

Our Jewish Roots: Biblical Insights from the Rabbis

In a 1949 student essay, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: “Jesus was a Jew. It is impossible to understand Jesus outside of the race in which he was born. The Christian Church has tended to overlook its Judaic origins, but the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine. He shared the experiences of his fellow-countrymen. So as we study Jesus we are wholly in a Jewish atmosphere.... There is no justification of the view that Jesus was attempting to find [*sic*] a church distinct from the Synagogue. The gospels themselves bear little trace of such a view. Throughout the gospels we find Jesus accepting both the Temple and the Synagogue.... It is quite evident that Jesus had profound respect for the law as did every true Jew. He never opposed it or hinted that it would pass away.” This was an astonishing thing for a 20 year old American seminary student raised by a Baptist preacher to say. German scholarship had dominated NT studies for over a century, and for obvious reasons had tried to distance their treatment of Jesus from his Jewish heritage (see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, for an extensive discussion of this.) Yet this point evidently mattered enough to King that he deviated from the assigned topic in order to include this paragraph in his essay.

King is partially quoting Howard Thurman’s book *Jesus and the Disinherited* [underlined words, without attribution], which had just been published that year. Thurman begins his discussion of the meaning of Jesus with the crucial point that Jesus was a Jew. “How different might have been the story of the last two thousand years on this planet grown old from suffering if the link between Jesus and Israel had never been severed” (p. 6). I think this fundamental insight into who Jesus was informed King’s reading of the Scriptures and shaped his sense of calling and mission. It is the foundation for his inclusion of Jewish leaders carrying Torah scrolls in the civil rights marches and for his close friendship with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In other words, the civil rights movement had Jewish roots.

Last year, we looked at how Christian theology and our understanding of the Scriptures have been heavily influenced and shaped by the antiJudaism of our tradition, which Thurman and King are lamenting. We saw that the story we tell about ourselves, how we understand who we are as Christians, essentially omits the Hebrew Scriptures. Our theology jumps from Genesis 3 to Matthew 1 (or perhaps more precisely to Romans 1). God created the world, humans sinned, Jesus came to deliver us. That’s the so-called “Roman Road” to salvation, which I argued is a flawed and incomplete caricature of biblical truth. We have lost our ability to read and understand the Scriptures properly because of our attempt to define Christianity apart from the story of Israel. We have cut ourselves off from our Jewish roots.

The New Testament is not the Bible. It cannot stand on its own and never was meant to stand on its own. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, is the foundation upon which the NT is built. So the teaching of the NT understood in isolation from the Old is bound to be distorted and incomplete, which is reflected in the unbalanced and anemic nature of much that passes for Christian teaching and faith in our world. ***The problem for most Christians is that they have been trying to live on the second floor of a building with no foundation.***

As in all the classes I have been teaching, I have been arguing that we desperately need to return to our Jewish roots, which Paul declares provide the rich sap that supports and nourishes our spiritual lives (Rom. 11:18). In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus makes what I think for most Christians is the astonishing claim that all you need to know for salvation is in Moses and the Prophets, and those who won't listen to them won't listen to someone who rises from the dead (Luke 16:29-31). When Jesus is asked about eternal life, he points people to Torah (Matt. 19:16; Mark 10:17; Luke 10:25; 18:18).

So in this class I want to go back to Torah, and talk about some of its central themes, which are fundamental for understanding God and God's purposes in the world. And I want to look at Torah from the perspective of Jewish rabbis, rather than Christian theologians, to help us rethink our own biblical traditions. For the past several years, most of my biblical study and reflection has been with the aid of Jewish writers, who have deepened my appreciation of the rabbi Jesus and of the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus. The anti-Judaism of our Protestant tradition in particular continues to infect Christian writers and preachers, and I want to try to take us in a different direction to help us think about the Bible in new ways. We are going to listen to the rabbis.

I. Who Are The Rabbis?

Gentile Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism both developed out of the first century biblically-based religion of the Jews and share that as a common root. What we think of as orthodox Christianity, the fundamental beliefs now accepted by virtually all Christian groups, was not clearly defined until the 4th century. We have seen how the early church "fathers," the theologians responsible for shaping the Christian creeds and doctrinal formulations, were strongly anti-Jewish, and so Christianity came to be defined over against Judaism, in stark contrast to it, and indeed, as a new religion that was harshly critical of Judaism.

While Christianity was in the process of formation, Judaism was also undergoing dramatic changes. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD was a major blow to historic Judaism. In the aftermath of a second Jewish revolt in 135 AD, the Romans executed Jewish leaders and teachers, banned Jews from visiting Jerusalem, made it a pagan city, and outlawed the practice of Judaism in Judea. Over a million Jews died in the two uprisings. Biblical scholars and teachers ("rabbis") were scattered and the rabbinic schools were devastated. This seems to have been the primary reason for a rabbi named Judah the Prince, around 200 AD, to begin preserving in writing the teachings of other rabbis from previous centuries, teachings which have become known as the Oral Law. This compilation of rabbinic interpretations of Torah is called the Mishnah. In the following 300 years the Mishnah was studied carefully by succeeding generations of rabbis, who eventually wrote down their discussions of the Mishnah's laws in a series of books known as the Talmud. Rabbis in Palestine produced a Talmud in around 400 AD, and over a century later the leading Babylonian rabbis produced a much more extensive Talmud, which became the authoritative source of the Oral Law and the basis for rabbinic Judaism. So the Talmud contains commentaries on commentaries, and has been the subject of ongoing rabbinic commentaries ever since. It is not a work of systematic theology but a

compilation of numerous voices in discussion and debate about the Scriptures and their application.

Why the need for an oral law? Torah itself is silent on many important subjects, such as how to conduct a wedding ceremony. It has commandments that are general but need more specifics, such as how exactly to keep the Sabbath holy or what constitutes work. What does it mean to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6)? Ancient commandments need updating in the face of changing times. This is especially true of commandments that presume an agricultural economy. How do they apply to urban dwellers in the Roman Empire (or in our own)? What might it mean for someone who owns a small business or factory to leave the edges of the field unharvested for the poor? Torah also has passages that are difficult or obscure. Why was Cain's sacrifice rejected and Abel's accepted? Just what was the sin that prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land? Is the demand to take an eye for an eye to be carried out literally?

We see debates about the oral law already taking place in the New Testament between Jesus and other Jewish teachers. Jesus sometimes rejects the Pharisees' interpretation and application of Torah as "human tradition" and yet he is perfectly willing at times to offer an interpretation of Torah that goes beyond the text itself, as in his teaching on divorce. Those discussions and debates about Jewish practice and the application of Torah to contemporary life continue in rabbinic circles to this day, as new issues and questions arise. (When I was in Israel a few years ago, we were served a tabbouleh made with quinoa and told that a rabbinic council had finally decided that quinoa was kosher for Passover).

