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Faith Today

The living heritage of Judaism

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

It was a cool autumn evening when my family and I drove up to the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation temple. We were there for a Friday service, our first Jewish service, and I was a bit apprehensive. I didn't know what to expect, though I suspected the service would seem foreign to me.

The first thing I noticed as we approached the entrance was a booth or hut made of branches with pictures of fruit and vegetables hanging around the sides. I later learned that this was a Sukkah, erected to remind Jews of the booths or huts the Israelites lived in as they wan-

dered in the desert toward the Promised Land.

Inside the temple, the rabbi explained that this Shabbat, or Sabbath, fell within the festival of Sukkot, the harvest festival described in Chapter 23 of the Book of Leviticus. I suddenly began to recall exciting scripture stories of the Israelites' courage, daring and abiding faith.

As the service progressed, we voiced — in language that is universal — prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition. I soon

felt a growing, comfortable familiarity with the liturgy.

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The fact that Catholics can discover roots of their own worship in Judaism should not be surprising, according to Dr. Eugene Fisher, director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations.

After all, Fisher said, Jesus was a Jew and his first followers were Jews. Moreover, "Jesus' prayer life was Jewish. He went to the temple. He went to synagogues. He chose the occasion of a Passover seder (the Last Supper) to explain his mission."

After Jesus was gone, Fisher said, his earliest followers continued to go to the Temple.

Over time, as the Christians began to develop their own liturgy, Fisher added, "it was based on structures of Jewish liturgy and permeated with the symbolic language of Jewish liturgy."

Fisher, who serves as a consultant to the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, said, for example, that the parts of the Mass have parallels in Jewish liturgy.

The first part of the Mass — the Liturgy of the Word — is essentially a typical synagogue prayer service combining readings from Scripture and psalms, Fisher noted. After that, the liturgy "takes its form from an adaptation of the Passover seder beginning with the great blessings — the berakhot." The blessings over the bread and wine are adaptations of Jewish blessings, he said.

When Jesus was asked how to pray, Fisher commented, his response "was very much in the manner of the synagogue." The thoughts contained in the Our Father are "found today in the basic prayers of daily Jewish life."

Catholic liturgical seasons find parallels in the Jewish liturgical calendar, Fisher remarked. "For instance, the season of Advent is a time of repentance, reconciliation and expectation — great themes of the Day of Atonement and the Jewish New Year celebrations, which also are in the autumn. And the season of Lent and Easter coincide with the time of Passover."

It is important to note, Fisher continued, that "Christianity continued to draw inspiration from the living spiritual heritage of Judaism." For instance, Christians "gradually began to apply to Sunday the characteristics of the Sabbath as a special day of rest."

Fisher, who has written numerous books and articles on Catholic-Jewish relations, feels it is important to understand how Christianity and Judaism grew from a common root in biblical Israel. But obviously, he said, different forms of prayer developed.

"From the Christian side the understanding of Jesus as risen Lord naturally infused Christian prayer with a distinctive characteristic," he said. "For its part, Jewish prayer continued to develop an increasingly rich spirituality which can, even after 2,000 years, be appreciated by Christians as a means of response to the one God we both worship, the God of Israel."

So Fisher insists that there is something more important than appreciating Judaism as a way of understanding our own past history as Christians.

What is often forgotten, Fisher thinks, is that Judaism is not simply a religion of the past. Jews have an ongoing bond with God and a life of worship in which Christians find their own worship reflected in numerous ways.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Catholic liturgy. Jewish liturgy. While participating in a Jewish service, Joe Michael Feist discovered that the two have much in common. And that fact shouldn't be surprising, says Catholic-Jewish relations expert Dr. Eugene Fisher.