

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 5/22/22**

Last week, I made the suggestion that like the Jews, we Christians are still waiting for our messiah, still waiting for our redeemer to come. Biblically the idea of salvation is unfinished business, still to come, “nearer now than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11). Jesus tells his disciples that when they begin to see cosmic signs and disturbing world events, “Look up, for your redemption is near” (Luke 21:28). Salvation is still in the future. One of our Jewish class members commented that the word “salvation” was not something she ever talked about.

But the Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures, is actually full of talk about salvation. Such language is especially common in the Psalms and Isaiah, where the word is sometimes translated as deliverance or rescue, which is what it means. The root word is the basis for the name Joshua, which means “the Lord is salvation.” That name, in its Greek form, we know as “Jesus.” It often refers to rescue from illness or difficult circumstances. The Greek word in the New Testament can actually refer to physical healing. The psalmist regularly uses “salvation” to refer to being protected from personal enemies (Psalm 69) or healed from serious disease (Psalm 116). But many of the passages in Tanakh use the word to refer to God’s deliverance and restoration of Israel (Exodus 15:2; Psalm 53:6; Isaiah 46:13; Jer. 3:23). That became part of the Jewish messianic hope. And the specific connection of the word “salvation” to the redemption from Egypt in Exodus became part of the rabbinic understanding of Passover. The Jerusalem Talmud specifically identifies the four cups of wine at the Seder with the “cup of salvation” spoken of in Psalm 116:13 (*Pesachim* 10:1).

But there are times, especially in the prophets, when the word seems to have a more comprehensive, global meaning, not limited to a localized incident of rescue, either of individuals or of the Jewish people. This is especially true in Isaiah, where the prophet speaks of God’s salvation as reaching “to the ends of the earth” (49:6). God’s salvation, defined by the prophet as torah, righteousness and justice, will go out to all the nations (51:4-5).

My sense of things is that most Jews do not talk regularly about salvation, in part I think because of the Christian appropriation and redefinition of the word.

Christians tend to read this word in the Bible as if it were speaking primarily of some sort of spiritual deliverance and ignore its down to earth meaning. As I argued last week, Christians have narrowed the cosmic vision of the biblical story of salvation to something largely private and personal. The majestic, sweeping biblical drama where God enters into covenant partnership with Abraham’s family for the benefit of the whole world has been edited down to a short story about getting my personal sins forgiven. The powerful community experience of social and political and economic liberation that Torah calls redemption has been exchanged for an individual inner feeling of relief from guilt. The prophetic vision of a redeemed physical creation has been largely ignored by people only concerned about human beings. This is the “gospel” that has dominated the so-called

evangelical church, an impoverished, watered-down version of biblical teaching. The biblical story, the story of Israel, has been turned into a few abstract, intellectualized doctrines.

This is why the “evangelical” view of salvation and the cross tends to be very private, personal, and individualistic, Jesus as my “personal savior,” who did it all “just for me.” The church has been preaching what Dallas Willard calls “the gospel of sin management,” and as I have been arguing in this course, we have lost our way because of leaving out the story of Israel, ignoring our Jewish roots.

The “gospel of sin management” runs into problems as soon as you take a closer look at the Old Testament. In Torah, sin itself does not separate us from God or make God unable to look at the sinner, as is commonly taught. God did not forsake Jesus on the cross because Jesus was bearing human sin. I think that idea that we regularly hear preached demonstrates a failure to take into account the significance of Psalm 22, which Jesus is quoting, an expression of the psalmist’s trust that even though he is in dire straits, God will deliver him. Jesus, I think, is declaring this same faith. The idea that God would turn away from his beloved son demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is.

