

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2**  
**Class Notes 10/18/20**

2. God's Faith in Us

The book of Genesis functions as a kind of prologue to or opening act of this revolutionary story that is the heart of Torah. We have heard the creation story in Genesis so many times that it is hard for us to read it with fresh eyes. We have been given an interpretation of it that fits with the Christian system: God created a perfect world, humans screwed up and the whole of creation became corrupted, and so one day God will have to come remake the world. In the meantime God sent Jesus to provide forgiveness for our sins so that we can go to heaven when we die. I have become convinced that virtually nothing in this understanding of the Bible is adequate; at best, it contains some half-truths.

The rabbis give us a different perspective on this story. Creation, they say, was an immense act of faith on God's part. To create the world, God stepped back and made room for us, for creatures who have the free will to go their own way and ignore their Creator. Rabbi Sacks says that this tells us something profoundly important about God. Torah at its heart teaches "the daring idea that more than we have faith in God, God has faith in us" (*To Heal*, p. 12). God's faith in us is demonstrated in a number of ways.

a. Created in God's Image

First and most importantly, Torah teaches that God took the risky move of creating humans in his own image and delegating to them something of his creative authority over the world (Gen. 1:26-28). Again, familiarity with the idea keeps us from seeing how truly astonishing this is.

Rabbi Sacks says that this monumental assertion is a revolutionary idea that has changed humanity. The idea that a human being could bear the divine image was nothing new. That is precisely how Mesopotamian kings and Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors were regarded. That was the basis for their authority. Torah's astonishing declaration is that all humans, regardless of gender, ethnicity, culture, or creed, share this divine image and authority, not just the ruling elite. In its historical context, this affirmation was a political one, not just a religious concept, and would eventually become the unspoken foundation for the Declaration of Independence and the revolt against the unquestioned authority of the King.

We saw that this idea is also the objective basis for the commands to love your neighbor and to love the stranger, the foreigner living among you. One can even learn to love one's enemy, because they too bear God's image. To mistreat another human is to mistreat God himself. We are all created in the same image, and yet because paradoxically it is the image of the imageless God, we are all different. ***To see God's image only in those who resemble us is idolatry.*** If you can't see God's image in others who are different from you, you will not be able to love them or God (1 John 4:20).

b. Partners with God in the Creation

God's decision to share his dominion over creation with humans, to entrust humanity with responsibility in the world, means, in the words of the rabbis, that we are partners with God in the creation (*Shabbat* 10a, 119b). The Eden story suggests, in Rabbi Sacks' words, that "creation is God's unfinished symphony, and he has entrusted its completion to us" (*To Heal*, p. 80). Here we need to notice something about the creation story that is vitally important but usually overlooked. ***Eden is not the world.*** Eden is only a small part of a much larger, less orderly world that humans are to cultivate and care for and fill by producing a family and rule in God's name. Creation in Genesis is "good," meaning that it functions the way God designed it to. But it is like a newborn baby: immature, in need of care so that it can grow into maturity. God set humans in the garden to continue his creative work. Again, this is an immense act of faith on God's part.

So God did not make the world as an idyllic place where we simply relax and enjoy ourselves. God created for us a challenging environment where we grow to maturity by doing God's work and by accepting responsibility for our actions in the midst of circumstances that are not always clear or easy. Even Eden has its serpents. The rabbis say, "It is not for you to complete the work but neither are you free to desist from it" (*m. Avot*. 2:21). God continues to work with us as partners in the ongoing process of bringing creation into what God wants it to be. Our response to God's faith in us, our faith in Him, means accepting this radical responsibility for the world.

Jesus too does not stay on earth to do everything himself, but rather he delegates responsibility to his disciples for the spread of God's word and God's love into the whole world, for building God's kingdom in the midst of pagan empires. Christian theologies that simply sit back and wait for God to act—to wave a magic wand and solve all our problems, or worse, to rapture us out of this world altogether—are unbiblical. Torah tells us we have work to do.

### c. Covenant: Law and Love

Torah calls the partnership with God "covenant," a mutual agreement, a reciprocal relationship between God and humans in which both parties to the covenant have responsibilities. And both parties enter into the covenant on the basis of trust, on the basis of faith. God takes the initiative in establishing the covenant; God takes a leap of faith in asking humans to respond in faith to him freely. God knows full well that humans may in fact reject the covenant, or enter into it and then break it later on (Gen. 17:14). Yet, God does not choose to do everything on his own. He blesses us and enters into partnership with us in order to bring blessing to the world (Gen. 12:2-3; 18:18; 22:18).

As a covenant, that partnership includes both law and love, justice and compassion. Christians have tended to see these as opposites, whereas in fact biblical covenants are always about grace and love and always about works and law. ***A law-free gospel is not good news.*** The *torah* of messiah, the law of Christ, is the foundation for the new covenant community that Jesus called the kingdom of God (Gal. 6:2; James 2:8). Israel is redeemed by God's grace but it is only when they receive the Law that Israel becomes a people, a nation. It is the covenant, not love alone, that creates community and sustains it.

So God delegates his dominion over creation to us, trusting us to learn what it means to bear God's own image in this world, to be his representatives, to be his partners. Even

when humans go their own way, God does not give up on them. God as we encounter him in Torah is like a parent who holds back and allows his children room to grow and learn and make mistakes so that they might become responsible and mature. More than we have faith in God, God has faith in us and has entrusted us with responsibilities that only we can fulfill. That is the grand, revolutionary story that Torah tells.

### 3. Doing Something for God

Over a third of the book of Exodus is devoted to detailed instructions about the construction of the Tabernacle. Although we usually skip over such “boring” parts of Scripture, in fact the length and repetitive detail in that passage signals its great importance for the story. Up until then, God has been doing things for Israel: liberating them, miraculously feeding them, giving them the Law, while Israel has spend most of the time complaining, wishing they were back in Egypt, and finally resorting to idolatry. All of God’s powerful dramatic blessings have had little positive effect on the people.

But in the narrative of the construction of the Tabernacle, for the first time we hear that all Israel follows God’s instructions faithfully and willingly, and the lengthy narrative dramatizes their faithfulness. R. Sacks argues that the subtext of the Exodus story is this: ***we are changed, not by what we receive but by what we do*** (*To Heal*, p. 149). If you want to create a people with a positive sense of collective identity, get them to build something together. ***What transformed the Israelites was not what God did for them but what they did for God.*** Doing something for God changes us more effectively than what God does for us. It is precisely when God entrusts humans with responsibility that we have the opportunity to grow into the people God wants us to be.

#### a. Making a Home for God

In Genesis, God does the work, making a home for humans. In Exodus, humans do the work, making a home for God in their midst (Ex. 25:8). R. Sharon Sobel looks closer at this verse, where God promises to dwell “among them” or “in their midst.” In many places, the Bible declares that no earthly structure can contain the infinite God (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6; 6:18; Is. 66:1). God does not dwell in the sanctuary as such, but rather among the people, in the midst of the community which built the Tabernacle. It is not the physical space itself the contains the Holy One, but the community that has come together to work on this project for God. They have made a space for God in their lives. The community itself is sacred space and building that community is essential work for God’s people (*Women’s Torah Commentary*, p. 156).

The story of the golden calf is inserted in the middle of the Tabernacle narrative, making it clear that when humans forget God and go their own way, chaos results. Those two stories are also connected by a significant image. To make the calf, the people bring their gold jewelry to Aaron (Ex. 32:2-4). To build the Tabernacle, the people bring all their valuables to Moses (Ex. 35:4-9). Our wealth, our possessions, our resources, can either create idols for our own pleasure or create a sanctuary for God’s presence among us.