

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

We have been talking about the idea of the fear of the Lord and how that reverential awe before the Creator of the universe should result not only in worship but in obedience to what God has commanded us. The Scriptures make it clear that separating our religious life, our worship, from our life in the world, how we treat widows and orphans, is an offense to God, and God will not honor that worship. If you are oppressing the poor, your acts of worship are not praise but blasphemy.

So one major part of the fear of the Lord, reverence for the Holy One of Israel, is obedience, following the way of the Lord that God has set out for us in the Scriptures, the way of compassionate justice (Gen. 18:19). Here is one of the great innovations of Torah, one which we now take for granted: the idea of holiness is broadened to include all of life, not just a separate religious sphere that has nothing to do with how we treat others. Hence the central importance of Leviticus 19, which defines holiness not just in ritual terms, but also as loving our neighbor and the immigrant in our midst, not seeking to maximize our business profits but leaving something for the poor, fair labor practices, honest dealings with all people, concern for those with disabilities and respect for the elderly, thoughtful restraint in the use of natural resources. Just this one chapter underscores God's interest in every aspect of our lives. There is no separation between what we think of as religion and what we think of as social responsibility. Biblically, the phrase "social gospel" is redundant. It is simply the gospel, the gospel we find first in Torah.

The New Testament also connects fear of the Lord with proper conduct of our lives. In Acts, the life of the church is described as "living in the fear of the Lord and in the strength of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:31). Peter comes to the realization that "in every nation the one who fears God and works righteousness/justice is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:35). Paul says that his own fear of the Lord is the basis for his ministry of persuading others to share his fear of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:11). Peter says that if we consider God to be our Father, then we will live lives of holiness, lives that are characterized by the fear of the Lord (1 Peter 1:14-17). Peter here, of course, is citing one of the central commands of Torah, again from Leviticus 19: "Be holy because I am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The Gentiles he is writing to are to leave behind their former way of life and embrace the holiness found in Torah. By doing so they become a community that bears witness to the God who is the Holy One of Israel.

But that obedience is not thought of as a burdensome duty. Rather, the person who fears the Lord is the one who is fortunate, blessed, because they delight greatly in God's commands (Ps. 112:1). God's servants, those who do God's will, are those who delight in fearing God's name (Neh. 1:11). For Nehemiah, it is precisely this great and "fearsome" God who is loved and obeyed by his servants (Neh. 1:5). So somewhat paradoxically, obedient fear of the Lord is closely related to love. "I love your statutes; my flesh trembles in terror of you; I fear your laws" (Ps. 119:119-120). Torah makes this clear: "What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, and to worship/serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your

being, to keep the Lord's commandments and his statutes for your own good" (Deut. 10:12-13). Here Moses explicitly connects the fear of the Lord with love and obedience and worship and service. (In Hebrew, the word for "serve" can also mean "worship." That is also true in Greek, which is why translators are divided about how to translate Romans 12:1. Is offering yourself as a living sacrifice an act of "service" [King James] or "worship" [NIV] or perhaps "service of worship" [NASB]? The two ideas are closely connected. That is why we speak of having a "worship service.") Worshipping God, serving God, loving God, obeying God, are all part of living a joyful life before God.

So despite the verse in 1 John 4:18 ("perfect love casts out fear"), usually quoted out of context, there does not have to be a tension between love and fear. What John is actually saying in the context of that passage is that if we have developed a mature ("perfect") love for others so that our lives are characterized by faithful service to them, we will have no reason to fear God's judgment. That, of course, is a very high standard, but it is also a recognition of the close connection between fear of the Lord and our obedience to God's will. If we love one another, John says, then we will have no need to fear anything from God.

Elsewhere, the Bible contrasts a proper fear of the Lord with a fear of humans and what they can do to you. We have already seen the passage from Isaiah where the prophet warns not to let human fears and conspiracy theories rule your life, but rather the fear of the Lord should direct your life (Is. 8:12-13). Ezekiel's awesome vision of God as he begins his mission is meant to strengthen the prophet and prevent him from fearing the reaction of hostile humans to his message (Ezek. 2:6-7).

But I think this point is made most vividly in Torah. The book of Exodus begins with one of the most remarkable stories in Torah, that of the two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who refuse to follow Pharaoh's command to kill the newborn Hebrew boys (Ex. 1:15-21). Usually this passage is translated to suggest that the midwives were Hebrews themselves. But the text is ambiguous: literally it reads "midwives of the Hebrews" (v. 15). That could mean that they were in fact Hebrew women but it could also mean that they were midwives to the Hebrews, that is, they were Egyptian women helping the Hebrew women, which to me makes more sense of the story. Rabbi Sacks points out that some Jewish commentators have understood the story this way because it is doubtful that Pharaoh would have expected Hebrew women to kill children of their own people or trusted them to do so (Sacks, *Ethics*, pp. 79-80). The story which immediately follows, where Pharaoh's own daughter rescues a Hebrew boy from the river, adopts him and names him Moses, I think is intentionally paired with the story of the midwives. Torah begins its account of the exodus with the extraordinary civil disobedience of three Egyptian women as a sign of how God's miraculous deliverance of the Israelites has already begun in completely unexpected ways. Those miracles are more astonishing, more compelling, more spellbinding to me than any of the more well-known wonders that occur later in the book.

Significantly, we are told twice in this short passage that Shifrah and Puah acted as they did because they "feared God" (vv. 17, 21). Despite the absolute power that Pharaoh held over his subjects, the power of life and death, these women refused to follow his immoral order. Their fear of God was greater than their fear of the State. They refused to take up the

sword in the name of national security. Because of their reverence for God, they valued the lives of immigrant children more than their own. Rabbi Sacks sees Shifrah and Puah as “two of the great heroines of world literature, the first to teach humanity the moral limits of power” (*Ethics*, p. 83). A well-developed, healthy fear of the Lord enables us to stand firm in the midst of a brutal and threatening and fearful world and be life-giving servants of that world.