Christians, too, continue to debate both major issues (abortion, homosexual behavior) and minor ones (women wearing pants to church). Christianity is as much controlled by human tradition as Judaism. It is human tradition that we meet on Sundays for worship or have communion on the first Sunday of the month. It is human tradition that places the sermon at the center of our worship (rather than prayers as in the Jewish tradition or the Eucharist in the Catholic and Orthodox services). It is human tradition that we hold Sunday School classes or expect a pastor to officiate at a wedding. One cannot escape asking such ongoing questions and retreat into a simplistic mindset that mistakenly thinks, "Well, I just believe and follow what the Bible says."

Nowadays, we think of rabbis primarily as leaders of Jewish congregations, much like Christian pastors. But historically that has not been the case. More often, rabbis have been biblical scholars and teachers, and it is to those teachers that we are now turning.

II. Why the Rabbis?

For the past several years I have been reading primarily Jewish writers on Scripture, because I find them refreshing, challenging, and inspirational. They have a deep concern for the Scriptures as God's Word, and each word, down to the smallest letter, matters to them (as it did to Jesus: Matt. 5:18). They also have a rich knowledge of the biblical languages, of the history of understanding of its key words, of nuances and overtones for those words, and of verbal connections with other passages. They delight in asking hard, probing questions about the text, and see debate as not simply producing one monolithic "truth" but as illuminating the complex and rich nature of biblical truth. While there is

much rabbinic literature devoted to minute details of legal interpretation, there are also plenty of rabbis who concern themselves with what Jesus called the “weightier matters of the law,” the big picture presented in Torah and the rest of the Scriptures. Reading the rabbis has made me much more aware of the Jewishness of Jesus, how deeply rooted he was in Torah and the Prophets. And they have caused me to rethink some of our own religious traditions and understanding of Scripture. Reading the rabbis has given me new perspectives on God, the world, and humanity, as well as on my own faith.

Here’s an example of a rabbi confronting a difficult text. One of the most troubling verses in the Bible for me is Psalm 37:25—“I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for food.” People at Bethel, who are well-provided for, regularly quote this verse without thinking about it. Every time I hear it I think, “Well I have.” How can anyone read this verse and think it is literally true or quote it as if it will guarantee them protection from trouble? That is precisely the kind of thinking that the book of Job argues against.

The psalmist may well have meant this just the way it sounds, and if so, that assertion is problematic and needs to be handled very carefully. But Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1995), one of the most important 20th century Orthodox teachers, noted the problem and could not accept the unthinking piety of this verse. He looked closely at its words and proposed that we understand the verb “I see” (*ra’iti*) in this verse in the same sense as it is used in Esther 8:6—“How can I bear to see (*ra’iti*) disaster fall on my people?” Esther is asking, “How can I just stand by and watch disaster come and not try to do anything about it?” So R. Soloveitchik argues that the verse in the Psalms should be translated: “I was young and now am old, but I never merely *stood still and watched* while the righteous was forsaken or his children begged for food.” So instead of a verse about passively waiting for God to take care of people (or worse, assuming that if people are starving, they must not be righteous), it becomes a verse about personal responsibility. This, I would argue, is one of the chief virtues of reading the rabbis. Their emphasis on our responsibility to change the world and people’s lives is a refreshing contrast to what I often hear from Christians, that we pray for God to act and make everything all right. When the disciples come to rabbi Jesus and tell him the crowd of people that has been listening to his teaching all day is hungry, wanting Jesus to do something about it, Jesus says bluntly, “You yourselves give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37).

Another example: some rabbis have noted a problem or even contradiction in the book of Deuteronomy. As the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses speaks to them of God’s love and their responsibilities. He is particularly concerned that their rebelliousness and obstinacy—“you are a stiff-necked people” (9:6)—will keep them from loving God wholeheartedly. In order for them to fulfill their calling and receive God’s blessing, something dramatic will have to change. He commands them: “Circumcise the foreskin of your heart and stiffen your neck no more” (10:16). Circumcision of the heart clearly refers to a radical interior renewal that makes love and obedience fully possible (see Lev. 26:41; Jer. 4:4; 9:25).

Note that this is not meant to replace outward physical circumcision. Paul is basing his argument in Romans 2:25-29 on this kind of passage, not to argue against physical circumcision, which he affirms does have value (2:25; 3:1-2), but to say that outward show

is not enough. The whole of rabbinic teaching agrees with him. Paul's underlining the importance of an inner transformation is not a "Christian" idea in contrast with a wooden Jewish legalism that emphasizes external rituals. As we will see, genuine heartfelt love for God and others is central to Torah's message, as Jesus and the rest of the NT also affirm.

Yet later in Deuteronomy Moses tells the people that "the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants so that you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your being (soul) in order that you may live" (30:6). There is a tension, if not contradiction, between these two passages. Who performs the surgery, humans or God?

Paying close attention to the differences in the actual wording of the two verses, some rabbis found a different meaning in the human act ("circumcise the foreskin of your heart") and the divine one ("God will circumcise your heart"), seeing the first as an initial removal of obstacles to loving God, and the second as referring to a deeper, more permanent change. Most modern commentators do not differentiate between the two (the NIV omits the word "foreskin" in the first passage), but I think the rabbis give us food for thought—the process of change in the human heart is complicated and difficult and does not happen overnight.

In his reflections on the book of Deuteronomy, modern-day Rabbi Shai Held points out that in Deut. 30 we actually do find this two-step process: first a return to the Lord on the people's part (v. 2) that precedes God's circumcision of their hearts. So on the one hand humans are responsible for changing, or at least beginning to change, their behavior and attitudes. (The Hebrew verb "turn" or "return" is regularly used to mean "repent," and in rabbinic literature refers to turning your life in a new direction, a fundamental change in one's way of being and acting, not simply feeling sorry for something you have done). But in Deut. 30 God also gets involved in the surgery.

This double vision is a prime example of the rabbinic principle that "one who attempts to purify himself is assisted [by God] in the process" (*Shabbat* 104a). The Pharisee Saul of Tarsus shares this Talmudic perspective about the interaction of God's will and our will: "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13). It is not enough to pray for God to wave a magic wand and change us. We must do the hard work ourselves, knowing that God is with us and supporting us and leading us in that effort. It takes both strenuous human effort and profound divine blessing to transform the human heart. In order for the human heart to open and soften, both our will and God's grace are necessary. Deuteronomy teaches that we are called to open our hearts and return to God even as we acknowledge that to complete the process of turning our lives around we need God's help.

