

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Jewish High Holidays in this time of uncertainty

## Sheldon J. Kopperl

Professor of religious studies, GVSU



**Sheldon Kopperl, professor of religious studies at Grand Valley State University**

Last week, the Jewish community celebrated Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Muslims also follow a lunar calendar and last week was the beginning of the month of Muharram, the first month in the lunar Islamic year. The Jewish year 5778 began at sundown Sept. 20, with the new moon in the sky.

The holiday ushers in a 10-day period used by Jews for intense introspection and looking back over the past year to see where we may have erred and strayed from being and doing our best. We ask our friends and neighbors for forgiveness for oversights and intentional slights we may have done in their presence or negative comments against them. We resolve not to repeat the mistakes of the past year, nor to commit other more drastic ones. We also commune with God and ask for forgiveness, and make an effort to sincerely repent and be better people.

On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which begins at sundown on Friday, we try to be at one with God, praying that ultimately we are forgiven for our deeds against him and that our neighbors forgive us for our transgressions against them. We end this most solemn of days in the Jewish year with a special evening service on Saturday night

in which we celebrate receipt of God's mercy and forgiveness, intoning seven times the phrase, "The LORD, He is our God," (taken from 1 Kings 18:39) followed by the triumphal blast of the shofar, or ram's horn, that marks the end of this short time of reflection.

### A TIME OF REFLECTION

Many Jews today enter the introspective period at the beginning of the previous Hebrew month, Elul, giving them a 40-day period for reflective thought. As many readers are aware, the number 40 in biblical narrative represents a number of significant events: the days of rain in the flood; the days of Moses' stays on Mt. Sinai; the number of days the spies spent scouting out the land, leading to the 40 years of wanderings in the desert by the Israelites; and the number of days Jesus spent in the wilderness resisting the temptations of Satan.

Thus this Jewish self-reflection period is the same length as Lent in the Christian tradition. In the late medieval period, the number of days of mandatory isolation of foreign

ships in port cities in an attempt to ward off outbreaks of the Black Death was based strictly upon Biblical frequency. Today's medical term "quarantine" comes from the 40-day period that was eventually selected (from the French *quarant*).

We gratefully acknowledge that we can count on God's forgiveness and usually the forgiveness of people with whom we come into contact on a regular basis and even those whom we encounter only once in a while. This year, however, the American Jewish community recognizes that there is a new uncertainty in our lives and our society.

When the members of the Charlottesville, Virginia, synagogue had to attend Friday night services last month with crowds of the alt-right shouting, "Jews Will Not Replace Us," (whatever that is supposed to mean), and singing Nazi-era marching songs, it is no wonder they were advised to leave through the back door for their own safety. Most of us thought that the streets of a university town in 21st century America would never be comparable to the streets of Weimar Germany in the early 1930s.

### FRIGHTENING INCIDENTS

Yet here we are with the number of anti-Semitic incidents significantly rising across the country. Many synagogues and

Jewish centers across the country have a policy requiring armed security at any event open to the public as well as at major Jewish events such as last week's Rosh Hashanah services. Universities and public buildings have received more than the usual amount of graffiti, including the ever-present swastikas and comments about Hitler not finishing what he started out to accomplish — how sad. Clearly racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-minority attitudes have become increasingly prevalent in this country since the beginning of the presidential campaign of 2016. Alas, among a lot of hand-wringing and mutual commiseration, no end is in sight.

It is at times like this that I am so grateful for our friends in the West Michigan interfaith movement. Putting our political squabbles aside (if only for the moment), Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and the other traditions making up our increasingly religiously diverse Grand Rapids community have shown solidarity with all of the victims of the bigotry perpetuated in the name of nativism.

Ironically, it is American diversity in all its many forms that has made America great (past, present and future). May Jewish year 5778 be recognized as the year that our local interfaith paradigm becomes the standard for all of the United States of America.