jesus Christ (as both divine and human), are all liminal beings. To be liminal is to be half and half – not quite one, not quite the other.

Though born in Mexico, I grew up in the Northeastern United States with my mother. The changing of the seasons from summer to fall was marked by a kaleidoscope of changing leaves, the smell of apple cider and hayrides through rows of corn. I loved the crisp smell of the air as fall rolled in – it was my favorite time of year.

In Mexico, when the end of October rolled around and the sugar skulls and rainbow tissue-paper banners began to proliferate, I remember asking my father why we did not provide offerings to the ancestors or feast in the cemetery the way other members of our Yucatan community did. My father replied that it was because, though we were Mexican, we were Jewish first – and while we could participate in some cultural aspects of the festival (like enjoying a delicious pan de muertos), Jews saw this festival as idolatrous, and therefore off-limits.

None of this, however, stopped Halloween from always being my favorite holiday. I did not get Dia de los Muertos – but nobody was better at U.S. Halloween than me. My costumes were elaborate and specific. I threw parties starting from the age of 10, with crafts such as painting pumpkins with glitter and turning Oreos into spooky spiders. When I grew too old for trick-or-treating, I donned my floor-length bat mitzvah dress and told the little girls at

the door I was a princess while doling out candy bars (full-sized, of course).

But my Mexican half yearned to be a part of a tradition that was closed off to me. It was not until attending Harvard Divinity School, where I am currently pursuing a Master of Theological Studies, that the tension between my competing identities came to a head. During a class, one student called on us to connect with the ancestors before our next meeting. Having never really engaged in such a practice, I first consulted my rabbi for his take on how best to connect with the ancestors. He provided several helpful examples of how people do this within the Jewish tradition, including the ritual commemoration of those who have passed at wedding ceremonies and the traditional way of celebrating the harvest holiday of Sukkot.

I found myself obsessed with questions for the following days. How could I simultaneously use this day – when the veil between the living and dead is at its most thin, when my Mexican ancestors might be ready to connect with me – when I was also Jewish, and this was a day that was historically prohibited? I found myself obsessed with the question for the following days.

But even more pressing for me, not intellectually but spiritually, was the question: What wisdom do the ancestors have for me that I have been unable to access? What secrets are they holding in their hands, waiting to whisper in my ear, if only I could ground myself enough to connect with them?

I think that the beauty of being a modern Jew whose primary identity is pulled from culture and ethnicity rather than religious practices is that I have permission to disregard the aspects of this celebration that are, at its core, anti-Jewish, like idolatry. Perhaps this holiday was unavailable to my father – but why should it be unavailable to me?

CONNECTING WITH THE ANCESTORS: HALLOWEEN AS A MEXICAN JEW

FRANCESCA REZNIK
MTS '23

Although it's true that Halloween comes from the antisemitic All Hollow's Eve, and Day of the Dead originates in pre-colonial Indigenous rituals and continues on in Catholic Mexico, the true magic of being a 21st century Mexican Jew in the U.S. is that we get to pick and choose. We are not bound by the same dogma and stigma of our ancestors – in fact, I am learning that by shedding these ideological shackles, I can embrace both sides of my ancestry with abandon. Lighting candles on Dia de los Muertos is no different than observing a yahrtzeit – not to me. If anything, one tradition is enriched by being tied to the other.

I recently came upon this excerpt from American Catholic monk Thomas Merton's journals in 1958, and it felt apropos:

My vocation is American—to see and to understand and to have in myself the life and the roots and the belief and the destiny and the orientation of the whole hemisphere—as an expression of something of God...to be able—possibly—to reach out and embrace all the extremes and have them in oneself without confusion...without being torn apart. No one fragment can begin to be enough—not Spanish colonial Catholicism, not 19th-century republicanism, not agrarian radicalism, not the Indianism of Mexico—but all of it, everything. To be oneself a whole hemisphere...

It is my ardent hope that this year my Dia de Los Muertos altar can tie together my fragments, without confusion, without being torn apart, so that I may be, myself, a whole hemisphere.



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Photo Credit: Sophia Doescher, MDiv '23

RAIN BOOTS



Abigail wrote this poem, in honor of her mother, for the HDS community grief ritual Compos(t)ing Our Grief, at the HDS Community Garden, on October 22, 2021.

ABIGAIL LOUISIN
MTS '22

By the back door,
we still have your rain boots.
They are yours like
the hummingbirds are yours,
the amber light is yours,
the honeyed apples are yours,
the white butterfly, flitting
through wildflower blooms,
is yours.

It is October, decadently umber,
the world burning up like
I thought I once might.

No one told me that grief
is watching autumn leaves
float down to soft, wet earth
and remembering you,
the way you hummed,
the way you tumbled down
stairs and made your coffee,
a splash of cream,
a smile. A leaf from
your morning walk
still in your hair.

I asked God if I could
see you one more time,
and God said yes. I saw
the full moon, a missing glove,
a small fox by the fence.
I heard a woman humming and
birds chirping and then someone
I don't know hugged me.
They wore your same perfume.

And of course, your rain boots,
still by the back door.

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