What fascinates me about Rabbi Held's commentary on this passage is what he says next. He contends that some Jewish thinkers write as if humanity has the capacity for limitless self-transformation. Many modern Jews, says the rabbi, find it difficult to acknowledge the limits we face in trying to reshape who we are. We live in a culture that values autonomy, that has produced a profusion of "self-help" philosophies, and we see it as weakness to acknowledge that we can't do it on our own. He says that Jews, if they were to allow themselves to admit they cannot do it alone and are in need of God's grace, may reflexively fear sounding "too Christian" (Held, vol. 2, pp. 220-221).

This confirms something I have long believed: that as Christianity and Judaism parted ways, each group was looking over their shoulder trying not to be like the other. Essential aspects of biblical truth were overlooked or downplayed in order not to sound “too Christian” or “too Jewish.” Rather than learning from one another, barriers were erected to keep out the other side. Christians, heavily influenced by Greek philosophical dualism that elevated the interior (soul) over the exterior (body), saw little value in outer “works.” And as Christian persecution of Jews grew, it only confirmed for Jews that when Christians talked about love and grace, they didn’t have a clue what those meant in practice. So I am proposing that we Christians need to take down those barriers (or perhaps climb over them) in order to begin learning from those on the other side. We need to take hold of a Jew and go with him, to learn from him who God is (Zechariah 8:23).

A disclaimer: I am not suggesting that what I am presenting is *the* “Jewish” perspective on Torah. There is no such thing, although as with the majority of Christians of various denominational differences, there are commonalities among Jewish readers of Scripture and perspectives that have come to be embraced by a majority of rabbis. Some of what I present here might be considered “mainstream” Jewish thinking, but some of the insights belong to specific rabbis who I have found to be helpful both in reading Torah and understanding the NT. Judaism contains a multitude of voices, some of whom are given greater authority than others. But all are part of the ongoing questioning and discussion and debate that seeks to connect our lives with the Scriptures. We need to include those voices in our own discussions.

III. Torah: The Big Picture

I want to begin with a brief discussion of some of the major, overarching themes of Torah before we look more closely at insights on individual passages.

A. The Canonical Story

Modern biblical commentators regularly note that the Bible is not a theological or philosophical treatise, not an ordered exposition of religious ideas (what to think) or ethics (how to act). Rather, the primary literary mode of the Bible is narrative, story. Indeed, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says that while philosophy is truth as a logical system, Torah is truth as story, philosophy in the narrative mode. Even though we commonly translate “torah” as “law,” in fact the Bible does something unique with its laws: they are embedded in a narrative, the story of Israel. You cannot understand those laws in isolation from that narrative. Biblical law is never understood apart from history, from the community of faith, and from an ongoing relationship with God.

Yet even though Christians and Jews share the same set of sacred writings, the ones we call the Old Testament, the larger narrative that each group has constructed from these writings is very different (see handout on Scriptures). The Jewish Bible is divided into three major sections: the Law (*torah*), the Prophets (*nevi'im*) and the Writings (*kethuvim*), known collectively by the acronym *Tanakh*. What is curious about the narrative shape of these writings is their sense of incompleteness, of more to come. Torah ends with Israel on the verge of entering the Promised Land rather than with its conquest. And Tanakh as a whole ends with 2 Chronicles’ call to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to Jerusalem

and rebuild the temple. Both end with a sense that while yes, God has delivered them from difficult circumstances, there is more yet to be done.

The Christian Bible arranged the order of these books differently and placed Malachi last, ending with the promise of Elijah coming as a herald of the great day of the Lord, which leads seamlessly into the New Testament narrative of the life of Jesus. Of course the Christian Bible ends with the coming of the new heavens and new earth after all the bad guys have been defeated. Like a Hollywood epic, the story is all wrapped up neatly with a bow on top. So the narrative focus in Judaism is on the journey through the wilderness, the experience of exile, and the difficult struggle to build a godly society here on earth, while Christians far too often focus on the future heavenly glories, on “goin’ up yonder,” on “crossing that river,” on the world to come rather than on this world. This, I contend, has shaped the very different ways in which Jews and Christians have understood who they are and what their mission is in this world.

I have argued that the essential Christian narrative, succinctly summed up in the so-called “Roman Road to Salvation,” omits the story of Israel entirely, and as such is a gross distortion of biblical truth as story. Reading the rabbis, both ancient and modern, provides for Christians a necessary counterbalance to the private, personal, inward spirituality of American Protestantism. “Judaism is not a faith transacted in the privacy of the believer’s soul. It is a social faith. It is about networks of relationship. It is about families, communities, and ultimately a nation, in which each of us, great and small, has a role to play” (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 130). This is the fundamental biblical truth taught first in Torah and worked out in the rest of the Scriptures. That truth is embraced, not abandoned, by the NT. “Read Torah and you will immediately note that it is not a formula for the salvation of the soul or the acquisition of inner peace. It is about [social] welfare and the treatment of employees, . . . justice and the impartial application of the law, charity and the alleviation of poverty. It is about the construction of a society” (Sacks, *Numbers*, p. 61).

The central story of Torah, the Exodus, is about politics and people, the misuse of power and economic slavery, human rights and minority rights, civil disobedience, and what freedom really means. The story of the Exodus is as much political and social as it is theological. Redemption is not about being saved from my sins but about being saved from the sins of others—from an oppressive government and from the idolatry of the state. Salvation is not a future heavenly hope but a present-day earthly reality. As Rabbi Sacks says, it is about the construction of a society, an alternative society that is radically different from the pagan empires of the world, be they Egypt, Babylon, Rome, or America. Jesus called that society the Kingdom of God, and in order to understand what Jesus meant by that central concept in his teaching, we need to go back to Torah.

B. Torah’s Revolutionary Narrative

The stories we tell about ourselves and our community give shape to our identity and our sense of purpose in the world. The story Torah tells is foundational for everything else in the Bible. We have seen that the Christian story differs significantly from the Jewish story, and essentially ignores the whole biblical story of Israel in our self-understanding. Because of that, I would argue that the Christian story is seriously diminished and limited.

I want to take a fresh look at the Biblical story to help us rethink the story we tell about ourselves.

