

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 2/6/22

We have been looking at the way in which the book of Genesis develops the theme of sibling rivalry, and I have been using this topic as a way of thinking about the historical relationship between Christians and Jews. I argued that we are family, however estranged from one another, and suggested that the various stories of family conflict give us a variety of choices or possibilities for the future. Genesis ends on a note of hope, with the reconciliation of the brothers with Joseph in Egypt.

I am reminded of a famous story about Pope John XXIII, who in 1960 received a delegation of 130 Jewish leaders at the Vatican. He greeted the assembly with these revolutionary words: “I am Joseph, your brother.” (Giuseppe, Joseph, was his middle name). This was the beginning of his efforts at reconciliation, his effort to condemn the antisemitism of the past and change the relationship between the Catholic Church and Jews. The Pope is remembered as “righteous Gentile” for his role in saving the lives of some 24,000 Jews in Turkey during World War II when he was stationed there as a representative of the Vatican.

So what kind of hope do we have of overcoming the 2000-year sibling rivalry between Jews and Christians, or are we doomed to keep on repeating our sad divisive history? I have three examples to offer for your consideration.

1. Rabbi Sacks tells a story about when he was a student in rabbinical school in the 1970s. The students were offered an unusual opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue with a group of African bishops who wanted to understand more about Judaism. The Principal of the seminary was sceptical in general about Jewish-Christian dialogue because of the widespread antisemitism in the Church, but at that time he felt that African Christians were different. He knew that they loved the Hebrew Scriptures and considered it the word of God, and he thought they might be open to understanding Judaism on its own terms.

So he sent Jonathan Sacks and other students of the senior class to a chateau in Switzerland for this engagement. For part of the time each day they studied the Talmud with other Swiss rabbinical students. “For the rest of the time we had an unusual, even transformative, encounter with the African Bishops, ending with a chassidic-style *tisch* [Orthodox festive meal] during which we shared with the Bishops our songs and stories and they taught us theirs. At three in the morning we finished by dancing together. We knew we were different, we knew that there were deep divides between our respective faiths, but we had become friends. Perhaps that is all we should seek. Friends don’t have to agree in order to stay friends. And friendships can sometimes help to heal the world.” (for the complete version of the story, see <https://rabbisacks.org/the-heroism-of-tamar-vayeshev/>).

I wish I had a picture of that event. The image in my mind of Jewish seminary students dancing with African bishops brings me great joy. Such productive encounters between the estranged siblings have been few and far between. Certainly this is a beginning point, a way to come together again.

I am convinced that not only is it important for Jews and Christians to build friendships but that we can also learn from each other. Certainly the African Bishops were seeking to learn from the Jewish students, and whether or not they intended it, the students surely ended up learning from the Bishops. Both groups found their faith enriched and enlarged. Clearly this experience laid the foundation for Rabbi Sacks' openness to engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths. (The slide shows pictures of R. Sacks presenting a Hanukkah menorah to Queen Elizabeth, and the Koren Siddur, a version of the Jewish prayer book that he translated and edited, to Pope Benedict. I love the fact that all three men are wearing skullcaps: the Cardinal, the Pope, and the Rabbi, and that even in the presence of the Queen, Rabbi Sacks does not remove his kippa.)

I love this story, but a word of caution before we go rushing off too quickly looking for kumbaya moments with Jews. As Rabbi Sacks indicates, the history of Christian antisemitism that we have studied has poisoned the relationship between Jews and Christians. Most Jews are wary of Christians precisely because of that history, and understandably so. Amy-Jill Levine recalls that when she was working on a Ph.D. on the gospel of Matthew, one of her relatives commented, "Why would you want to read such antisemitic stuff?" She responded, "Have you ever read it?" "No, why would I want to read such antisemitic stuff?" As Jacob approached his reunion with Esau, he was still very much worried that his brother continued to harbor a murderous intent. Esau had never actually harmed Jacob, only issued threats. But Christians have repeatedly inflicted widespread violence on Jews and those memories are difficult to overcome.