Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 11/29/20

Last week we talked about the importance of what story we are telling to define who we are both as individuals and as a community and how we are supposed to live. We saw that the story many Americans tell, especially on holidays like Thanksgiving, is fundamentally a lie, and that the deep divisions in this country come in part from the very different stories we tell. I recall a conversation a few years ago with a woman who had a child in the Metco program and was upset about the history text, which instead of talking about slavery spoke of the African "immigrants" who were brought over to work and help build the American economy. She had tried in vain to get them to tell a different story, because the stories we tell about ourselves matter.

We have also seen that most Christians have left out the story of Israel from their own story, from their own understanding of who they are. In particular I have argued in this course that we have left out the story of the Exodus from our understanding of the cross and what the word "redemption" means. In his speech to the Conference on Race and Religion, Rabbi Heschel sees that story as crucial for people of faith to embrace as their story, the story that tells them who God is. Of course, African Americans had been doing that since the days of slavery. Martin Luther King and other Christians involved in the Civil Rights Movement were able to incorporate the Exodus story, the story of Israel, into their understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, and so they were able to welcome Jews into fellowship with them in their common cause. The Jewish roots of the Civil Rights Movement came from the common story they shared. They were all proclaiming to Pharaoh: "Let my people go!"

And in this season of Advent, we need to be reminded of an essential part of the story that we Christians share with Jews: we are all waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

2) In his speech, Heschel emphasizes the idea of collective responsibility for sin. "*Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself; in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.*" In the Jewish tradition, the notion of community responsibility is important. For this reason, he says, on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, penitential prayers in the synagogue are recited in the first person plural—"We have lied, we have committed adultery, we have done murder" and so on. The penitent should consider that, even if he or she has not committed the particular sin mentioned, they surely have not done enough to prevent that sin from being committed by others, and so they bear some responsibility for its continuing to afflict the world. This is a way of thinking that is utterly foreign to most American Christians. Heschel here indicts what might be called "passive racism," participation without protest in a racist society. He says that we can no longer neglect our responsibility, even if we have not personally committed any actively racist acts. Heschel castigates above all the sin of "indifference to evil." His Jewish

heritage had allowed Heschel to understand what many white Christians still cannot see: that racism is a corporate, social disease that is nurtured by many, not simply the acts of a few misguided individuals.

3) Throughout the speech Heschel insists that racism is a satanic, "unmitigated evil," a "cancer of the soul" that is utterly incompatible with religion. Racism is not simply a political problem; it is a theological one. The ancient rabbis taught that when one insults another person, one is in fact insulting God, because all humans are created in God's image. It is a sin worse than idolatry or murder. Heschel says: "The image of God is either in every man or in no man....God's covenant is with all men, and we must never be oblivious of *the equality of the divine dignity* of all men." For the religious person who fully recognizes the divine image in the face of every person, racism becomes unthinkable.

Heschel says that precisely because the privileged social classes have trouble recognizing the image of God in people not like themselves, the biblical prophets are biased in favor of the poor and the oppressed. Andrew Young has said that Heschel's great work of biblical scholarship *The Prophets*, published in 1962, was almost a sacred text for early civil rights leaders, and the reason for this is clear. Heschel understood that the Hebrew prophets call the religiously committed person to become an activist for the poor and underprivileged, for those who are being discriminated against by society. One cannot be in a relationship with God without sharing God's anguish at injustice. Sympathy for the oppressed is actually a divine quality which humans imperfectly try to imitate. Heschel sees even God's wrath as connected to God's concern for the poor. He says that our human "sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval; God's reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed?" (*The Prophets*, vol. 2, p. 65) God's wrath, expressed in the raging voice of the prophets, is a necessary part of God's compassion for the oppressed. Wrath is the essential flip side of God's love.

4) Heschel ended his speech with a call to act on behalf of the oppressed, citing the rabbinic idea of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. He gives a particularly Jewish interpretation to this call, one we have seen in other rabbis: God has deliberately left creation unfinished, so that humans can be God's partners in completing it. "The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. . . God needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in space, by sitting in pews, by visiting temples, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God's mission." Whereas God's task was to make the universe, ours is to shape history in a way that will be pleasing to God. Heschel concludes his speech

with his favorite Bible verse, Amos 5:24: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Through all of this speech I hear a plea from Heschel to his own people to take up the cause of equal rights for African Americans. He makes a case for how Jewish theology demands action on behalf of those who are being oppressed. Heschel would receive criticism from prominent Jewish leaders and groups that he was involving himself in matters that did not concern a Jew. He should be spending his energies working for Jewish causes (which, as we have seen, he also did). Heschel's vision of his larger social responsibility to all peoples would not allow him to ignore the plight of his black neighbor.

