

Opportunities
for interfaith
sharing at Loyola
Marymount
University

The Same God

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Fr. Manh Tran, SJ, learns about the *lulav*, an important part of the Jewish celebration of *Sukkot*, from author Michael Barclay, Hillel director at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

“**W**hat’s a nice Jewish guy doing working at a Jesuit university?”

by Michael Barclay

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been at a dinner or a party and been asked this question after someone learns that I teach at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), the Jesuit university in Los Angeles.

The answer to that question comes early in the fall semester each year, at the time of the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*.

Sukkot commemorates the Hebrews’ 40-year journey in the desert after receiving the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. During their wanderings, our Jewish ancestors resided in temporary structures called *sukkot*, or “booths.”

Each year, observant Jews around the world remember this time by building a personal *sukkah*, a “booth” usually decorated with palm fronds and fruits. This practice stems from the biblical commandment

“You shall dwell in booths for a seven-day period; every native in Israel shall dwell in booths. So that your generations will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them from the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 23:42).

An important part of the festival involves a *lulav* (made of palm, willow, and myrtle branches wrapped together) and *etrog* (a citrus fruit from Israel, also called the citron) inside the *sukkah* as part of this “pilgrimage” celebration.

Pesach, or Passover, which celebrates the Exodus from Egypt, and *Shavuot*, a commemoration of the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, are the two other pilgrimage festivals when ancient Jews would travel to the temple in Jerusalem.

Sukkot helps us to remember our faith in God,

who watched over our ancestors in the desert and continues to watch over us now. The sukkah itself lets us relive the experiences of our ancestors by dwelling in booths reminiscent of the ones used by the wandering Hebrews.

But as important from a spiritual perspective, Sukkot reminds us that while this physical world is transient, true wisdom and strength come from the spiritual realm. It is a beautiful holiday and one that Jewish families rejoice in every fall.

You can generally find sukkot in the back yards of homes; in urban areas, from Tel Aviv to Manhattan, you can also see sukkot perched on balconies and rooftops. Our sukkah at Loyola Marymount is built in the middle of campus, thanks to the support of campus ministry head Fernando Moreno. Support staff build an A-frame out of wood and gather dozens of large palm fronds. The next day, Jewish students and faculty gather to tie the fronds on to the structure's sides and top and then decorate it with fragrant fruits and flowers, making it as beautiful as we can.

A couple of times throughout this week-long holiday, students, staff, and faculty gather to celebrate this festival. We wave the lulav, which represents the spine, eyes, lips, and heart of a human being, to unify our hearts, words, and actions. We say prayers that remind us of the magnificence of the creation that God has bestowed upon us. We then eat together a potluck meal inside the booth as we discuss the spiritual issues of life.

By dwelling together in this sukkah, we bless each other and recognize how interfaith relationships can help us withstand the pressures of the physical world. We encourage students of every faith to come experience this holiday, and it is a joy to watch Jewish students help their Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters learn about Sukkot.

Chanukah and Purim are also celebrated on campus, and our Passover Seder (the ceremonial dinner that commemorates the Exodus) is filled each year with students of all faiths. Jews and non-Jews gather weekly to study the history, practices, theories, and meditations of *Kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism, based on the Bible rather than on hyped-up, inaccurate media reports. Most students know that Madonna and Britney Spears wear red bracelets that can be bought at department stores, but at LMU they get to study the actual history, practices, text, and meditations of this ancient form of Jewish mysticism.

This interfaith commitment is seen not just in the Jewish community but in all aspects of campus spiritual life. During the holy Islamic month of Ramadan, students gather on campus in the evenings to exchange thoughts as they break their daily fast.

This spiritual atmosphere on campus is a direct

result of President Fr. Robert Lawton, SJ. "Universities depend on so many people living and working together to thrive as communities, and yet we too frequently divide ourselves into the traditional categories: faculty, staff, students," he says.

Lawton's support of this type of experience is best described by a passage he recited in a convocation address: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1Corinthians 12:4-6).

As a Jew, I believe that it truly is the same Spirit in each of us. At Loyola, I have the freedom and encouragement to practice and share my faith with others and to learn and experience the practices of my colleagues. Through our dialogue together, we are each able to have a better understanding of how God blesses us with gifts of wisdom, understanding, and relationships with each other and, as a result, a deeper understanding of our own spiritual traditions.

It's ironic that at many secular colleges in the country it would be absolutely fine for an instructor to swear and curse, but it would be an issue if the same instructor used the word "God." Here at Loyola, I can use that "G" word whenever appropriate without fear of being ridiculed for my belief. I can have an open and honest conversation with a member of a different religious tradition, and together we can both grow spiritually as a result. I can not only observe Sukkot but also share it openly with others who may never have heard of this joyous celebration.

We find God worshiped in so many ways throughout the world. I believe that each of these spiritual paths is like an instrument in God's symphony. We learn more about our own spiritual instrument as we interact with others, and our instruments become more in tune as we recognize our part in the symphony. At LMU, we get the opportunity to play our instruments together without losing our own spiritual identity. For me, this interfaith music is truly the sound of heaven.

So what's a nice Jewish guy doing working at a Jesuit university? I'm learning more about my own tradition through dialogue with friends of other faiths, teaching others about Jewish practices, and being part of a dynamic educational community committed to academic excellence and spiritual awareness as well. **G**

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