The five books of Moses actually have a careful literary structure:

Genesis: Prologue—the prehistory of Israel

Exodus: journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai

Leviticus: at Mt. Sinai

Numbers: journey from Mt. Sinai to the Jordan

Deuteronomy: Epilogue—looking to the future of the nation Israel

The main focus of Genesis is on the creation of the human family and their struggle to become a family. All of its stories are about family in one way or another: marital relationships, sibling rivalry, parental favoritism, conflict and reconciliation. Eventually the focus of the story narrows to one particular family, Abraham's, who will bear the responsibility for bringing God's blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3). Exodus to Deuteronomy traces the difficult path of this family becoming a nation, their march from slavery to freedom. There are numerous parallels between the books of Exodus and Numbers, but there is one main difference. Exodus is about a journey from, from Egypt and slavery. Numbers is a journey to, to the land and nationhood. Exodus is about negative freedom, that of a liberated slave who now has no one to give him orders. Numbers moves towards a positive freedom, which is not being able to do whatever you want (anarchy) but freedom to do what is right, a law-governed liberty. "What matters in Exodus is how the people escape from Pharaoh. What matters in Numbers is how they rise to the challenge of self-rule and responsibility" (Sacks, *Numbers*, p. 9). This literary structure helps us understand the place of the law in the life of Israel. The law defines their relationship, their covenant with God; it is the constitution for who they are as a nation, and it illustrates what freedom means. The law cannot be understood outside of or apart from the narrative of redemption, apart from the story of a loving and gracious God.

So the foundational story in the Bible is about God's redemption of his people, a revolutionary story about how the Creator of the universe liberated an undistinguished group of enslaved people from the power of the greatest and longest-lived empire of all time. It is a transformative story of hope, which is recounted each year at Passover, the "eternal critique of power used by humans to coerce and diminish their fellow humans" (Sacks, *Ceremony*, p. 167). For most of history, the gods have been seen to be on the side of the ruling powers. Pharaohs and Caesars and Chinese emperors were thought to have divine attributes, and European kings in the Middle Ages were thought to be established by divine right. Christians in America still misuse Romans 13 to that effect. Religion has been used to put a divine stamp of approval on the status quo. Yet the shocking truth in Torah is that the one true God, the creator of the world, intervened in history to liberate enslaved immigrants from the oppressive powers of the state.

Torah sharply rejects the permanent economic hierarchies that characterize societies like Egypt. One of its greatest concerns is to lay the foundation for a society in which desperate poverty and degrading treatment of the less fortunate are unknown. The message of the Law, hammered home again by the prophets, and central to the teaching of Jesus, is

that deep-seated economic inequity offends against the fundamental values of righteousness and justice, the “way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19). This is who God is, says Torah, and this is what it means to follow Him. For Christians to ignore this or spiritualize it all or redefine redemption and godliness in other terms is irresponsible and unbiblical.

While the Exodus is central to Israel’s identity, their story begins in Genesis with the covenant God makes with Abraham. God promises to make of Abraham’s family a great nation and give them a land of their own, but this does not happen easily or overnight. The road to the Promised Land goes through Egypt and exile, through the Red Sea and the wilderness (Gen. 15:12-16). “Why so?” asks Rabbi Sacks. “The journey to the Promised Land had to pass through Egypt because Israel was to construct a society that would be the antithesis of Egypt. Therefore they had to know Egypt, experience Egypt, feel it in their bones, carry it with them as an indelible memory that they would hand on to all future generations. They had to experience what it was like to be on the wrong side of power: strangers, outsiders...people without rights who were subject to the whim of a merciless ruler” (*Ceremony*, p. 173).

Until they knew first-hand what it was like to live under Egyptian rule, they could not construct a society that was different. Throughout Torah, when Moses explains to the people the reason for a commandment, he often does so by asking them to remember what it felt like to live in a society where things were otherwise (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 5:12-15; 10:19; 15:12-15; 24:17-18, 21-22). They are not to mistreat foreigners, immigrants, because they know the heart of a foreigner, they have suffered the social, political, and economic discrimination personally (Ex. 23:9). The re-enacting of the Egypt experience every year at Passover is meant to establish and develop for each new generation that sense of empathy with the powerless and oppressed.

Perhaps the most striking commandment based on Israel’s experience in Egypt is one that does not seem to follow logically: “Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land” (Deut. 23:7). One might assume that the years of oppression and slavery in Egypt would produce resentment and bitterness towards Egyptians. Yet Moses insists that they should not harbor such attitudes. Why? R. Sacks explains: “A people driven by hate are not—cannot be—free. Had the people carried with them a burden of hatred and a desire for revenge, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would not have taken Egypt out of the Israelites. They would still be there, bound by chains of anger as restricting as any metal. To be free you have to let go of hate” (*Exodus*, p. 93). Israel is expected to turn their painful experience of being outsiders, of being oppressed and hatred, into empathy for others, even for their enemies. Centuries later Jeremiah would tell the exiles in Babylon the same thing: that they should pray for Babylon’s peace and well-being (*shalom*) because it is in Babylon’s *shalom* that they will find their own *shalom* (Jer. 29:7 KJV; the NIV’s translation of this whole passage is terrible). When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he is affirming this fundamental principle of Torah and the Prophets.

This commandment is reflected in what to me is the most astonishing part of the Passover ritual in Judaism: intentionally spilling some of the wine. The Passover Seder is structured around four cups of wine, each with a specific meaning, which are to be drunk as a sign of the joy of God’s redemption. At one point, as the ten plagues are recited,

participants are expected to spill drops of wine from their cup. While there are many explanations for this ancient tradition, some rabbis affirm that it signifies that our cup of joy is not full because of the sufferings of the Egyptians that were part of God's redemption of Israel. They connect this to the saying, "Do not rejoice at the downfall of your enemy" (Prov. 24:17). The Talmud offers an astonishing *midrash* on the parting of the Reed Sea: "At that time the ministering angels wanted to sing a song of praise before the Holy One, blessed be He, but He rebuked them, saying, 'My handiwork [i.e., the Egyptians] is drowning in the sea and you wish to sing a song before me?'" (*Sanhedrin* 39b). God, says the Talmud, does not rejoice in the death of the wicked, because they are still his creatures, his handiwork. Punishment may be necessary, but it is not a cause for joy.

Israel is commanded to remember their experience in Egypt so that they will not behave the same way towards others, so that they will have a "gut-feeling" (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word for compassion) that shapes their morality and their politics. And all the prophets, from Moses to Jeremiah, proclaim God's insistence that if they ever forget it and act like Egyptians, they will be forced to relive the experience of persecution and exile again in order to relearn the lesson.

