

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What did your Rabbi Do on his Summer Vacation? Brought a taste of Jewish Learning to a Methodist community

In July 2025, I got a call from the worship director of the Chautauqua Bayview Association of the Methodist Church telling me about a unique opportunity. They were asking me to be “Preacher of the Week” for their institute in August 2026. I had never heard of this small community in Petosky, Michigan, even though I had attended the University of Michigan as an undergraduate. They told me that every summer they have vacationers along Lake Michigan spend the summer for recreation, worship and learning, and that each week a different religious leader is responsible for the learning sessions. Most of these speakers are Methodist ministers, but sometimes an Episcopalian or Presbyterian might be featured. I was told, “It’s been a long time since we’ve had a rabbi. With everything going on in the world today, I think it’s time.”

I jumped at the chance. As a former camp director myself, I thought of this as “summer camp for grownups.” When I made that comment, the worship director said, “I just want to make sure it’s a camp for values.”

As “Preacher of the Week,” my assignment was to give a sermon at the Sunday morning service and then teach four classes throughout the week. I wanted to be able to relate to the Christian participants while highlighting how Jewish teaching and learning is different. Rev. Dr. Jason Byassee, the Director of Worship and Religious Life, introduced me by emphasizing the importance of Christians learning from Jewish teachers. “When we Christians have faith conversations with our elder siblings in faith, Jewish people, it is not interreligious dialogue for us. It is an in-house, family conversation. A quarrelsome family, no doubt, but Israel is used to that.” Rev. Byassee also stressed the important role Christians have in combatting antisemitism, acknowledging that, “It’s a hard moment to be Jewish today, even in North America.”

I was amazed at the level of participation and enthusiasm that came from this small community. Before the Sunday worship, a small class was studying a book by Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar who is a professor of both New Testament and Jewish Studies, called “The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi.” They welcomed my input about the similarities and differences between Christian parable and Jewish midrash. Then, over 500 worshippers crowded the lecture hall for a service with a fabulous musical choir and invited me to the stage. I entitled the sermon, “Original Choice: The Empowerment of Mistakes,” contrasting the Christian concept of Original Sin with my views about Judaism’s emphasis on personal responsibility and learning from the consequences of our behavior, explaining that on the High Holy Days we make a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*: accounting of the soul. After the service, many people approached me to say they were looking forward to the weekday classes. There were even a few Jewish tourists

who were visiting the area, and were curious when they heard that the Methodist institution had invited a rabbi to be their guest preacher.

For the next four days, about 150 people crowded into the teaching space, eager to learn more about Judaism. I called the class “An Introduction to Jewish History, Philosophy and Peoplehood; OR 5,000 years in 180 minutes.” Each day focused on a different aspect of Judaism – Torah, Talmud, Midrash, Jewish denominations and movements -- giving the participants a taste of Jewish learning. Throughout the week, the students were given index cards to write additional questions, which were discussed on the fourth day. Though there was swimming and boating and pickle ball and other activities available, most people came back each day. After the fourth and final class, Rev. Byassee set up an additional, unscheduled session for those who wanted to learn more. 50-60 people crowded around the back porch of a cottage for informal learning.

I thought it was very significant that this association chose to have a rabbi teach for them about Judaism, specifically at a time when much of the world has been turning their backs. And they were genuinely interested in understanding the roots of their own faith. They were recognizing how essential Jewish learning was to their efforts to be good Christians. As Rev. Byassee said, “In order for us, as Christians, to love and follow the Jew Jesus, it means we must also love the Jewish people who are part of our collective family. We understand why many Jewish people would not recognize kinship with us – ours is a pretty weird rabbi after all.” Though many Christians believe it is their mission to bring everyone to see Jesus as a messiah, there were no attempts to lure me to accept that viewpoint. I could be authentically myself, as a Jew, in a sea of Christians. I felt more than accepted; I felt respected.

Of course, in five days, nobody gets more than a taste of what takes a lifetime to learn. But I believe they learned more than information, and that can have a greater impact on more than this finite group of people. Each of them will go back to their own hometowns, living their lives, knowing that what they might have thought about Judaism and the Jewish people is a little different. And if they encounter those with pre-conceived, stereotypical prejudices, they might confront them with some new knowledge about the Jewish religion and a Jew who helped them learn.

I’m already booked to visit their sister Chautauqua institute next summer on Lake Erie in Ohio. Building bridges, one person at a time. In the New Year, I hope we can all take time to share our love of Judaism others.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon

Anyone who would like to watch a YouTube video of the Sunday worship or any of the classes, please write to me at rabbidangordon@gmail.com