This conference was the beginning of the friendship and collaboration between Heschel and King. For both, the theological was intimately intertwined with the political, and that conviction provided the basis for the spiritual affinity they felt for each other. Political activism was not simply history, but salvation history, history occurring within God's realm. God is concerned about the civil rights struggle because God suffers with those who suffer.

Heschel and King both spoke with prophetic boldness to the powers that be. A few months after the Chicago conference, when President Kennedy wanted to bring together religious leaders to discuss civil rights in a meeting at the White House, Heschel was one of those invited to attend. In response to Kennedy's invitation, Heschel daringly telegraphed the president: "*I look forward to privilege of being present at meeting tomorrow. Likelihood exists that Negro problem will be like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes. Church and synagogue have failed. They must repent. Ask of religious leaders to call for national repentance and personal sacrifice. Let religious leaders donate one month's salary toward fund for Negro housing and education. I propose that you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency. A Marshall plan for aid to Negroes is becoming a necessity. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity*." He could have sent that morally grand and spiritually audacious telegram yesterday.

Again, Heschel has to insist that racial discrimination is a religious issue, because most people, including most religious leaders, did not see it that way. Note that he asks pastors and rabbis to get involved, not simply to speak out from the pulpit but also to personally sacrifice on behalf of the needy. It is a bold demand.

Heschel lived what he preached. In March 1965, Heschel led a crowd of 800 people to the FBI headquarters in New York City to protest the brutal treatment that civil rights activists were receiving in Selma, Alabama. Twice, peaceful groups of protestors had attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery to call attention to Alabama's

suppression of black voting rights. Only 2% of black voters in Montgomery had been able to register to vote (sound familiar?) The marchers were attacked by local police forces and white supremacist groups, (sound familiar?) and Governor Wallace refused to guarantee the safety of the protestors. Heschel's group wanted the FBI to step in and enforce the law. The New York delegation was not permitted to enter the FBI building, but Heschel was allowed inside to present a petition to the regional FBI director. J. Edgar Hoover would soon put Heschel on the watch list of subversives.

A few days later, King sent Heschel a telegram inviting him to join their third march in Alabama, the one that actually made it through. On March 21, Heschel walked with King from Selma to Montgomery. Due to the presence of Heschel and other Jewish leaders, it was reported that Jewish "skullcaps became a symbol of the movement." Hundreds of black marchers were wearing them, and the demand for what they renamed "freedom caps" was so great that an order was wired for delivery of a thousand caps when the marchers would arrive in Montgomery for the demonstration at the state capitol. Black leaders had learned that Jews wear the caps at prayer because one's head must be covered in the presence of the Lord. Arguing that "wherever the freedom movement is, God is to be found there," they adopted this Jewish practice (*Jewish Telegraphic Agency Bulletin*, 23 March 1965). I find this utterly remarkable, a sign of how important the Jewish presence was to the marchers.

Shortly after returning from the march, Heschel wrote to King: "The day we marched together out of Selma was a day of sanctification." Remember, Heschel has said that the answer to evil is not the good but the holy, something that involves God and not just human effort. Marching with King was spreading holiness in the world. So for Heschel, the march was not just "political;" it had spiritual significance. *"For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."* As we have seen, social action on behalf of the oppressed is indeed prayer and worship, offering a true sacrifice to God. This iconic photograph of Heschel marching with King and many others is what holiness looks like. (I love the joyful nun.)

D. King and the Anti-War Movement

As important as the Civil Rights movement was to them, both men recognized that the call to establish biblical justice in the world reached beyond the challenges of racism. Just as King encouraged Heschel's involvement in the Civil Rights movement, Heschel encouraged King to take a public stand against the war in Vietnam. In 1965, Heschel was one of the founders of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. Heschel spoke out against the war on January 31, 1967, in Washington, D.C.: "At this hour Vietnam is our most urgent, our most disturbing religious problem, a challenge to the whole nation as well as a challenge to every one of us as individuals. . . .Vietnam is a personal problem. To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous."

Two months after Heschel's speech, on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before he was killed, King gave perhaps his most controversial speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," at Riverside Church in New York City. Heschel was on the podium with King that day.

