In an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, “Death-Heads Revisited,” a Nazi commander finds himself being tried by the ghosts of those he murdered at the Dachau Death Camp during World War II. His only defense is that he was “just following orders.” At the end of the episode he goes mad and is escorted off to an asylum as someone asks, “Dachau. Why does it still stand? Why do we keep it standing?” Then, during this unusually solemn episode’s closing monologue, Rod Serling, the show’s enigmatic host, responds:

The Dachaus, the Belsens, the Buchenwalds, the Auschwitzes—all of them. They must remain standing because they are a monument to a moment in time when some men decided to turn the Earth into a graveyard. Into it they shoveled all of their reason, their logic, their knowledge, but worst of all their conscience. And the moment we forget this, the moment we cease to be haunted by its remembrance, then we become the gravediggers.

Then, for the first and only time in the show’s 156 episodes, Serling didn’t conclude with his famous signature phrase, “in the Twilight Zone,” but ended with, “Something to dwell on and to remember, not only in the Twilight Zone, but wherever men walk God’s Earth.” Serling was right to go off script in this case, for these monuments of madness must continue to stand as reminders to help prevent such horror and evil from every happening again in the real world. Unfortunately, we don’t always need monuments or ghosts to haunt our memories. Much of the unrest, terrorism, and violence in the world today are but an extension of what is arguably the darkest and most diabolical point in human history. Certainly the unrest in the Middle East, particularly between Israel and Palestine, as well as between the U.S. and Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as horrific events like 9-11 an the Boston Marathon bombing, is at least partially rooted in the aftermath of World War II.

It’s easy for us to project all the blame for the Holocaust onto one nation, if not onto one person—Adolph Hitler. But history proves the level of anti-Semitism that existed in Germany at the time had long been prevalent throughout most of Europe, as well as in the United States. This is why Hitler’s depravity has been called, “The Final Solution,” to what much of the world considered the “Jewish Question” and its “Jewish Problem.”

After the war, after 6 million of the 11 million Jews living in Europe had been exterminated, the Allied Forces realized the, so-called, problem needed another solution, and it was now upon them to address it. So, in 1947 the United Nations
approved a place to create a Jewish Homeland, which has become modern day Israel. Long before this, however, six centuries before Christianity, this amazingly resilient and enduring people were first forced from their homeland. Some remained in segregated neighborhoods, and a few others were allowed to return over the centuries, but when Rome took over near the start of the 1st Century CE, hostilities rose, the Jews revolted, and the Jewish-Roman war ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. The Jews were further dispersed and, in an effort to deny their very existence, Rome renamed the region after one of Judea’s most notorious enemies, the Philistines, which, today, we pronounce, Palestine.

Throughout the centuries since, the exiled Jews, who somehow managed to maintain their identity while dispersed throughout much of the world, longed and sought for a home to call their own. At various points in history, places in Argentina, Chile, Uganda, Kenya, Madagascar, Guyana, Russia, as well as others, were pursued to various unsuccessful degrees. But after the war the decision was made to establish Israel in its original homeland.

The problem with this solution, however, is that there were already hundreds of thousands of peasants already living in the land, as they had been for a couple of thousand years, a fact that was recognized, but ultimately ignored. David Ben-Gurion, who would become the State of Israel’s founder and first Prime Minister, stated, “in our political argument abroad, we minimize Arab opposition to us... let us not ignore the truth among ourselves... politically we are the aggressors and they defend themselves... the country is theirs, because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down, and in our view we want to take away from them their country, while we are still outside.” Just a year before the founding of Israel, President Truman told those concerned about the long-term ramifications of the plan, “I am sorry gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism. I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents.”

The result has been almost constant unrest in the Middle East ever since, as well as terrorist activities around the world for the past 65 years. Despite numerous attempts since then, we have failed to establish lasting peace in the Middle East. It may seem like the only possible end to this endless conflict is no less diabolical than Hitler’s final solution, the complete eradication of one side or the other, or, perhaps, the unintentional annihilation of both. While this pessimistic view is understandable after more than a half-dozen decades, I do believe there is a better way that can succeed.

