

Issue 1, 2026
Volume 179
Published Quarterly

Universalist
Heritage and
Spirit Today



Universalist Herald

The oldest continuously published liberal religious magazine in North America



Universalist History

**Westfield Christian
Universalist Church**

**Rev. D.B. Clayton, Southern
Universalist Pioneer**

The Old Sheshequin Church

Photo by David Damico, Editor

The Truth About Roosters

A review of Blessed Are You, Wondrous Universe

Submitted by subscriber,

Rabbi Alison Brody, New York, NY



Morning blessings begin each day in traditional Jewish practice. As we started first grade, each student was given a siddur ~ a Jewish prayer book. Our siddur began with the traditional Hebrew blessing to begin each day, which was translated into English this way: "Upon hearing the sound of the rooster, one says: Blessed be the One who gave the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night."

I loved this blessing as a child ~ we didn't have a rooster, but I thought it was a good idea to give thanks for the animal's ability to signal the start of each day. Once I was able to read and understand the original Hebrew, though, I had a problem: the original Hebrew blessing says nothing about roosters, giving thanks instead for the differentiation of day from night. Later I had more problems with the morning blessing: uncertainties about the One who was praised, the One who gave (and withheld) understanding, and the One who created roosters who were missing from prayer books.

More than fifty years later, I love to find new prayer books. The shock of the missing rooster has led me to develop a prayer book litmus test: I check whether the morning blessing creates theological quandaries, and then whether the Hebrew-to-English translation can be trusted. It has been wonderful to find a new collection of prayers titled "Blessed Are You, Wondrous Universe" by poet and liturgist Herbert Levine, which offers this morning blessing:

Blessed living planet,
You give me strength.
Blessed providing world,
You satisfy my needs.

For me, it is a gift to find a version of the morning blessing which blends gratitude with reason. The combining of the two is at the heart of this

collection, and Dr. Levine explains in his introduction that "(w)e might call the expressions of this siddur secular spirituality or religious secularism." He continues:

This shift from blessing God to blessing the universe involves a significant shift regarding prayer and personal agency. In a traditional siddur, God is the ultimate actor whose intervention we seek ... In naturalistic prayer, however ... we praise the universe and the earth, and ... we humans are the agents who need to hear our own self-reflective prayers.

The poem-prayers in "Blessed Are You, Wondrous Universe" bring together the secular and the religious, as well as connecting biblical and universal reflections; this is also very much appreciated and a significant change from traditional prayers.

"The poem-prayers in "Blessed Are You, Wondrous Universe" bring together the secular and the religious, as well as connecting biblical and universal reflections..."

My first grade prayer book also gave the Hebrew and English blessing to be said when seeing a rainbow. I was excited as a child to learn this prayer, and then disappointed almost as much as when I discovered the missing rooster. Here is the traditional prayer: "Blessed are You, Lord

our God, King of the universe, who remembers the covenant, is faithful to His covenant, and keeps His promise." As a child, I wanted a blessing about wonderful appearances in the sky, and found instead words about faith and covenants and promises. Here, in a welcome alternative, is Herb Levine's short blessing upon seeing rainbows:

Blessed are you, astounding universe,
Which alone makes wonders.

In these naturalistic prayers, Dr. Levine guides us to reflect on how the universe astounds, the planet lives, and the world provides for us. These new poem-prayers echo ancient Jewish texts while also grounding all readers in gratitude and awe; and this, apparently, is what Dr. Levine hopes for readers of his new collection.



Here is a passage from the afterword:

I believe that the practices (in this new siddur) ... – consecrating the cosmos through blessings, affirming that the world we live in is sacred, holding up for praise the most universal values in the Jewish tradition – will be good for Jews and good for our world ... Seeing the world as merely secular is surely one of the factors that has led humanity to abuse our planetary home. So it's time to try out an alternative – seeing the world as sacred.

Blessed are You, Wondrous Universe is available in two formats: a comprehensive edition with full Hebrew and English text echoes familiar words of Jewish prayer; an abridged edition offers transliterated Hebrew and additional English reflections. Both editions are published by Ben Yehuda Press (www.benyehudapress.com).

.....

Rabbi Alison Brody grew up in the orthodox Jewish world of New York City, and has been blessed by friendships with people of different faiths and traditions over the years. She has worked and volunteered as a community chaplain and social worker in public hospitals, universities, nursing facilities, and prisons. She can be reached at RabbiBrody@runbox.com. ☺

Come, come, whoever you are! All are cordially invited to the last in-person **Universalist Convocation**, which will be held at Clayton Memorial Church, Newberry, SC on May 15-17, 2026. The theme of this convocation is

Southern Universalism

Our speakers will focus on the development and growth of the Universalist faith south of the Mason-Dixon line. There have been many ministers who have made their way from Boston to establish churches in large cities, small towns, or to become circuit preachers to serve the religious needs of all who wanted to hear the saving message of Universalism. One of those circuit riders was Rev. Rhett Baird. We are thrilled to announce that he will be making a video appearance!

Join us to hear the stories of courageous men and women who ventured out to share their faith.

Go to www.universalistconvocation.org to register, read about the presenters, find a hotel, and join like-minded Universalists in learning about Southern Universalism. We hope to see you in May! ☺

Universalist Herald

Gift Subscriptions

If you find our publication insightful and wish to share your interest in Universalism with others, send a gift subscription. This can be to an individual or to a church and can be either in print or digital.

- 1 Year Subscription \$24.00 USD
- 2 Year Subscription \$34.00 USD
- 3 Year Subscription \$46.00 USD
- International-Postal \$34.00 USD
- Email & Intl. 1 year \$14.00 USD
- Email & Intl. 2 year \$26.00 USD
- Email & 3 Intl. year \$36.00 USD

Subscription rates.

Send checks or money order payable to **Douglas Shaheen**
36 Central Ave., Unit 14
Milton, MA 02186

or through **Paypal** from our website

www.universalist-herald.org

