

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 11/15/20

(A note about Rabbi Sacks) Last Sunday they held a funeral of sorts for Rabbi Sacks, outdoors in the cemetery. Videos of the eulogies, including one from his daughter, are available on You Tube. To me it was sad that only 30 people could be there because Britain is in lockdown again. And because of that his family cannot receive visitors for the traditional week-long mourning period (Shiva), also very sad. Sis. Carole has posted my personal tribute to Rabbi Sacks on the website, a tribute I found difficult to write and feel is totally inadequate. I suppose this class is my real tribute to him.

I wanted to share a statement sent by Prince Charles to the funeral: *“With his passing, the Jewish community, our nation, and the entire world have lost a leader whose wisdom, scholarship, and humanity were without equal. His immense learning spanned the sacred and the secular, and his prophetic voice spoke to our greatest challenges with unfailing insight and boundless compassion. His wise counsel was sought and appreciated by those of all faiths and none.”* I found this a remarkable characterization of a man who was deeply committed to what most people think of as antiquated and arcane religious thinking, Orthodox Judaism. Yet he was able to communicate how those ancient ideas, Biblical ideas, still make sense in our modern world, and as a result he touched the lives of millions of people around the globe, many of whom were not Jewish, including our own little group here at Bethel AME church in Boston. May his memory continue to be a blessing and a challenge to us.

Last week we began looking at Heschel’s response to the Shoah, the Nazi genocide of the Jews. We saw that his perspective was somewhat surprising: rather than falling into the facile comfort of dividing the world into good guys and bad guys, he called on all people to search their hearts to see what they might have done to prevent such evil from flourishing. He emphasizes corporate responsibility for what has happened, which is not quite the same thing as guilt, and asks us to think how we might act differently in the future. The gospels contain a fascinating parallel to this in the story where Jesus is asked about an atrocity the Roman governor Pilate has committed, slaughtering Jewish worshippers as they are offering their sacrifices. Jesus says something virtually identical to what the Baal Shem Tov said: he tells people such events are the wake-up call to look at one’s own sinfulness, rather than the sinfulness of others, and repent, turn our lives around and head in a different direction (Luke 13:1-5).

While emphasizing human responsibility, Heschel also addresses the difficult issue of what we can say about a God who allows such human evil to flourish. Heschel finds in the Scriptures, especially in the prophets, an understanding of God that is different from the rationalist philosophical abstraction we have inherited from the Greeks. In contrast, Heschel’s develops what I think is his most important theological concept, what he calls the “divine pathos,” the biblical truth that God is not distant, not impassive, not the

philosophers' "unmoved mover" nor the stern lawgiver who simply issues commands and expects obedience. Heschel insists that God is "moved and affected by what happens in the world... Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath" (*God in Search of Man*, pp. 368-69). Heschel asks, "How does the world look in the eyes of God?" To answer the question he quotes Torah: "The Lord saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth... And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart" (Gen 6:5-6). The Bible is full of God's anguish and dismay at the evil of this world.

The Hebrew prophets clearly demonstrate this divine pathos. The first characteristic of biblical prophets that Heschel discusses in his book is their "sensitivity to evil." The prophets rail against wrongdoing that we consider a normal part of how our world operates. "*To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.*" The prophets make us aware of the meagerness of our moral comprehension, of our callousness to human cruelty and injustice, of our failure to recognize how such things look to God. "*The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed.... Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world.... **God is raging in the prophet's words***" (*The Prophets*, Vol. 1, pp. 4-5). Where is God after Auschwitz? He speaks, says Heschel, through his prophets.

So Heschel hears the pain and agony in the voice of prophets like Jeremiah and Hosea as an expression of God's pain, God's suffering. He points to passages like Jeremiah 8:21-9:3, where it is the Lord himself who speaks in anguish. "Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" (vv. 21-22). Heschel looks closely at this text and sees that the prophet's words are in fact God's words (9:3). "God's pain and disappointment ring throughout the book of Jeremiah.... Again and again the prophet brought God's word to His beloved people: mourn, grieve, sorrow, lament. A sense of delicacy prevented the prophet from spelling out the meaning of the word: Mourn My people for Me as well" (*The Prophets*, p. 111). For Heschel, it is God himself who looks in vain for a balm in Gilead. The bond of covenant love that links God to Israel means that God participates in Israel's suffering.

Heschel shares the radical view of Rabbi Akiva (second cent.) and other ancient sages: "The Holy and Blessed One is a partner in the suffering of His creatures; He is involved in the lot of His people, wounded by their sufferings and redeemed by their liberation" (*Heavenly Torah*, p. 120). In his writings, Heschel develops this significant theme in rabbinic teaching that sees God as going into exile and suffering with His people and needing to be redeemed with them. He says that the person who asks, "Why has this exile (or suffering) come upon us?" should be answered with "Upon *us* and not upon *Him*?" To ask the question that way suggests that we are suffering by ourselves, apart from God. Heschel argues that someone "who removes *God* from the community has denied the very essence of faith" (*ibid.*). If God has promised to dwell among his people, then God's

presence goes with them even into exile. God suffers when they suffer and is liberated when they are liberated (*Heavenly Torah*, pp. 108-109).

For Heschel, God in the post-Shoah era can only be seen as the God who suffers with us. Heschel recognizes that this is a daring idea, and that many rabbis rejected the notion (and that it may make us uncomfortable). But for Heschel the biblical God is intimately involved with the affairs of his people, including its suffering. We can bear suffering without losing hope because we know that God is suffering with us.

This, of course, is precisely the message of the cross. As the Christian rap group Cross Movement proclaimed, “Most people look at God as an “it” and not ... a person. They look at God as a thing, not someone who has feelings, not someone who can listen to the radio and weep” (from the album *House of Representatives*). For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate expression of a loving God who is not unfeeling and far off, not a philosophical abstraction who is unaffected by what happens in the world, but rather a God who draws near to his people and enters into their suffering in order to redeem them. For those who claim to follow Jesus, taking up the cross means a willingness to accept that suffering as part of what it means to redeem the world. For Christians, the cross is the central affirmation of the divine pathos.

Heschel continued to grapple with how to reconcile his love for the living God with the suffering of his people, how to live in the shadow of the Shoah: “To live both in awe and consternation, in fervor and horror, with my conscience on mercy and my eye on Auschwitz, wavering between exaltation and despair.” Heschel is left looking in two directions at the same time—at the God who cares about human suffering and on that suffering itself. This is the struggle of the prophetic soul, the pain of living with the tension between the world as it is and the world as we know God wants it to be.

How do we respond to such great evil? “This essential predicament of man has assumed a peculiar urgency in our time, living as we do in a civilization where factories were established in order to exterminate millions of men, women and children; where soap was made of human flesh. What have we done to make such crimes possible? What are we doing to make such crimes impossible?” (*God in Search of Man*, p. 369) Again and again Heschel calls human beings to take responsibility for the world God has entrusted us with.

Heschel insists that “evil is not man’s ultimate problem. Man’s ultimate problem is his relation to God...The Biblical answer to evil is not the good but the *holy*. It is an attempt to raise man to a higher level of existence, where man is not alone when confronted with evil. Living ‘in the light of the face of God’ [Psalm 89:15] bestows upon man a power of love that enables him to overcome the powers of evil.” I suggest that Heschel’s involvement in the civil rights movement (as well as the anti-war movement) was his personal response to the Shoah, and his bond with Martin Luther King came from his recognition of King as a genuine prophet through whom God was raging.