Unlike some of his supporters, King saw that the war in Vietnam was a piece of the larger problem he was fighting against: America's willingness to use its vast powers to oppress and inflict violence on the poor, both at home and abroad. King recognized that the suffering inflicted on Vietnamese peasants was no less cruel than the suffering inflicted on American blacks. He decries the insanity of the military sending poor black young men 8,000 miles away to give their lives for liberties they were denied at home. "We have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools." He understood how the war in Vietnam was diverting vital resources from the war on poverty and says that he was "increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor," making it clear that he means both the poor in America and the poor in Vietnam. He concludes: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." He saw that militarism was as much a poison on the American soul as racism.

King lost a lot of supporters after that speech, but continued to speak out about what he called the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism" that were corrupting the heart and soul of his beloved country. Along with Heschel and other religious leaders he participated in an anti-war prayer vigil at Arlington Cemetery on Feb. 6, 1968, holding a Torah scroll, little American flags and the cross to indicate their purpose. He had two months left to live.

Heschel too remained deeply engaged in anti-war efforts until his death in 1972. He lectured frequently at anti-war rallies, and made his opposition to the war an integral part of his public lectures and of his classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Heschel vigorously condemned the atrocities committed by US forces in Vietnam. Throughout those years, Heschel received warnings and complaints from some members of the Jewish community, who felt his protests were endangering American government support for the State of Israel. Similarly, King was attacked for endangering President Lyndon Johnson's support for the Civil Rights movement, and his outspokenness against the war was opposed by major Black organizations, including the Urban League and the NAACP. Heschel, like King, was placed under FBI surveillance and was branded an anti-American subversive by supporters of the war.

But the real subversiveness, Heschel stated, came from the policies of the American government: *"[I]t is our duty as citizens to say no to the subversiveness of our government, which is ruining the values we cherish.... The blood we shed in Vietnam makes a mockery of all our proclamations, dedications, celebrations. Has our conscience become a fossil, is all mercy gone? If mercy, the mother of humility, is still*

alive as a demand, how can we say yes to our bringing agony to that tormented country? We are here because our own integrity as human beings is decaying in the agony and merciless killing done in our name. In a free society, some are guilty and all are responsible. We are here to call upon the governments of the United States as well as North Vietnam to stand still and to consider that no victory is worth the price of terror, which all parties commit in Vietnam, North and South. Remember that the blood of the innocent cries forever." Heschel and King warn us that only by listening to these cries do we preserve our humanity and our religious integrity.

E) Two Prophets

On March 25, 1968, the Conservative Rabbis of America held their annual conference. King was invited as the keynote speaker for the proceedings, which included a celebration of Heschel's sixtieth birthday. When King entered the auditorium, he was greeted by 800 rabbis singing "We Shall Overcome" in Hebrew! King said this moved him deeply because it was "the language of the prophets." He acknowledged Heschel's help in mobilizing clergy of all faiths to act for civil rights, and spoke of Heschel as "one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days." Heschel in turn believed that King truly represented the spirit of the Hebrew prophets: "Where in America do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us." Both Heschel and King spoke with the voice of those prophets.

For Heschel, the centrality of the Exodus theme in the civil rights movement was a sign of Christian affirmation of its Jewish roots. After the conference he telegrammed an invitation to the Kings for a Passover Seder at his home in April: "The ritual and celebration of that evening seek to make present to us the spirit and the wonder of the Exodus from Egypt. It is my feeling that your participation at a Seder celebration would be of very great significance." Sadly, King was assassinated a week before this celebration.

The day before King's funeral, Heschel walked alongside the King family and other African American leaders in the "Silent March" in Memphis, a march not only honoring King but also calling attention for the reason he had been in Memphis—seeking economic justice for sanitation workers. Mrs. King had invited Heschel to speak at the funeral, where he read from Isaiah 53: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hid their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." It was a bold but legitimate move to see King as the suffering servant. Mrs. King also attended Heschel's funeral in 1972, where their daughter Yolanda began a lifelong friendship with Heschel's daughter Susannah.

Heschel and King were both deeply rooted in the biblical prophets, and became prophets in their own time. In particular, they both loved to quote the prophet Amos:

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."
Significantly, when King quotes this verse (as in his "I Have a Dream" speech), he does so not in the King James Version but in Heschel's own translation from his book on the prophets (Vol. 1, p. 212), the translation Heschel used in the speech where the two men first met. Because of King, it is Heschel's version of Amos 5:24 that most people know; it is Heschel's version that is engraved on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, a silent witness to the abiding connection between these two prophets of God.