

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 4/3/22

I have been discussing my contention that Christianity has spent too much of its time and energy focusing on life after death because of its lack of proper grounding in the Old Testament, the Scriptures of Israel. I quoted Rabbi Heschel's response to a question about why he never writes about the afterlife. "We believe in an afterlife. But we have no information about it. I think that's God's business—what to do with me after life. Here it's my business what to do with my life. So I leave it to [God]." I think this is an eminently sane perspective on things. There is a lot of useless Christian speculation about the afterlife but very little real information. Jesus discouraged his disciples from such speculation about the future. He said that no one, not even he, knows the details and it isn't for you to know or worry about. As Heschel said, that's God's business.

As Rabbi Sacks and many others make clear, Judaism is a celebration of this life, with all of its problems and difficulties. "God's blessings are material as well as spiritual—good crops, fine harvests, a land of plenty, and a politics of peace....To be a Jew is to celebrate life, to see God in life, and to make a blessing over life" (*Deuteronomy*, p. 244). God is to be found in the midst of our lives here in this world, not in escaping from it, but in embracing the responsibilities God has given us for this world and enjoying the blessings God has provided for us. "Salvation" is not a "spiritual" or religious word in the Old Testament. It means deliverance from crises, illness, poverty, oppression, perils, enemies, etc. The so-called "prosperity gospel" people have actually grabbed hold of a piece of this biblical truth but have used it in unbiblical ways.

Christians have tended to "spiritualize" much of the OT and have lost its focus on the realities of this life. So, for example, the promise of "showers of blessing" in Ezekiel is turned into something very different from its original context. Through the prophet God is promising Israel that they will have the necessary rainfall for their crops to flourish (Ezek. 34:26-27). Such spiritualization of the OT drains it of much of its meaning. In a world where drought is increasingly a problem due to global warming we need to recover and wrestle with the earthy, creation-focused message of the Scriptures. (The slide shows an example of a much more biblical understanding of the phrase: a mobile shower for the homeless called "Showers of Blessing.") And as Cornell West once said, too often in church people are praying for God's showers of blessing on them. Rather, he says, we should be praying to be a blessing to someone else. That, after all, was the foundational calling and mission given to Abraham and his descendents (Gen 12:1-3).

Another example: Take the way we read the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. In Christian teaching it became a theological drama of spiritual rebellion and original sin that doomed the human race. Because of that spiritualization of the story, Christians completely missed the point that this is first and foremost a story about food, that this was the first kosher law, that this is a story about the disastrous consequences of

taking for yourself everything you see and desire, a story about limiting human consumption of the earth's resources, a story about how humans are not the only thing that matters in God's creation. Despite the fact that many people pride themselves on reading the Bible "literally," I have never seen a "literal" reading of this story that says it is actually about what you eat.

But in the context of the rest of Torah's teachings, it is very much about what you eat, whatever other implications it may have. It is very much about consumerism. As I argued when we talked about the kosher laws, because Christians came to look down on the law of Moses, they did not appreciate the value of the laws restricting what you could eat, and therefore were blind to a central teaching in the story of Adam and Eve, which is not just a story about Israel but about all humanity. Torah demonstrates that the spiritual is to be found in everyday activities such as eating and drinking, in growing crops and building things, in how you handle your money and how you handle your time, in how you work and how you rest from work. As Rabbi Heschel says, worship and living are part of the same reality. Or as Jesus said, giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty person is a spiritual act with eternal consequences.

So also Christians have tended to ignore the literal, this-worldly meaning of the central story in Torah, the Exodus. That story, as we have seen, 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, what Paul calls "principalities and powers" that rule this world. Salvation is not a future heavenly hope but a present-day earthly reality. As Rabbi Sacks says, the story of the Exodus 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, another biblical idea that has been spiritualized almost out of existence into some future heavenly world that has little to do with our daily life. As I have been arguing in this class, in order to understand what Jesus meant by that central concept in his teaching, we need to go back to Torah.

The church's rejection of its connection to Israel damaged Christianity in no small measure. The narrowing of the gospel message that grew out of Christian anti-Judaism, both its spiritualization and focus on life after death, has left us with a disembodied, escapist theology. Lost was the OT focus on this world, on the goodness of creation and its pleasures, on the communal nature of salvation, on justice here and now for the poor and marginalized, on our responsibility for what Judaism calls *tikkun olam*: repairing the world. Judaism could have been God's balancing voice to the individualistic, intellectualized, spiritualized, otherworldly message of Christianity. Instead, we cut ourselves off from our Jewish roots. When the Church cuts itself off from this root, from our lifeblood, it becomes spiritually anemic, and its faith and practice become stunted and

distorted, and it misreads its own Scriptures. You end up with millions of American Christians believing that “social justice” has nothing to do with the gospel.