So Torah, the foundational document of our faith, delineates the hard work necessary for the creation of an alternative society in this world, a society that worships and serves a God who liberates the oppressed and loves those, like the Israelites themselves, who are insignificant in the eyes of the world (Deut. 7:7). In modern terms, God did not choose an empire like China or the US but rather a small people like Honduras or Ghana to be the bearers of his light to the world.

I don't think it is a coincidence that the crucifixion took place right as the Passover remembrance of God's liberation of his people from Egypt was being celebrated. At the center of the story of the cross is another brutal empire whose fundamental nature as part of the principalities and powers opposed to God is exposed by the injustice Jesus suffered. The Bible spends little time focusing on the physical suffering of the crucifixion but much time highlighting the power games and political cynicism that led to the execution of an innocent man by the government in collusion with the religious authorities. Forty years later, the Jews were to experience the same Roman brutality in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and out of that tragedy they began to figure out how to live counter-culturally and without power in a world whose values were opposed to all that God had taught them. Christians, on the other hand, soon came to embrace the power of Empire and made Caesar and his armies members of the church. They were shortly to become, in the eyes of the Jews, just another Egypt, another Babylon, another Rome.

So when we want to understand what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God," we have to go back to Torah and the story of God's liberation of his people from the power of Empire. That story of God's mission to redeem the world continues to this day, and at some point we will have to ask how Jesus fits into that story, but for now we need to look more closely at how that story began.

C. God's Faith in Us

We are so familiar with the creation story in Genesis that it is hard for us to read it with fresh eyes. We have been given an interpretation of it that fits with the Christian system: God created a perfect world, humans screwed up and the whole of creation became corrupted, and so one day God will have to come remake the world. In the meantime God sent Jesus to provide forgiveness for our sins so that we can go to heaven when we die. I have become convinced that virtually nothing in this understanding of the Bible is adequate; at best, it contains some half-truths. I want to take another look at Genesis, with the help of the rabbis, to provide a new perspective on this familiar story.

Some people in our day ask the question: given the way the world is, how can there be a God? The ancient rabbis asked the opposite question: give what we know of God, how can there be a world? I want to connect two versions of that question from the rabbis in order to think more carefully about God and creation.

1. One of the things that I particularly like about the rabbis is that they read the text closely and confront difficult issues and problems that are raised by the text. Looking at Genesis 1, a 16th century rabbi whose ideas have had a profound effect on Judaism, R. Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1534-72), posed the simple yet mind-boggling question: if God exists, how does the world exist? If God is infinite, how is there room for anything else? How was it possible for God to create something outside of himself? Luria's radical answer was that God must have contracted into himself a bit, intentionally withdrawn or limited himself, in order to make space for the world and for humanity. Let's let that idea sit for a bit and marinate in our minds.

2. The Talmud contains a much earlier *midrash*, an imaginative story told to help understand a text, which raises a further question: why would God want to create humanity, knowing what a mess they will make of the world? In Gen. 1, God proceeds to create the world with a series of proclamations: "Let there be..." Yet when we come to the sixth day with the creation of humans, there is a significant change in this orderly text. "Let us make humankind..." (1:26). The rabbis ask, why the change in language? Who is God talking to? The traditional answer has been that the Bible makes reference to a kind of heavenly council that God from time to time consults about his decisions (see 1 Kings 22:19-22; Job 1:6 ff., Psalm 82:1; Jer. 23:18). Often these are seen as angelic beings, and the *midrash* envisions the angels objecting to God's plan to create humans because of what humans will do. God destroys the first two groups of angels who object, so seeing this, the third group tells God to do whatever he wishes. After the evils of the time of the Flood and the corruption of Babel, the angels ask God, "'Did not the first angels speak correctly?' God replied: 'Even to your old age I am the same and even to your grey hairs I will bear with you' (Is. 46:4)" (*Sanhedrin* 38b).

What does this mean? To understand the significance of the quote from Isaiah, you have to go to that passage to see its context. (By the way, this is true as well for when Jesus and Paul quote the Bible. They are never merely using isolated verses as proof texts, but rather, like the rabbis, assume that we know the Bible well enough to understand the context of the quote.) God is declaring to Israel that despite their waywardness, despite the sin that has led to their exile in Babylon, God continues to be the same God who gave birth to them and who will continue to bear with them, continue to support them, continue to care for them, like a mother does for the child she has carried in her womb (v. 3). In other

words, God expresses his willingness to patiently put up with human sinfulness in the hope that his creation will turn back to him and be saved.

Rabbi Sacks says that this tells us something profoundly important about God. Torah at its heart teaches “the daring idea that more than we have faith in God, God has faith in us” (*To Heal*, p. 12). Sacks quotes an ancient translation of Deut. 32:4, which speaks literally of “a God of faith” (although most English translations understand this to mean “faithfulness”). The rabbinic commentary states: “‘A God of faith’—He who had faith in the universe and created it” (*Sifrei, Haazinu*, 307). Creation, says Sacks, was an act of faith on the part of God. “God as we encounter him in Torah takes a risk, monumental in its implications. He creates one being, *Homo sapiens*, capable of being itself creative. He creates, that is to say, a being in His own image” (*Deuteronomy*, p. 324). Humans are capable of thought, language and free choice, including the choice to rebel against God. Granting freedom to humans, creating them in his image, was an immense act of self-limitation. God knows that Cain is angry and may attack his brother, so he gives Cain a warning and a choice, but he does not prevent Cain from committing murder (Gen. 4:6-8). That is the price of freedom. God’s involvement with his creation involves uncertainty and risk.

Yet even though humans inflict suffering on one another and on themselves, God does not give up on the faith he has placed in his creation. When Adam and Eve sinned, God punishes them (partly for their own good) by driving them out into a more difficult life in the harsh surrounding world but He also acts as a loving parent by making protective clothing for them (Gen. 3:21). Surprisingly, God does not inflict the death penalty on Cain, but simply makes life more difficult for him. And, more surprisingly, he puts a mark of protection on Cain so that others will not kill him (Gen. 4:15). When human evil and violence has driven God to the point of wanting to wipe them out altogether, he decides to begin again with one righteous man, Noah. Astonishingly, God comes to regret even this decision and vows at the end of the story never to destroy his creation (Gen. 8:21-22). God expresses his willingness to bear with human sinfulness.

So in creating the world God effectively draws back and effaces himself in a profound act of self-sacrificial love which is at the heart of the creation story. God as we encounter him in Torah is like a parent who holds back and allows his children room to grow and learn and make mistakes so that they might become responsible and mature. The risk God took in creation was that his creatures might not love Him the way He loves them, that they might go their own way. God trusts us and empowers us to be his co-regents. God delegates his dominion over creation to us (Gen. 1:26-28), trusting us to learn what it means to bear God’s own image in this world, to be his representatives, to be his partners. More than we have faith in God, God has faith in us and has entrusted us with responsibilities that only we can fulfill. That is the grand story that Torah tells.

