

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 11/14/21

4. Fear and Obedience

In addition to worship, the fear of the Lord is also closely connected to serving God, to obedience, doing what God tells us, because in worship we acknowledge God's authority over us, God's claim on our lives. Our attitude of profound reverence in the presence of the Lord is more than just an inner feeling. It must lead to action. The conclusion to the book of Ecclesiastes sums up this biblical perspective: "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13). In fact, one fears God precisely by keeping God's commandments (Deut. 6:1-2). That is one of the central meanings of that phrase, as we saw in the book of Job. Fear, worship, and obedience are all part of one package (1 Sam. 12:14).

The prophets do not fault Israel for observing outward religious acts of worship without having the proper inner attitude. (Historically, that has been the Christian slander of Judaism.) There was plenty of enthusiastic praise and worship going on in ancient Israel. The prophets condemn the people because their worship does not result in proper behavior towards other people. This theme is central to the prophetic message. The book of Isaiah begins with this complaint. The people are celebrating lavish worship services and lifting up holy hands to the Lord and praying without ceasing. But they are not seeking justice for widows and orphans, so God says those prayers are useless (Isaiah 1:10-17). Amos says that because the court systems and economic structures of the society are rigged against the poor, God despises their praise and worship services: "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like waters, righteousness like a never-failing torrent!" (Amos 5:21-24; see also Micah 6:6-8). Jeremiah stands in the Temple gates and warns the people that coming there to worship will not keep them safe from judgment if they continue to oppress the poor and the immigrant in their midst (Jer. 7:1-10). In the absence of obedience to God's commands to establish a just society that cares for the needy and does not participate in the idolatry of the surrounding culture, heartfelt worship counts for nothing. It will only lead to judgment. Rabbi Heschel comments, "Worship and living are not two separate realms. Unless living is a form of worship, our worship has no life" (*God in Search*, p. 384). You cannot separate what you do in church on Sunday from the life you live the rest of the week. Repeatedly, the biblical authors make this point. "Whoever oppresses the poor blasphemes his Maker, but whoever is gracious to the needy honors Him" (Prov. 14:31). The Hebrew of this verse contains the same ambiguity as the English. The pronoun "his" (we would say "their" in contemporary inclusive English) could refer either to the oppressor or to the poor person. It once again reminds us of the foundational importance of the creation story for our understanding of the Scriptures. "My" Maker is also "their" Maker. If you do not see God's image in the face of a person in need, you will never understand that your mistreatment of that person is an assault on God. As Jesus said, what you do to them you do to me. Heschel comments: "There is no reverence for God without reverence for

man...The fear lest we hurt a poor man must be as deep as the fear of God” (Heschel, *God in Search*, p. 375). Humans, bearing God’s image, must also be included in what it means to fear the Lord. If you are oppressing the poor, your acts of worship are not praise but blasphemy.