

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 11/1/20

d. Sacrifice: the Gift of Giving

One of the things that Israel does for God is offer sacrifices. Although Christians think of sacrifices exclusively as atonement for sin, the major sacrifices in Leviticus have nothing to do with sin. And the sin sacrifices are only for unintentional sin, not serious sins like murder or adultery, for which no sacrifice was possible. Most sacrifices are not about sin but about fellowship with God. Sacrifices are a form of worship; the sacrificial system presupposes that the relationship between Israel and God is fundamentally in order. Torah repeatedly affirms that these are occasions of joy and thanksgiving for what God has provided for us.

Indeed, the Hebrew word for the sacrificial offerings comes from a root meaning “to draw near.” The goal of the sacrifice is to draw near to God and have God draw near to the offerer. Sacrifices are not about paying God something to make God love us again. That was a pagan idea, that you could manipulate the gods with sacrifices. Sacrifice was about communion with God and with others.

Rabbi Sacks says that *central to the purpose of the sacrificial system was creating a community whose joy in the Lord came through giving*. We saw that sacrifice was not simply about giving to God but also about sharing with others. It is a gift to be able to give. Judaism considers it important to human dignity and respect to have the ability to give. Even the poor are expected to give to others. That is why Leviticus makes accommodations for those who cannot afford to give an expensive animal. It is not the cost of the sacrifice that matters to God. It is the act of giving itself.

When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, 40 years after Jesus, and sacrifices were no longer possible, the rabbis were able to rethink Judaism. Looking closely at the rest of Scripture they understood that bloody sacrifices were not essential to a relationship with God or for the forgiveness of sins. They found in the Scriptures the rationale for replacing sacrifices with Torah study, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness. These three elements not only replaced the sacrifices; they were viewed as an improvement on them, as “better than.” These have been the heart of Jewish life for two thousand years.

To atone for sin, the rabbis developed a rich and complex doctrine of repentance, which they argued was what always had made those sacrifices effective. The Scriptures make it clear that God was able and willing to forgive sin without sacrifices. So the sacrifices were an expression of worship, of thanksgiving and joy, and of repentance. Those are the gifts we offer to God.

Rabbi Shai Held provides an apt summary for the perspective I have been developing in this course. “In creation, God appoints humans as vice-regents, co-rulers responsible for the creation in ways that enable it to flourish and thrive. Human freedom brings responsibility as well, not only for ourselves but also for others. Torah places great weight on human responsibility but harbors no illusions about human nature.

“According to Jewish theology, God believes in our ability to renew ourselves and to make real and deep contributions to realizing a more just, decent, and compassionate world. Participating in that grand effort is part of what it means to be human. But we are also asked to live with our eyes open, in full view of just how complicated both we and the world are, and thus of how hard and elusive moral progress really is.

“We can and we must improve ourselves, but we cannot perfect ourselves. We can and we must improve the world, but we cannot perfect it. That is part of what it means to wait for the Messiah rather than pretend that we are the Messiah. Yet the door to repentance is always open, and when we fail, God encourages us to get up and keep going.” (*Heart of Torah*, Vol. 1, p. xxvii)

We have seen that the word *torah* does not mean law, but rather teaching or instruction. Torah itself is not merely a set of laws but a mixture of narrative and legal material. Rabbi Sacks says that by interweaving story and commandments, history and law, Torah establishes a creative tension between the world as it is (narrative) and the world as it ought to be (law) (*Numbers*, p. 239). Living with that tension between who we are and who God wants us to be, between human empires and God’s kingdom, is part of what it means to walk by faith in the God who has faith in us.

III. Rabbi Heschel, Rev. King, and the God Who Suffers

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly had to make the argument that, properly understood, the Judeo-Christian tradition viewed racism as a sin and therefore it was an evil that the clergy must address. Sadly, his biblical stance was opposed by many Christian leaders who argued that as a pastor he should focus on the soul’s relationship to God. Leave politics to the politicians. But King received strong support, both theological and personal, from an unlikely source, a Polish-born Hasidic rabbi who specialized in the study of Jewish mysticism. This was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and in fact he became an important contributor to the religious argument against racial discrimination, not only agreeing with King but also helping him to develop his theology. Like King, Heschel also encountered opposition to his social activism from prominent Jewish leaders. Nevertheless, his teaching and example inspired many concerned Jews to join the fight against racism. Indeed, both men reached beyond religious and racial boundaries in their efforts to establish justice in America.

