

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 2/27/22**

Last week we started a discussion of what I see as a problem, the Christian over-emphasis on life after death to the neglect of life before death. I pointed out that the Old Testament focuses squarely on this life, and has virtually no mention of any afterlife. It is not a significant part of Israel's faith.

Many Christians have been puzzled by the fact that what they see as the most important part of their religion—going to “heaven” when I die—is totally absent from the Old Testament. Why didn't God make this fundamental doctrine clear to everyone from the beginning? If it is so important, why is there no mention of it in the Scriptures?

Rabbi Sacks sees what he calls this biblical “concealment” of the hope for a world to come as an intentional reaction to and polemic against the beliefs and practices of the Egyptian society from which Israel had been liberated (*Ceremony and Celebration*, p. 185; see also “Defeating Death,” <https://rabbisacks.org/nitzavim-5781/>). Remember that Israel was to be the antithesis to Egypt. They were to be a community shaped by radically different values and purposes. In striking contrast to their obsession with death and the afterlife, and their construction of massive pyramids and elaborate tombs of the Pharaohs which 4,000 years later are still standing, when Moses dies Torah says: “No one knows his burial place to this day” (Deut. 34:6). The greatest leader of the Israelites, a prophet who spoke to God “face to face” (Ex. 33:11), rests in an anonymous grave that no tourist can visit nor pilgrim revere. Yet the counter-cultural community that he helped bring into being persists “to this day” as a greater monument, a living memorial not only to Moses but also to the God that he served. (Interestingly, there is a kind of gravestone monument to Moses on Mt. Nebo, but it was erected by the Franciscans as a “Christian Holy Place.” Note that the inscription on this monument is in Arabic and English, but not Hebrew.)

Rather, says Rabbi Sacks, in his final speech Moses exhorts the Israelites to “choose life” (Deut. 30:19). Their focus is to be on this world, not some future one. Their energies are to be directed towards establishing a nation, a people, a community that is characterized by the compassionate justice that is “the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19). Humans were created to care for and serve this world, not only the people in this world but also the physical creation itself (Gen. 2:15; 3:23). Rabbi Sacks says, “*Judaism has relentlessly sought God in the here-and-now of life on earth. Yes, we believe in life after death, but it is in life before death that we truly find human greatness.*” He gives this succinct statement: “*God is close. God is here. God is life. Therefore celebrate life. Sanctify life. Turn life into a blessing and make a blessing over life. That is Judaism in 25 words.*”

As we have seen, Torah carefully separates anything having to do with death or even having the appearance of death from Israel's religious observances and holy place. Jewish priests did not officiate at funerals. Significantly, even in what's called the Mourner's

Kaddish, a prayer recited at the death of a loved one and during synagogue services in remembrance of the dead, there is not one word about death.

*“Magnified and sanctified be God’s great name throughout the world that God created and governs by divine will. May the Kingdom of God be established during your lifetime, and during your days, and during the days of all the house of Israel, yea speedily and in the near future, and let us say, Amen.*

*May God’s great name be blessed for ever and ever.*

*Exalted, glorified and honored be the name of the blessed Holy One whose glory is beyond all blessings, hymns and praises that people render, and let us say, Amen.*

*May great peace emanate from Heaven with good life for us and for all Israel, and let us say, Amen.*

*May the one who makes peace in the heavens, make peace for us and for all Israel, and let us say, Amen.”*

This is simply a prayer for the sanctification of the name of God in the world and the establishment of God’s rule of peace. Its essence is the same as the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Israel’s religion is not to be about death but rather about life, this life.

So the Old Testament is not overly concerned about death or what happens when you die. Death is simply a fact of life. For the individual Israelite, God’s purposes and Israel’s destiny matter much more than their own death. Their family and community live on. The only real tragedy is an early death, an untimely one. Death is not a threat or the enemy and the OT has little interest in life after death.

This goes against the grain of what most Christians have been taught is the real heart of religion: a belief in the afterlife. People are puzzled when I point out that the Old Testament saints, like the ones listed in the chapter on faith in the book of Hebrews, did not serve God for fear of eternal punishment or to get an eternal reward. They had no such belief. We have seen that the ancient rabbinic tradition looks down on such an attitude: “Do not be like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving reward but be like servants who serve their master unconditionally” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:3). Interestingly, two of his pupils misunderstood the intent of Antigonus’ saying and founded sects that denied the existence of an afterlife. One of those sects we know as the Sadducees, who we know did not believe in the resurrection (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8).

The troublesome questions I have posed to people are: would you still be faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob if there were no “heaven and hell”? Would you still want to be a disciple of Jesus? Another way of thinking about this: do you think “the way of the Lord” taught in the Scriptures is the best possible way of life, regardless of what the future might bring? Or is your Christianity only “fire insurance?”

John Goldingay, an evangelical Christian Old Testament scholar, suggests that it was a “risky business” for God to reveal the idea of the resurrection to humans and that God wisely delayed this revelation. (It is important to point out that this is not a “Christian” doctrine, but one that is thoroughly Jewish, already part of the teaching of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, and one that was carried on by the rabbinic tradition. See Acts 23:28. The Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, who we know as the Apostle Paul, believed in the resurrection

long before his encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus.) On the one hand it gives hope to communities facing severe persecution, such as the Judeans in the time of the Maccabees or the early Christians.

But there is a great danger to this belief in an afterlife, one which has plagued Christianity ever since. That is the danger, says Goldingay, of *“discouraging people from taking our earthly life as seriously as it deserves as God’s gift. It risks our not experiencing life’s pains or its joys and thus squandering them. Christians’ frequent failure to take this life seriously shows God’s wisdom in delaying the revealing of the resurrection.”* (*Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II, p. 646). He goes on to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison in 1943: *“It is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything would be gone, that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world.”*

God wanted the covenant community, the community of faith, first to be firmly rooted in this life. Focus on an otherworldly establishment of justice undermines our desire to work for it now. Worse, it has also served to justify all sorts of inhuman behavior in this world. Rabbi Sacks argues, somewhat counterintuitively, that *“there is almost no injustice that cannot be justified by reference to life after death. Terrorist suicide bombing is the latest example. When Karl Marx called religion ‘the opium of the people,’ this is what he had in mind: that the promise of bliss in an afterlife makes people accept chains and injustices in this life”* (*Ceremony*, p. 185). The men who flew the planes into the Twin Towers did so precisely because of their hope of reward in Paradise. Jim Jones convinced parents to give poisoned Kool-Aid to their children and commit mass suicide by telling them that death was a “friend” that would allow them to pass over into another plane of life. Slave owners taught their version of Christianity to their slaves with the hope that it would pacify them and make them accept their captivity.

Throughout history, prominent Christian theologians from Augustine to Martin Luther to Reinhold Niebuhr have worked with a dualistic worldview that separates God’s future spiritual kingdom from present-day earthly kingdoms. This has allowed Christians to tolerate and defend secular political actions that were profoundly unchristian. Because of his doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther gave his support to the German princes’ slaughter of hundreds of thousands of peasants who were demanding better treatment. More recently, Alberto Gonzales, a so-called “evangelical” Christian, developed legal arguments to justify the Bush administration’s use of torture at Guantanamo Bay. Another devout Christian, Lt. Gen. William G. Boykin, was so enthralled with this practice that he engaged in a secret operation within the Bush defense department to, in his words, “gitmoize” the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, leading to the horrors that we have learned took place there. Christian history is full of such examples.