

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 3/13/22

Last week I kind of overwhelmed people with a rapid list of topics from the Old Testament that are fundamental for our understanding of the New. I was making the point that we have lost much of our firm foundation in Israel's Scriptures and so have lost much of value for our faith. In specific, I have been arguing that Christianity has become so focused on life after death that we have lost the biblical emphasis on this life.

What I was illustrating with that list of topics is one of the issues I have been talking about: how we understand and use biblical words. If you simply start with the New Testament and ignore the Old, how do we know what words like "God" and "Christ" and "salvation" and "heaven" mean? What Christ do we tell people about, the gentle Jesus meek and mild whose main concern is getting us into heaven when we die that Obery Hendricks found so problematic (see *The Politics of Jesus*)? Or the anti-Jewish and anti-Roman Catholic preacher of the Reformation who came to free us from Torah? Or the militaristic macho he man who urges his followers to give their lives for American imperialism (see *Jesus and John Wayne*)? Or the super-spiritual, quasi-angelic being of much of pietistic Christian imaginings who effortlessly walked this earth without really sharing its difficulties, its sweat and pain and doubt and frustration, its sexual desire and temptations to embrace wealth and power and fame? Or the sugar-daddy Jesus who does everything just for me and who guarantees me happiness and prosperity in all that I do?

I have been arguing that only when people have learned to take the Old Testament really seriously can they be entrusted with the story of Jesus or even understand the story of Jesus. Only by diligently searching the scriptures, like the Bereans, can we begin to answer the question Jesus put to his disciples: who do you say that I am?

For Christians to take the Old Testament seriously means that we start with its very specific understanding of God rather than the vague general idea of a divine being that most people in our society have: "In God we trust" is an almost meaningless statement because it can mean whatever anyone wants it to mean. The God who we believe became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth was not simply some generic deity, not some abstract philosophical concept, not Plato's ethereal "Form of the Good" or Aristotle's distant and dispassionate "Unmoved Mover," but rather the passionate and compassionate God of Israel's Scriptures who had made a covenant with and commitment to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah ultimately as a way of bringing blessing to the whole world. That God had liberated the Israelites from the oppressive rule of the Egyptian Empire and given them Torah as a constitution of a new nation. That God you could complain to and argue with and engage in dialogue with.

And that God did not just become any flesh, but Jewish flesh. That God is who Jesus worshipped and who Jesus reveals to us, the God of the Old Testament, a God whose pathos, whose suffering, whose loving anguish and deep distress at the waywardness of his people is given clear expression in the prophets (see Heschel, *The Prophets*). We saw when we discussed Rabbi Heschel that he shares the radical view of Rabbi Akiva (second cent.)

and other ancient sages: “The Holy and Blessed One is a partner in the suffering of His creatures; He is involved in the lot of His people, wounded by their sufferings and redeemed by their liberation” (*Heavenly Torah*, p. 120). When Israel suffers, God suffers because God dwells in the midst of the community. For Christians, that divine suffering because of human sin reaches its high point on the cross. The cross is nothing new but simply the ultimate and dramatic expression of who the God of Israel has always been. Jesus was the tangible embodiment of the self-revelation God had already given Israel, not the overturning of it or replacement of it.

That is why Paul says that God’s promises find their “yes” in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20) but here is a perfect example of what I have been talking about. This verse has nothing to do with some small individual “promise” that you might think God has made to you about some specific detail in your life. This means that Jesus is the confirmation that God’s promises to Israel, God’s stated purposes for the world revealed in the Old Testament, will be accomplished.

That is clear from how Paul uses the word “promise” in other places. First and foremost, God’s “promise” is the one God made to Abraham and his family, to Israel, that through them the whole world would find blessing (Romans 4:13-16; Galatians 3:16-18; Eph. 2:12). Paul tells Gentile believers that through their baptism into Christ they are heirs of that same promise (Gal. 3:29; Eph. 3:6). This is a bold and daring idea in Paul’s theology, but it does have a foundation in the Scriptures. What I want to emphasize here is that Paul’s thinking is deeply immersed in the story of Israel and he cannot separate what God has done in Christ from that story. Paul always has the story of Israel central to his theology. Once you remove that story from your understanding of the Bible, which I am arguing the church has done, then you can think about it in ways that are foreign to what the authors meant. So the word “promise” in 2 Cor. 1 can then be taken in a trivial, self-centered way that has nothing to do with what Paul is talking about.

Paul’s point throughout his letters is that God’s covenant promises, God’s interest in and purpose for Israel, for the land, the city, the heavens and the earth, continue in Christ and find their affirmation in him. Jesus is dramatic proof of God’s eternal commitment to the promises God made to Israel. Those promises remain unfulfilled.

Jesus did not come to reveal new truths, new theological ideas. Jesus makes it clear that Israel had perfectly good revelation in the Law and the Prophets (Luke 16:29-31). Jesus came to announce that God’s promised rule in the world was now beginning to appear, and so Jesus called people to begin living that life of the world-to-come, to make it a present-day reality.

What Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for is not everlasting life or their soul’s salvation but for the coming of God’s kingdom, God’s effective rule, into this world. Jesus did not tell people, “Follow me so that you will go to heaven when you die.” He offered them a way of life in community, an abundant life, the life of God’s coming kingdom, the best possible way of life. He offered them what the rabbis call the life of *‘olam ha-ba*, the life of the world to come, what he called eternal life, now. Jesus said, you don’t have to wait for some far-off future or for an afterlife to experience the life God wants for you. The

Law and the Prophets have already told us what such life looks like and we are going to have a community that begins living that life here and now. We are going to show that life to the world and so be a light, bring joy and blessing to that world.

Such a life is only possible through wholehearted service of God and of others, of not seeking your own salvation but rather giving up your focus on yourself and redirecting your energies to living out the gospel, the good news of the kingdom, the good news of the kind of community God wants to establish in the world (Mark 8:34-35). Jesus called his disciples to stop worrying about their own needs and refocus their attention on the needs of others and trust God that in the process of caring for others, their own needs would be taken care of.

Heschel makes a fascinating comment on this idea. “If man was created to seek the purity of his soul, then his entire worship [is] for his own benefit” (*A Passion for Truth*, p. 264). Heschel sees a selfishness at the heart of the quest for personal salvation because it makes faith completely self-serving. “The essence of religion does not lie in the satisfaction of a human need. As long as man sees religion as a source of satisfaction for his own needs, it is not God whom he serves but his own self” (*God in Search of Man*, p. 350). Such worship, says Heschel, is idolatry.

To underscore this point I want to revisit something we looked at near the beginning of this lengthy journey of exploration of our Jewish roots. I presented a fascinating contrast between Noah and Abraham and I want to look again at that reading of their stories, a reading I found in the first book I read by Rabbi Sacks that made me sit up and take notice of this profound teacher. It made a deep impression on me and I still remember where I was when I first read it. Here we go.

We have all grown up with the Sunday school version of Noah, the perfectly righteous man in the midst of an utterly sinful world who does exactly what God commands him to do. Yet that childish telling of the story omits the biblical ending: Noah, passed out drunk and naked, shaming himself and his family (Gen. 9:20-23). What is the Bible doing with this story? Why does it end this way?

The rabbis wrestled hard with this question. Rather than ignoring it and insisting on Noah as a model of righteousness, they looked again at the narrative and noticed something odd. When the rain stops, the floodwaters recede, and the ark rests on dry land, you expect the family to emerge. Instead, Noah waits 40 days and then goes through an elaborate procedure to see if the flood is over, lasting a couple more months. Eventually, God has to order Noah out of the ark (Gen. 8:15-16). Why does Noah wait so long?

There is a startling midrash on this text:

Once the waters had abated, Noah should have left the ark. However, Noah said to himself, “I entered with God’s permission, as it says, ‘Go into the ark’ (Gen. 7:1). Shall I now leave without permission?” The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Is it permission, then, that you are seeking? Very well, then, here is permission, as it is said ‘Come out of the ark’” (8:16). Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai said: “If I had been there, I would have broken

down the ark and taken myself out” (*Tanhuma Buber, Noach* 13-14).

Rabbi Sacks notes the exasperation with Noah in this midrash. “*When it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission*” (*Genesis*, p. 45). Throughout the story, Noah has been silently obedient to God (6:22; 7:5, 9, 16). He does exactly what God commands him to do. Yet, Sacks argues, what the story of Noah tells us is that “obedience is not enough.” God wants us to develop maturity, responsibility, not simply unthinking obedience. Torah ends Noah’s story on a sour note so that we will go back and look more closely at what is missing from the story.

Ultimately in Torah it is Abraham, not Noah, who is the model of faith (and for the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus as well). When God sets about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sinfulness, Abraham does not just passively go along with it. He steps forward and challenges God: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Gen. 18:23-25).

Abraham continues to argue with God over the destruction of the wicked cities. If he had been in Noah’s shoes, he certainly would have tried to do something about the fate of the rest of the world. Noah was content to save only himself and his family. R. Sacks draws a devastating conclusion from Noah’s story: “Noah’s end—drunk, disheveled, an embarrassment to his children—eloquently tells us that if you save yourself while doing nothing to save the world, you do not even save yourself. Noah, so the narrative seems to suggest, could not live with the guilt of survival” (*Genesis*, p. 46). More than anything, God wants us to care passionately about the lives of others and about the world around us, not simply to be concerned for our own personal salvation.

The difference between Noah and Abraham is captured in another midrash by R. Yehudah bar Ilai (2nd century): “‘Noah walked with God’ (Gen. 6:9)—the meaning of this phrase can be understood by a parable. A king had two sons, one grown up, the other a child. To the child he said: ‘Walk with me.’ But to the adult son he said: ‘Walk before me.’ So it was that to Abraham, God said: ‘Because you are wholehearted, walk before me’ (Gen. 17:1). But of Noah, the Torah says that he ‘walked with God’” (*Bereshit Raba* 30:10). Noah was like a child who dutifully obeys his father, nothing more. Abraham was mature, grown up, able to walk ahead of God down the path God had set out, but doing so with his eyes open to the needs of others. He was even willing to challenge God, to argue with God when necessary, because he was deeply concerned about the world around him, not simply focused on his own salvation. The gospel is about a whole lot more than simply getting oneself saved.