We have seen that a student essay written by King in 1949 demonstrates a remarkable perspective on Jesus and Judaism: “Jesus was a Jew. It is impossible to understand Jesus outside of the race in which he was born. The Christian Church has tended to overlook its Judaic origins, but the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine. He shared the experiences of his fellow-countrymen. So as we study Jesus we are wholly in a Jewish atmosphere.... There is no justification of the view that Jesus was attempting to find [*sic*] a church distinct from the Synagogue. The gospels themselves bear little trace of such a view. Throughout the gospels we find Jesus accepting both the Temple and the Synagogue.... It is quite evident that Jesus had profound respect for the law, as did every true Jew. He never opposed it or hinted that it would pass away” (“Six Talks in Outline”).

This way of understanding Jesus was quite unusual in 1949, and King was certainly influenced by his reading of Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Dispossessed*. I believe that this fundamental insight into who Jesus was informed King's reading of the Scriptures and shaped his sense of calling and mission. It is also the foundation for his inclusion of Jewish leaders carrying Torah scrolls in the civil rights marches and for his close friendship with Rabbi Heschel. So I want to explore their unique relationship, especially because of its continued relevance both to the topics we have been discussing in this class as well as to our continuing struggle for civil rights in America.

A. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1973)

Rabbi Heschel was born in 1907 in Warsaw, Poland. His parents were Hasidim, members of a spiritually intense Orthodox Jewish sect. Hasidism focused more on a direct, passionate relationship with God, on experiencing the glory of God radiating throughout the world rather than on the intricacies of Talmudic law. Hasidic worship services could be quite lively and exuberant, even chaotic. Both of Heschel's parents came from generations of distinguished rabbinic learning and they intended young Abraham to follow in his ancestors' footsteps as a Hasidic *rebbe* or spiritual leader. From early on, Heschel showed precocious ability as a student and even published his own Talmud commentary at age 15. He was ordained as a rabbi shortly thereafter.

While remaining faithful to Orthodoxy, he persuaded his family to let him pursue secular studies as well, something many Hasidim were skeptical about or actively hostile towards. He received his Ph.D. in 1933 from the University of Berlin for a dissertation on the Hebrew prophets, and completed his studies at a rabbinical college in the following year. In 1937, Martin Buber, the famed Jewish philosopher, named Heschel as his successor at the Jewish Learning Center in Frankfurt. The following year, the Nazis deported him and all Polish Jews back to Poland. Fortunately, six weeks before the Nazi invasion in 1939, Heschel was able to escape Poland for a teaching position in London and the following year he came to the US.

Heschel's life was a combination of contrasts. He was a brilliant intellectual and a deep mystic. He wrote scholarly works on the classics of Judaism, like the Biblical prophets, the writings of Maimonides, and the Kabbalah. But he also penned numerous volumes of a non-academic nature on the spiritual issues that confront the modern Jew. Heschel is wonderfully quotable, and I had to resist giving you pages of quotes from him. All the more remarkable for a man who only learned English after he turned thirty.

Heschel was also deeply committed to establishing ties with people of other faiths. In 1964, Heschel met with Catholic Church leaders and was able to help influence the Second Vatican Council in issuing its groundbreaking "Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions" that condemned anti-Semitism, repudiated the church's history of injustice towards Jews, and rejected the notion that all Jews are guilty of killing Christ and therefore God has eternally cursed them. He was able to persuade the bishops to modify or eliminate parts of the church liturgy that were anti-Jewish. The following year, Heschel became the first Jew ever to be appointed to the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, one of the foremost Protestant theological schools in the United States. At the same time he remained actively involved in advocating for Jewish issues,

such as the persecution of Soviet Jews and support for the State of Israel. He also became a major figure in both the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement.