

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 3/21/21

We have been talking about the importance of considering different points of view in order to arrive at a more complex and nuanced understanding of God's truth both in the world and when we read Scripture. An argument for the sake of Heaven, a sincere quest for truth, means not just by trying to figure things out on my own but rather taking into account the perspectives of others, discussing and debating with people who may see things very differently from me. And it means recognizing that same discussion and debate is going on within the Scriptures themselves.

Rabbi Sacks makes the same point in his essay "God Loves Those Who Argue." He says that "in Judaism there is something holy about argument. Why so? Because only God can see the totality of truth" (*Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 68). We humans only see fragments of the truth at any one time; we need the variety of viewpoints. You cannot get God's perspective on things with a simple linear sequence, with tunnel vision, with only one human point of view. Heschel asks, "Is it possible to have a living Torah without the struggle of opposites, without disputes, without the many permutations of ideas and outlooks?" (*Heavenly Torah*, p. 702). If Torah, if Scripture, is to be a living word, the word of the living God, a word that still speaks to us today, then we must accept the complexity of the way it communicates to us and not try to reduce it to one single point of view. We have to approach God's word with two eyes.

Heschel says we need to develop the skill to hear the words of both sides of an issue, because the other side has things to teach us, and the time may come when we need to use those insights to understand and apply the Word differently. In any debate there is always a minority report, a dissenting opinion, and that minority report still matters. Heschel says that one of the reasons that both sides matter is that even though the decision may be made at a particular time to accept one side as the way to follow, the time may come when circumstances may demand that we follow the other path. He quotes a fifteenth century Spanish rabbi, Joel ibn Shuaib: "It is inappropriate to judge matters the same way every time, for it will often happen at a given time that it is appropriate to rule leniently, and at another that stringency is called for." Rabbi ibn Shuaib goes on to argue that this is precisely why we have courts to decide how to apply the law to a specific set of circumstances.

Inevitably there are inequities that might arise from trying to apply religious laws the same way every time, he says, but Torah has a remedy for that: *chesed*, which "operates to rectify inequities" in the Law. The impartiality of laws, the absolute nature of truth claims, can be harsh at times and may not fit a particular set of circumstances. So law needs to be tempered with loving-kindness by the judges, by those who interpret the Law. This, I think, is precisely what Jesus argues about how we should understand the Law. Rabbi ibn Shuaib says that this does not undermine the authority of the Law. "It is rather a drawing near to God's will, God's intent, if not God's very words." (*Heavenly Torah*, p. 716).

Heschel here is arguing for the compassionate justice that we have seen is the essence of Torah's teaching. A *torah* of *chesed* does not view the Law as one-size-fits-all, but has a certain flexibility in how the laws are applied in individual circumstances. (In our next section, we will see an example of Jesus doing just that.) If the Word is a living word then it cannot be allowed to become a calcified fossil. Yes, we may have decided to follow the teachings of Hillel in the past, but the present situation calls for us to follow Shammai. Yes, Jesus said that divorce was a bad thing and not God's original intention for humanity. But there are some marriages that don't look like God was the one who had joined those partners together and forcing them to stay together would not be an act of *chesed*, of loving-kindness, neither for the couple nor for their children nor for the surrounding community. Yes God is loving and compassionate and forgiving, and there are times when we need to hear and proclaim that merciful word to individuals. But yes also God demands righteousness from his people and there are times when that demanding word is necessary.

Yet, says Heschel, even when there were differences of opinion among the rabbis like Hillel and Shammai, "the Torah never became two Torahs, for their intention was for the sake of heaven" (*Heavenly Torah*, p. 713). From God's perspective, the truth is one, but from our limited human perspective we see only partially, as the Apostle Paul says, reflections in a mirror (1 Cor. 13:12). We see only fragments of God's truth. The title of Heschel's book, literally *Torah from Heaven As Refracted through the Generations*, suggest this. A continual stream of light may be broken by a prism into a spectrum of colors. That is Heschel's central metaphor for God's revelation and for the way humans see God's light, God's truth. We can pursue the truth, like Hillel, like Heschel, like Rabbi Sacks, with humility and a sense of our own limitations as human beings, recognizing that there are other people who will be able to see things that we simply cannot see. God's truth cannot be reduced to something that will fit on a tract to hand out on street corners. It cannot be contained in a couple of pious clichés or simple outline of a "plan of salvation." God's truth challenges and stretches the very limits of our understanding.

Rabbi Sacks argues that the importance of being open to and appreciating more than one perspective comes from the very nature of justice itself. "Both the case for the prosecution and for the defence must be heard if justice is to be done and seen to be done. The pursuit of truth and justice requires the freedom to disagree....And where do we learn this from? From God Himself, who chose as His prophets people who were prepared to argue with Heaven for the sake of Heaven in the name of justice and truth" (*Life-Changing Ideas*, pp. 68f.). In this course we have seen how Abraham and Moses and Jeremiah and Habakkuk and Job all argued with God yet are seen as righteous men, as examples of faith and of faithfulness. If God is prepared to listen to us and even at times change his mind, then surely we can follow His example.

Rabbi Sacks concludes his discussion of the topic with this summary of his main point: "***When you learn to listen to views different from your own, realising that they are not threatening but enlarging, then you have discovered the life-changing idea of argument for the sake of Heaven***" (p. 69). Now Rabbi Sacks was no modern liberal relativist. He was an Orthodox Jew, a firm believer in the major tenets of traditional rabbinic Judaism, yet his deep humility even about his own strong convictions gave him an openness to other

voices both within and outside of Judaism. It was precisely that humility and that openness to other perspectives that enabled him to communicate more clearly the truths he held so dearly and bring blessing to others even as his own understanding was enriched and enlarged. He was a living testimony to the power of this life-changing idea of argument for the sake of Heaven.