This is where the title of today’s message comes in, “Running Late for Prayers,” based upon a Sufi parable. It’s the simple story of Hazrat Ali:

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1 Chomsky, Noam, *The Fateful Triangle*
Running Late for Prayers

...the close companion of Muhammad, who was once late for the dawn prayer. The prophet, who was leading the prayer, was about to begin when the Angel Gabriel appeared and asked him to wait a little longer. At that moment, Ali was on his way to the mosque, but he had found himself walking behind an old Jewish man. Out of respect for this man’s age Ali did not want to pass him on the street. Because of this respect, Allah, who did not want Ali to miss the benefit of the first prostration of the day, sent Gabriel to delay the beginning of prayers.²

The meaning of this simple tale is easily grasped—having respect for one another is far more important than any of our religious rules and rituals. Even so, its subtle intricacies are well worth expounding upon. For of the five pillars of Islam—Shahada (declaring that there is only one God, Allah, and his prophet was Mohammad), Zakat (eliminating inequality through charity), Sawm (ritually fasting, especially during Ramadan), the Hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one's lifetime)—none is more pervasive than Salat, which requires Muslims to prostrate and pray 5 times every day.

It’s easy to understand from this how some might even come to equate what it means to be a good Muslim with how much one prays, or even how much one is seen praying, just as some confuse what it means to be a good Christian with attending and being seen at church on Sundays. (BTW that is what it means to be a good Unitarian ☄️) Our religious rituals are always meant to serve only as reminders of what is at the heart of all faiths—compassion, justice, peace, mercy, and the like—although such values and principles are too often forsaken in the name of rigid rites and rules that become arbitrary, meaningless, and, often, dehumanizing, in the process. This is the point of this parable, that some would judge or condemn Ali for being late for the first prayer, the most important of the day, even though his tardiness resulted from his compassion and respect, qualities without which his entire religion would be pointless.

A few years ago,³ for example, I met with an envoy from the Middle East. During lunch I sat next to a Syrian woman, an attorney working on her PhD, who was telling me about how difficult it is to be a liberated and educated woman in her country, when she suddenly realized her companions had all left the room to attend their afternoon prayers. Her eyes widened and her cheeks became blush. She stood in a panic, apologized, and abruptly dashed away in search of her cohorts. Liberated as she was, she was still bound by the Salat, her duty to pray five times a day, and she dreaded facing the stigma associated with running late for prayers. Yet, in the parable of Hazrat Ali, Allah sends his messenger, Gabriel, to delay prayers for everyone until Ali can arrive. This is so, the story suggests, because his respect for the old man on the road is far more important than any of the Five Pillars of Islam.

³ Louisville, 2008.
Running Late for Prayers

Another facet of this story is that the old man is only in front of Ali, and it would have been very easy to rush around him and make it to prayers in plenty of time. Those who consider their religious rules and rituals more important than the wellbeing of others would certainly do so. But Ali cannot pass the old man out of respect. He will not violate the law of the heart, doing unto others... even if it means violating the written law and cultural norms. Yet so often the opposite has proven true, people use religion to justify their disregard for the rights and welfare of others, to quickly pass them by without a second glance. This is not unlike what Jesus was getting at when he insisted, “The law was made for the good of humanity, not humanity for the good of the law,” as well as his own parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a non-Jew, an infidel, is the only one to stop and care for a man who has been attacked and beaten by robbers, then “passed by on the other side,” as the scripture puts it, rush around by both a Jewish Priest and a Jewish Lawyer.

Finally, it’s impossible to overlook what is perhaps the most poignant piece of this story, that the old man is Jewish. For a Muslim to make the Salat, a pillar of his faith, secondary to his respect for a Jew in the road, is the kind of behavior that could save the world today. This is the solution, the only solution, to finally resolving the endless conflict and terror that now infects our global community.

If this solution sounds familiar, it may be because it is our first principle, the first Pillar of Unitarian Universalism, respect for the worth and dignity of every person. The demand for such respect is not exclusive to our faith, as the parables of Hazrat Ali and the Good Samaritan suggest. But it is the dominant principle of our faith because we cherish individual expression and freedom above most everything else. Our churches strive to model the kind of free society that we wish to see in the world, a society in which every person is free to live and believe as one chooses. Although many of us, perhaps a majority of us, would tend to agree on most social issues, our political and theological opinions vary widely, yet we neither ignore these differences or allow them to tear us apart. For, as the great UU theologian, James Luther Adams once said, “The free person does not live by an unexamined faith... The free person believes with Socrates that the true can be separated from the false only through observation and rational discussion.”4 This is why Rev. Jack Mendelsohn further explains that, “In a Unitarian Universalist congregation an agnostic may sit beside one who believes in a personal God; at the after-service coffee hour a believer in reincarnation may stand chatting with one who affirms ‘utter extinction.’ Such are our diversities in theological belief.”5 Perhaps the late Rev. Forrester Church put it most succinctly, “We value one another’s thinking. We respect one another’s search. We honor it even when it differs from our own. We resist imposing our perception of truth upon one another. At our best, we move... to

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a fundamental trust in our own and one another’s inherent ability to make life meaningful.” Or, as our familiar Unitarian saying simply states, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

Even so, despite the fact that over the years Unitarian Universalists have been able to tackle many of the most divisive social issues and remain whole, I have noticed one issue that remains difficult for us to talk about, an issue that can atypically and almost immediately begin to divide us against each other, and so we hardly speak of it at all. I’m talking about this issue of the Middle East, the Israel/Palestine conflict in particular.