For Christians, the idea of God’s voluntary self-limitation as an act of love for the world should not be a surprise. That is precisely what Paul says Jesus did in becoming human: “he emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7), he divested himself of his power and position as part of the Godhead. Neither should we be surprised by the idea of God’s faith in us. Jesus does not stay on earth to do everything himself, but rather he delegates responsibility to his disciples for the spread of God’s word and God’s love into the whole world. Christian

theologies that simply sit back and wait for God to act—to wave a magic wand and solve all our problems, or worse, to rapture us out of this world altogether—are unbiblical.

III. A Closer Look

The rabbis tend to read Torah closely, often looking at minute details in the text and asking questions that at first may seem esoteric or trivial, but that upon reflection lead to far-reaching insights about the world. I want to take a closer look at the implications of some of these rabbinic insights for our theology.

A. Partners with God in Creation

Reflecting on the Creation story, the rabbis asked, “If circumcision was so important to God, why did God not create men already circumcised?” Odd question, you might say. Yet in response to the question, the great R. Akiva (2nd century AD) argues that the works of humans are actually an improvement on the works of God. To make his point, he produces ears of wheat and loaves of bread. “These are the works of the Holy One, Blessed is He, and these are the works of human beings. Are not these more beautiful?” (*Tanhuma*, Tazria 5). God creates grapevines but humans make wine. God creates flax plants but humans make fine linen cloth. God creates goats but humans make goat-hair tents, feta cheese, and savory stew. R. Akiva is arguing that humans can actually improve on nature, that what is “natural” is not necessarily best.

From this, R. Sacks (along with many others) takes the idea that God deliberately left creation incomplete, leaving room for human work. As we have seen, God took a risk in creating humans in his own creative image and giving them dominion over his creation (Gen. 1:26-28). God put humans in charge and gave them work to do. Adam is to “serve/work” the earth and “guard/take care of” it (Gen. 2:15). The idea is radical: “Creation is God’s unfinished symphony, and he has entrusted its completion to us” (*To Heal*, p. 80). As we have seen, Torah itself, as well as the Tanakh as a whole, both have a literary structure that conveys this idea: the story is not finished, there is more to be done. The Talmud speaks of becoming “partners with God in the Creation” (*Shabbat* 10a, 119b).

My understanding of the creation story was radically changed by a study I did some years ago of the book of Job. In chapters 38-41, God holds up his creation as a response to Job’s questioning, but God’s perspective on creation differs significantly from the traditional one most Christians hold. We need to look more closely at the details in the text and think carefully about its imagery, the picture it paints for us. In Genesis, God’s original creation begins as formless, chaotic and dark waters (1:2), and God works to bring light into the darkness and establish order out of the chaos. But the author of Job insists that the waters of chaos and the darkness have a part in God’s overall creation. God did not do away with them; He only set limits to them, which is the main focus of Gen. 1 (see Job 38:8-11). Eden is a lush garden, a highly ordered part of creation, but it is only one small part of a much larger world. Outside is the bleak and troublesome wilderness as well as the sea, a disordered and dangerous world. There even are other humans who pose a threat to Eden’s offspring (4:14-16). Notice the important verses that are usually passed over when we read this account (2:10-14): the four rivers not only irrigate Eden but flow out into the

surrounding lands. Here we have a picture of what Eden was supposed to be: a source of life for the rest of the world.

Adam and Eve were to participate in that life-giving service. They were given the task of expanding that Edenic order by working the garden so that it would grow, and by being fruitful and producing a family to help expand God's rule over the world, to bring it under control (1:28). Creation is "good," meaning that it functions the way God designed it to. But it is like a newborn baby: immature, in need of care so that it can grow into maturity. God set humans in the garden to continue his creative work. That, I think, is what the Rabbis mean when they say that we are partners with God in creation.

The serpent is also part of that primal creation (3:1), not a demonic force or devil, but an exotic creature (like Behemoth or Leviathan in Job) that God can control but who is a problem for humans. Humans were given dominion over creation, but in the case of the serpent did not properly exercise that authority. Hence they are sent out into the much more difficult world that surrounds Eden, a world that still needs to be brought under God's ultimate authority. Their job is still the same: to "serve" the earth from which they were taken. (Genesis 3:23 directly echoes 2:15).

So God did not make the world as an idyllic place where we simply relax and enjoy ourselves (a misconception about Eden). God created for us a challenging environment where we grow to maturity by doing God's work and by accepting responsibility for our actions in the midst of circumstances that are not always clear or easy. Even Eden has its serpents. The "goodness" of creation refers to its proper functioning rather than moral perfection. A free creator God created free humans in his image, creative beings capable of envisioning and creating worlds. From the beginning they were given creative work to do. God works with us in this creative act of making a world, of caring for the world, and protecting it. The rabbis say, "It is not for you to complete the work but neither are you free to desist from it" (*m. Avot*. 2:21). God continues to work with us in the ongoing process of bringing creation into full maturity, in bringing order out of chaos. (The book of Revelation envisions a time when night and the sea will be no more [Rev. 21:1, 25]. Creation will finally be brought to completion.)

Humans were created as God's vice-regents to "subdue and rule" the world (1:28), that is, to help bring order out of disorder. We do so through responsible creation care, through working to establish justice and peace, through fighting the "powers and principalities" that work against God's orderly kingdom. We are God's partners in what the Jewish sages have called *tikkun olam*, repairing or fixing up the world, both in the sense of healing its brokenness and also constructing a home for God, a temple in which God can fully dwell (see R. Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*).

The Bible calls that partnership with God "covenant." This brings us back to the issue of circumcision. Circumcision was given as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:10-14). That covenant is a mutual agreement, a reciprocal relationship between God and humans in which both parties to the covenant have responsibilities. And both parties enter into the covenant on the basis of trust, on the basis of faith. God takes the initiative in establishing the covenant; God takes, as it were, a leap of faith in asking humans to respond in faith to him freely. God knows full well that humans may in fact reject the covenant, or enter into it and then break it later on (Gen. 17:14). Yet, as with

circumcision itself, God does not choose to do everything on his own. He blesses us and enters into partnership with us in order to bring blessing to the world (Gen. 12:2-3; 18:18; 22:18).

B. The Danger of God's Blessing

In 1979 at an archaeological site near Jerusalem, two tiny silver scrolls about an inch long were found dating to the early 6th century BC (the time of Jeremiah), containing inscriptions in ancient Hebrew script of the well-known Priestly Blessing from Numbers 6:24-26. These are the oldest biblical texts that have ever been found and testify to the ancient importance of these verses:

The Lord bless you and protect you

The Lord shine his face on you and be gracious to you

The Lord turn his face toward you and give you *shalom*

(Note: the King James translation of this verse, “The Lord bless you and keep you,” which is what we tend to be familiar with, doesn't quite capture the Hebrew. This is the same verb we saw in Genesis 2:15, which means “guard” or “protect.” See NLT, CEB, CEV). Blessing in Torah is always rooted in physical and material well-being, which is central to the meaning of *shalom*. Christians often overlook this because of our tradition of spiritualizing most of Scripture. It does not refer to a private inward feeling (although those may grow out of it) but to the growth and flourishing of the nation (see v. 27). That is what God promises Abraham (Gen. 12:2). That is what Jeremiah promises the exiles in the oft misquoted and abused text (Jer. 29:10-14). That is what the priests are praying for in Numbers, that God will act favorably towards his people so that the whole community will be strengthened and do well.

But there is an interesting rabbinic debate over the precise meaning of the first sentence of the blessing. R. Obadiah Seforno (1475-1550) sees the first part of the sentence (“bless you”) as referring to material wealth and possessions, and the second part as referring to protection from thieves, from losing that wealth. Others have seen it as protection from outside enemies. But R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (1816-93) offers a more complex, and I think more biblical, understanding. He notes that the blessing, although recited over the whole congregation of Israel, is phrased in the second person singular. From that he derives the nuanced interpretation that it refers to each person receiving blessings appropriate to them: “For the one engaged in Torah—blessings for his study; for the one engaged in trade—success in business,” and so on. God's blessings are not generic.

R. Berlin's explanation of “and protect you,” however, is profound. “May God protect you, lest the very blessing you receive turn into a stumbling block.” As the author of Ecclesiastes points out, the blessing of wealth can lead to greed and to oppressing others, or it might create anxiety about not having enough or fear that you might lose it (Eccl. 5:8-15). Even the blessing of Torah learning can produce bad fruit, if it leads to arrogance and isolation from others. So based on this discussion, modern-day R. Shai Held argues that when we pray for God's blessing, we also should pray for protection, lest those blessings become destructive forces in our lives (Vol. 2, p. 106). God's blessings can become a curse.

R. Sacks sees this insight as a major theme in Torah. God's blessings of Israel do not necessarily lead to greater faithfulness on the part of the people. No sooner has God miraculously delivered them from enslavement to Pharaoh and the Egyptian Empire than they begin to complain and wish they were back in Egypt (Ex. 14:11-12; 15:24; 16:2-3; 17:2-3). God's faithfulness culminates in idolatrous partying where they attribute their salvation to the work of their hands, a golden calf (Ex. 32). In the space of three months, they have forgotten God altogether.

As they are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses addresses this very issue. He tells them that the real challenge to their faithfulness lies ahead, in the land of blessing. They may think that they have already been through hard times in the wilderness and that this was the test of their strength. But it was not. When they have come into the land and experience its prosperity, "then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.... You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me'" (Deut. 8:14-17). Over and over again Moses warns the people not to forget the God who has blessed them (see Deut. 6:10-12). "The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home" (Sacks, *Deuteronomy*, p. 88). Paradoxically, God's blessings can make us turn our backs on God. It is precisely when we are most blessed that we need to pray for protection—from complacency, from self-satisfaction, from being corrupted by success, from forgetting God.

Jesus, of course, spends a lot of time warning his disciples about the dangers of wealth, prosperity, and success, which can so easily become idols that take us away from God. God's blessings are never for us alone, and if we try to hold on to them selfishly we will lose them. God always blesses people in order that they might be a blessing, in order that they might share those blessings with others. God explicitly promises to bless Abraham with a family and a land so that through that blessing the whole world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). We have seen that Adam and Eve were blessed with the rich, abundant life of the garden of Eden so that they might extend that blessing out into the rest of the world. Instead, they got caught up in their own personal enjoyment of the blessing and missed the point that not everything God had provided for them was for their own personal use. Blessings, the rabbis remind us, can become curses.

C. Doing Something for God

As I have said, the rabbis are close, attentive readers of Scripture and they notice oddities and differences in the text and try to tease out what those might mean. In Exodus, there are two sets of stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. The first set is broken by Moses when he comes down from the mountain and sees the people with the golden calf. So he has to go back up the mountain to get them again. Yet there is a significant difference between the two sets. The first set of tablets is entirely the work of God, handed over to Moses (24:12; 31:18). But God asks Moses to carve the second set of tablets himself and bring them up the mountain (34:1-4). There is a further oddity here. God says He will again write on the tablets Moses makes, but when Moses comes before the Lord, God has Moses write the words on the tablets (34:27-28). So the second set of tablets is the work of Moses. Why the difference?

R. Sacks points out that the principal story that we usually focus on in the Exodus narrative is God's powerful liberation of the helpless Israelites, bringing them to freedom by a series of signs and wonders. But a careful reading of Exodus uncovers a more complicated story. Exodus contains a number of parallel stories that share a common element. There are

- 1) Two battles, one immediately before the crossing of the Reed Sea (ch 14) with Pharaoh's army, the second shortly after the crossing (ch 17), with the Amalekites.
- 2) The two sets of stone tablets
- 3) Two appearances of God's glory, once at Mt Sinai (24:15-18), and the other in the Tabernacle at the end of the book (40:34-35).
- 4) The Sinai covenant is declared twice to the people, once by God (20:1-14), the second time by Moses (24:1-11).
- 5) A doubled account of the construction of the Tabernacle, once before the Golden Calf (25-30), the other after (35-40).

In each case, says R. Sacks, the first event is the work of God alone, while the second involves a human contribution (*Exodus*, pp. 14f.). This close reading of the text creates a subtle but significant shift in how we understand the Exodus story. That story about is more than just what God has done for us. It is about how humans learn to do things with God and for God.

Part of why most Christians miss this is that we only read part of the book. We tend to read the Bible selectively, picking out a few passages that we like, or think we understand, or think are speaking "to me," and skip over the rest. So when we come to Exodus 25, and find that the next 15 chapters are a detailed, repetitive description of the construction of the Tabernacle, we skip over to Leviticus (which we pretty much skip entirely) and then skip over the genealogy in Numbers, and so on.