In this course we have looked deeply and at length at the very practical, down-to-earth teaching in Torah and the prophets. We have seen that holiness does not mean being “super-spiritual,” or spending all your time in church-related activities, but rather it means caring for God’s creation, building community, generosity to the poor, loving care for immigrants, honesty in business dealings, putting limits on the pursuit of corporate profits, humane treatment of animals, limiting your consumption of the earth’s resources, regularly stopping from work to rest and be refreshed by God. These are not optional add-ons to one’s religious life but are the very essence of what it means to be a person of faith. We need to stop worrying so much about life after death and return to the Bible’s primary focus, its emphasis on life before death. We don’t need to ask people what kind of life they anticipate after they die. We need to ask them the question Jesus asked: what kind of a life do you want to have right now?

Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem

I want to take a slight detour to look at a topic that came up in class a few weeks ago that speaks directly to two of my main concerns: that Christians have misread the New Testament because of their disregard for the Old, and our overspiritualization of biblical truths.

A couple of weeks ago we were talking about the idea of the promises of God in 2 Cor. 1:20. I was arguing that this verse is a good example of how because Christians have omitted the story of Israel from their understanding of the New Testament, they have missed the point. For Paul God’s promises are first and foremost the ones made to the patriarchs (Rom. 15:8; Romans 4:13-16; Galatians 3:16-18; Eph. 2:12; 3:6), to Abraham in particular and to Israel more generally, that through them the whole world would find blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). I would argue that biblically, this is God’s “mission statement,” the fundamental declaration of God’s purpose in the world. For Paul the fulfillment of those promises is now beginning as Gentiles come to worship the God of Israel in part through Paul’s own ministry.

Susan pointed out to me that this verse comes in the middle of a somewhat confusing discussion of Paul’s travel plans and wondered what the connection might be. I want to look more closely at those travel plans and talk about how they are a part of fulfilling God’s promises to Abraham.

From time to time in various parts of his letters, Paul mentions his proposed future itinerary, the cities he hopes to visit. Those are verses we tend to pass over quickly in our search for “things that are relevant to me and my personal situation right now.” But piecing

together several of those passages reveals a fascinating and important story that helps us understand Paul's ministry and calling and should cause us to rethink what we think we know about Paul. It is a kind of lost story because Luke does not highlight it in his account of Paul's travels, and only mentions it briefly. It is the story of his risking personal danger in an attempt to bring together Jews and Gentiles in one loving community.

Remember who Paul is: Paul is a Jew, Saul of Tarsus. As he tells the Philippians, he was "*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, according to the law a Pharisee, as to righteousness in the law being blameless*" (Phil. 3:5-6). He studied under Gamaliel (or Gamliel), grandson of the great first century teacher Hillel whom we have talked about (Acts 22:3). The Talmud says of him, "*When Rabban Gamliel died, reverence for Torah ceased and purity and piety died*" (Sotah 9.15). This hyperbolic statement is an indication of the respect with which the later rabbinic tradition remembered Paul's teacher. Although Paul spends many years reaching out to Gentiles, he never forgets his own people, never forgets his Jewish roots. When Christians read Paul's writings, we tend to hear the voice of a sixteenth century German monk rather than a first century Pharisee. That has created a serious misunderstanding of this central figure in early Christianity.

Acts 24:17 "I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings." This is the only mention of this offering in Acts, and it comes much later in the story when Paul is under arrest and appearing before the Roman governor of Judea. Up to this point, Luke has been emphasizing Paul's eagerness to get to Jerusalem for *Shavuot*/ Pentecost after having spent Passover in Philippi (Acts 20:16). Paul says that he is "bound by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem, even though he has a sense that danger awaits him there and indeed, he ends up getting arrested by the Romans. (Acts 20:22-23). Luke wants to show that Paul continues to be a faithful Jew. For the rest of Acts, Paul will be arguing to various audiences that he is indeed a loyal Jew and his mission to the Gentiles is not an anti-Jewish one. As we will see, taking up this offering is one way Paul is trying to make the same point.

Paul, however, speaks of the offering repeatedly in the letters from this time period, which explain his purpose in some detail and stress its importance to him. Paul is taking up a financial offering from a number of different Gentile churches to take back to the economically struggling Jewish church in Jerusalem. In so doing Paul hopes to unite the Jewish and Gentile factions in the church and demonstrate their fundamental unity. We are going to look at a number of passages from Paul's letters to flesh out the story Luke tells in Acts and get a more complete picture of what Paul is doing.