I was naïve of this fact when I first brought it up in the pulpit more than a dozen years ago, in an effort expose many of the deplorable, dangerous, and unjust circumstances of many Palestinians. Imagine how surprised I was when some of my dearest friends, people who have known me for years and know what I stand for, began accusing me of being anti-Semitic. Since the Palestinian people are also Semitic, I knew what they were really suggesting is that I am prejudice against Jews. I stood my ground, and insisted that compassion for one group does not exclude compassion for another, but, in truth, I’ve never broached the subject from the pulpit again until now, because I’ve been afraid to.

And I’m still afraid, and have tried to choose my wording even more carefully than usual today because I know how divisive this issue can be, even among Unitarian Universalists. But over a year ago a couple of our members, who traveled to Gaza and witnessed it firsthand, were anxious to have a service to discuss what they learned. As our Worship team began talking about the possibility, the conversation quickly became difficult even for us. At first we thought that maybe we could also have a Sunday during which we focused on what we actually termed, “the other side.” But as we thought about this, we realized our pulpit is no place for point and counter point arguments. We do not wish to turn our Sunday service into a forum for public debate. I, in particular, was disturbed that we so immediately began discussing the issue in terms of sides. It seemed as if, even in our brief discussion, we began experiencing, on a very tiny scale, the very conflict that now divides the Middle East.

Afterward, Myrta Laddich, one of those who traveled to Gaza, came to my office and said, “This church is doing too much good in the world, and I don’t want to do anything to mess that up. I’ve decided I don’t want to do a service about this issue at this time.” Her compassion deeply moved me, and immediately reminded me of Hazrati Ali, who, out of love and respect, refused to move ahead of the old Jewish man on the road. I knew then that I could not take the coward’s way out and let it simply end with Mryta’s decision to remain silent. For, again, as James Luther Adams also said, “the faith that cannot be discussed is a form of tyranny.”

And so, rather than discussing the issue, I’ve decided to give a sermon about how difficult it is for us to discuss the issue, in the hope that we can soon find a way
to put our great faith into practice by finding a way to discuss this conflict without allowing it to divide us the same way it has so much of our world. This, again, is the solution and only solution, and if, as Unitarian Universalists, we can't discuss it peacefully and respectfully while keeping our community whole, then there may be little hope there will ever be true peace in the Middle East.

I began by mentioning *The Twilight Zone*, not only to illustrate a point, but because the show's creator, Rod Serling was both Jewish and Unitarian. Although a native New Yorker and a World War II American hero, Serling experienced anti-Semitism firsthand. As a child he was called a “Christ killer” and had lots of trouble fitting in. After returning from the war, he met his future wife, Carol Kramer in college, but had to convert from Judaism to Unitarianism just to marry her. Even then, her wealthy parents disowned her for marrying a Jew.

Serling, like many Jewish people of his era found a refuge in the Unitarian church. This was so because, at a time when anti-Semitism was rampant in the world, including here in the U.S., which largely abandoned the Jews to their horrific plight, they were able to join what was perceived as a mainstream church, while maintaining their own religious views and traditions. Ever since, Jewish and Unitarian communities have remained closely akin. In 1920, after the sudden death of one of our own church’s most beloved ministers, Dr. William Simonds, Rabbi Julius Leiber, of the Temple Emanuel, conducted his service. Two years later, when our crumbling church building needed to be torn down, Temple Emanuel gave us their old Temple at Sprague and Madison. Today many Synagogues and UU churches still share space. Our church, in particular, shares our building with the Congregation Emanu-El. And, at the end of each Sunday service, we hold hands and sing our Jewish blessing, Shalom Chavarim, “Peace friends, until we meet again.”

So if I were the praying type, though I should most certainly be running late, I would pray that we never lose our friendship and kinship with our Jewish friends and neighbors, with our beautiful brothers and sisters who have been so horribly maligned, oppressed, and persecuted throughout the ages. I would pray that they continue to exist, and thrive, in whatever land they choose, and remain safe and secure. But I would also pray that the whole world should come to grasp the profound meaning of parables like those of Hazrati Ali and the Good Samaritan, that it is up to each of us, no matter what our religion, nay, because of our religions, to care for all those we encounter upon the road of life, no matter who they are, what they believe, or where they are from. And I’d pray for world peace, and that it might begin with us. Amen.