Yet it is precisely the length, and the repetition, and the detail of the Tabernacle section that signals its great importance for the author. Up until then, God has been doing things for Israel: liberating them, miraculously feeding them, giving them the Law, while Israel has spend most of the time complaining, wishing they were back in Egypt, and finally resorting to idolatry. All of God's powerful dramatic blessings have had little positive effect on the people.

But in the narrative of the construction of the Tabernacle, for the first time we hear that all Israel follows God's instructions faithfully and willingly. The doubled narrative contains first God's commands about how to build the Tabernacle, and then describes in detail how the people carry out those commands faithfully. Note the insistent repetition, especially in chapters 39-40, of the phrase "they did X just as the Lord had commanded Moses." Note also the insistent repetition of the phrase "a willing heart" (KJV Ex. 25:2; 35:5, 21-29), contrasting Pharaoh's hardened heart. The story of the building of the Tabernacle signals a significant change in the people. They are no longer at odds with one another and God, but work together in harmony and in obedience to God. The extended narrative dramatizes their faithfulness.

R. Sacks argues that the subtext of Exodus is this: ***we are changed, not by what we receive but by what we do*** (*To Heal*, p. 149). God answers Moses' frustration and anger with the people by giving them a project. It is as if God were saying: if you want to create a people with a positive sense of collective identity, get them to build something together. ***What transformed the Israelites was not what God did for them but what they did for God*** (*Exodus*, p. 293). Moses himself, when he received the first set of divinely carved tablets, comes down from the mountain the same man with anger issues. But when he comes down the second time with the tablets he made himself, his encounter with God now has left him changed. His face shone, and those tablets, unlike the divinely constructed ones, are the ones that will last and be kept in the ark of the Covenant. Doing something for God changes us more effectively than what God does for us.

D. Making a Home for God

Sometimes in Christian circles you will hear the word *shekinah* (or “*shekinah* glory,” which is redundant, like saying “today’s soup *du jour*”), referring to a perceptible, almost tangible manifestation of God’s presence and glory in the world. This is not a biblical word, but one coined by the ancient rabbis to speak in non-anthropomorphic ways about God’s appearing to humans. It comes from the Hebrew root *sh-k-n*, which means “to dwell, to abide.” As a noun, it refers to a neighbor, someone who dwells near. The Hebrew word *mishkan*, which we translate as “tabernacle,” comes from the same root and literally means “dwelling, home.” It refers to a place God can dwell among the people (Ex. 25:8-9). The *mishkan* was where the *shekinah*, the glorious divine presence, made its dwelling in the world. (John 1:14 speaks of the divine Word making his dwelling, literally “pitching his tent,” among us so that we saw his glory. This is a direct reference to the *mishkan*.)

Careful readers of Torah hear echoes of another story in the narrative about the *mishkan*. R. Held (along with many other commentators) points out that after detailing all the work that the people had done to construct the Tabernacle, Torah says, “And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had made it as the Lord had commanded, even so had they made it” (Ex. 39:43). This takes us back to the creation story, where Torah says, “And God saw all that he had made and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). In the creation story, “on the seventh day God finished his work” and God “blessed” the seventh day (Gen 2:2-3); Exodus tells us that “Moses finished the work” (40:33) and when he sees the completed *mishkan* Moses “blessed” the Israelites (39:43). (I have translated more literally and underlined the words that are the same in each verse). Bezalel, the chief craftsman, is endowed with *ruach elohim* (Ex. 31:3; 35:31), God’s breath or spirit, the same phrase used in Gen. 1:2 at the outset of creation to indicate God’s creative power. There is a deep connection between God’s creation of the world and the Israelites’ construction of the Tabernacle.

That connection is made more certain by the literary structure of the narrative. There are six days of preparation to receive God’s revelation, and God gives Moses instructions on the seventh day (24:15-16). Those instructions in Ex. 25-31 are divided into seven sections, each marked with the phrase “And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying...” The seventh, concluding section (31:12-17) ends with the command to rest on the Sabbath because God had also rested on the Sabbath at the end of his creation of heaven and earth.

Rabbi Sacks finds one further striking parallel in figures that only appear twice in Torah: the cherubim. They are the fearsome guardian angels who, after Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden, bar the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). In the Tabernacle, golden cherubim are placed above the ark that contained the Torah (Ex. 25:18-21), which Proverbs 3:18 describes as “a tree of life for those who take hold of her.” (*Exodus*, p. 201). God’s ongoing instructions to his people about how to live will emanate from between these creatures in the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:22).

So the story of the construction of the Tabernacle mirrors the story of the creation of the world. In the Genesis story, God does the work, making a home for humans. In Exodus, humans do the work, making a home for God in their midst (Ex. 25:8). Even as God created a space for humans, so humans create a space for God to fill in their midst. The sanctuary is about bringing God close to humanity.

R. Sharon Sobel looks closer at this verse, where God promises to dwell “among them” or “in their midst.” The Bible is clear that no earthly structure can contain the infinite God (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6; 6:18; Is. 66:1; cf. Acts 7:48). God does not dwell in the sanctuary as such, but rather among the people, in the community which built the *mishkan*. So the *mishkan* is not ultimately for God but for the people, a visible symbol that God is in their midst. It is not the physical space itself that contains the Holy One, but the community that has come together to work on this project on God’s behalf. They have made a space for God in their lives. The whole community is involved in bringing holiness into the world. The community itself is sacred space (*Women’s Torah Commentary*, p. 156).

The story of the golden calf, coming in between the two parts of the Tabernacle narrative, makes it clear that when humans forget God and go their own way, chaos results. Those two stories are linked not only by their juxtaposition, but also by a significant image. To make the calf, the people bring their gold jewelry to Aaron (32:2-4). To build the *mishkan*, they bring all their valuables to Moses (35:4-9). Our wealth, our possessions, our resources, can either create idols for our own pleasure or create a sanctuary for God’s presence.

When they are obedient to God’s word, when they do all that God has commanded, then they create a world in which God can dwell. The Talmud says: “The one who prays on the eve of the Sabbath and says, ‘Now the heavens and the earth were finished’ (Gen. 2:1) is regarded as if he had become a partner with the Holy One, blessed be He, in the work of creation” (*Shabbat* 119b). Like the world, constructed by God’s word, so the *mishkan* is constructed by following God’s commands. The *mishkan* is a perfectly ordered environment, an image of what God wants the world to be. The world itself is to be a home for the divine where God’s word is obeyed, his presence felt, and his dreams for the world fulfilled, a place where the divine glory fills the earth and guides God’s people (Ex. 40:34-38). Ideally, God’s people become the community where that happens. God has begun the work but He asks us to complete it.