Listening honestly and openly to Scripture's multiple voices will challenge us. Doing the same for other voices in the Church and in the world will also challenge us. But if we enter into the discussion and debate with love and humility, doing so for the sake of Heaven and not our own egos or need to be right, we will grow and be enlarged in our faith and in our understanding, and we will find new ways to communicate effectively with those who have views different from our own.

Closing Reflections

1. I have had two remarkable learning experiences that illustrate this kind of thinking. When I was at BC doing graduate studies in Irish literature, I sat in on an undergraduate course called "Irish Literature and Politics" that was co-taught by two professors: one history and one literature. They sat up front together and presented what at times were two very different perspectives on the complex and divisive topic of Ireland's cultures and politics. They would sometimes even get into a very heated debate. I doubt that the students had ever heard two professors arguing *as a way of giving a lecture*. I certainly hadn't. And they didn't try to resolve all the issues but left them for the students to wrestle with. It was one of the best classes I have ever had. The literature professor was my advisor and she happened to be Jewish, which is probably not a coincidence.

The second was a study tour of Israel that I went on several years ago. It was a graduate course from a Catholic seminary in Chicago, called "Abraham's Children." We had Christian, Jewish, and Muslim professors who each gave parallel lectures on the same topics: God, revealed truth, worship, community, etc. We also met with a variety of people there from all three faith traditions, who gave us multiple perspectives on the very complicated and volatile situation in Israel. Again the students were left to wrestle with the various viewpoints that we were hearing. Such an approach is unusual but vitally necessary if there is to be any real understanding of the Holy Land or progress made in resolving the seemingly endless conflicts. As long as the arguments there remain about power, they will have no lasting result.

Both experiences illustrated for me a different way of looking at the world. I can no longer accept one-sided views about Israel, or Ireland. These experiences modeled for me what it means to argue for the sake of Heaven.

2. Years ago in the Wednesday night Bible study, when a difficult question would arise, pastor would sometimes answer by saying, "That is one of the things on my list to ask God when we get to Heaven." But one night, Sis. Jackie Jones, of blessed memory, objected to pastor's response. She said, "Pastor, I don't have any list like that. When I get there I am going to be too busy praising Him to bother with such questions." At first that just struck me as pious nonsense. I too have a list like pastor's and over the years that list has grown. Paul says that while we only have partial knowledge now, eventually we will know God

more fully. As the old song says, we will understand it better by and by. And there is nothing wrong with asking questions. Sis. Jackie actually asked a lot of good, hard questions in Bible Study. But I came to appreciate what Sis. Jackie said as well. We are human beings and will always be human beings and that means that we can never fully comprehend God or God's ways. Our understanding will always be limited and there are questions that may never be answered. Worshipping God and doing God's will do not require having all the answers, even in Heaven.

This is why I like the AME doctrinal statement about the Bible: "*The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation*" (AME Articles of Religion). The Bible tells us all that we need to know but not necessarily all that we would like to know. The Bible doesn't have all the answers.

3. One of the silver linings in this pandemic for me has been the opportunity for something I have long argued was important and should be a part of every church: feedback and discussion after the sermon. The way most churches are structured (Rev. Mariama's is a notable exception), the sermon is a lecture, a monologue. But now because of Zoom, every week we have the opportunity after the sermon to talk back, to ask questions, to reflect, even to challenge what the preacher has said. So the sermon becomes a dialogue and is much richer for that inclusion of other voices into the conversation. It mystifies me that more Bethelites do not take advantage of this unique opportunity. It is something I am hoping we can continue in some form when we go back to meeting in person.

4. What does this have to teach us about how we approach the deep divisions in the Church itself? How can we adopt the model of debate and argument that we have seen with Hillel: humility, love, and a willingness to hear God speaking through those with whom we disagree? Can we really embrace Rabbi Sacks' life-changing idea, that we learn to think of different views not as a threat but as enlarging our own understanding of God and the world? Is it possible to have unity without uniformity in the Church, rather than just continuing to split off into separate groups? (This was Paul's main pastoral issue with the churches he was writing to. Paul's letters are not about how to "get saved," but rather how to "get along.") Can we somehow learn to argue for the sake of Heaven so that our debates will be productive and not just power struggles that end up dividing us even further?

5. In this course I have been arguing that Christians have been reading the Bible with only one eye, the eye of historic Christian teaching and theology and piety, and that by cutting ourselves off from our Jewish roots, our reading and our theology have been greatly diminished and even at times led astray. I have attempted to introduce you all to another perspective, also ancient and rooted in the Scriptures, as a way of giving us a greater depth of field in the way we see the Bible, a more complex vision of the truth. I am not saying that I agree with everything the rabbis have said, nor that I disagree with everything Christian theologians have said. I am arguing that God's truth is more complex than either tradition is able to say.

Ultimately I am asking if we can come to see both these and those, both the words of Moses and the words of Jesus, both Judaism and Christianity, as the words of the Living God, as one Torah even though it has been refracted through a great number of human lenses throughout the generations. Can we come to see Jesus as authoritative and significant and wise precisely because of his Jewishness, rather than in contrast to it? Can we see Paul as a devout Pharisee wrestling with how his tradition speaks to Gentiles rather than a 16th century Protestant reformer who simply rejects that tradition? And can we learn to pursue the arguments we continue to have with Jews as arguments for the sake of Heaven rather than as a power struggle for who is right? Can we come to pursue them as arguments that will indeed have enduring value and serve to teach all of us to see things that we cannot see by ourselves?

I pray that our vision and our lives may continue to be enriched and enlarged by this discussion.