In the Bible, God is remarkably patient and forbearing with human sinfulness. After Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit, God still comes and walks in the garden looking for them. And despite their sin, God does not turn away from them, but rather continues to minister to them, clothing them (Gen. 2:21) and sending them out of the garden for their own good. Even though God has told them that if they were to eat of the fruit, they would die that day (Gen. 2:17), in fact that does not happen. God continues to be in relationship with them, and Eve gives birth to a son “with the Lord’s help” (Gen. 4:1). When that son, Cain, even after God’s warning, kills his brother, God gives him some sort of mark of protection so he will not be killed by anyone else for what he has done (Gen. 4:15). God does not turn away from these sinners or cut off their relationship, and the wages of sin in these foundational stories is not death. As with the later story of Moses killing the Egyptian, the result of the sin is being sent off into exile, off to a foreign land, where life is more difficult, a pattern we see repeated with Israel. But God does not abandon Moses either, nor does God abandon Israel because they sin.

In the story of the great flood, we are told that God wanted to wipe out all living things from the earth because “God saw that human evil was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). Yet after the flood, in a verse that directly echoes this one, we read “Never again will I curse the ground/land because of humans, because the inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” (Gen. 8:21). The attentive reader will see a problem here. Why does the second verse say “because”? In Gen. 6, the evil inclination of the human heart is the reason for destroying humans. Here it is the reason for not destroying humans. The NIV noticed the puzzle here and so changed the translation to “even though,” which is not an accurate reflection of the Hebrew (see KJV, NRSV). But I think we need to take the text as it stands seriously. God recognizes that wiping people out is not the best way to deal with human sinfulness. After the flood, God has a change of heart, and decides to live with the fact that humans have a built-in propensity to evil. God does not turn away from this sinfulness, but

instead has to come up with a different approach. So God decides to enter into a covenant relationship with humans (9:16). None of this fits the traditional Protestant way of understanding God's relationship to human sinfulness.

Christians usually see the separation from God that is caused by human sin as the problem for which Christ is the answer. But this is understood in a way that is almost exactly the opposite of how it appears in the Old Testament. After the flood, sin creates a problem in the relationship between God and God's covenant people, not with the world in general. Sin in the OT refers primarily to how God's redeemed people have not lived out their calling as a community to be different from other peoples but rather have come to be identified with the world and act like the world. The lure of Egypt is still strong and idols are everywhere. Judgment language in the OT is primarily directed against Israel, not the "world." Sin is a problem for God's people, for us, for those who in Christian terms are "saved" or redeemed, for those who are already in a relationship with God. Jesus' attitude is the same: he reserves his most forceful declarations of judgment for religious folk rather than for those people the religious folk call "sinners." So in one sense we should not be worrying about whether the rest of the world is in danger of God's judgment. Rather, we should be asking if the church in America has not already fallen under judgment and, like ancient Israel, has been sent into exile until it learns the lesson.

Sin is a problem in the OT, but one for which God provides a solution: a covenant relationship of mutual commitment and faithfulness that includes God's acceptance of human sinfulness and provides the opportunity to deal with it through repentance and sacrifice, topics we have discussed at length in this course. If the only purpose in Jesus' coming was to forgive our sins, then Israel had no need of him. They already had a perfectly good sin-management system. The whole of the Old Testament, from Torah to the Prophets to the Psalms, regularly proclaims God's willingness to forgive the repentant sinner. That is not a "Christian" doctrine; it is a fundamentally Jewish belief and teaching. When Jesus tells people that their sins are forgiven, the response from other Jews is not, "You can't say that: we believe in a harsh God who punishes people mercilessly." No, they say, "Only God can forgive sins" (Luke 5:20-21). Contrary to traditional Christian anti-Jewish stereotypes, the scribes and the Pharisees clearly believe in a forgiving God.

This should make us rethink what it means that Jesus came to "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). If "salvation" is reduced in meaning to "forgiveness of sins," which I have been arguing against, then this verse makes no sense. The same is true of John the Baptist's proclamation about the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Note that this verse is regularly misquoted as talking about the "sins" of the world. But as we saw when we looked at sacrifices, the offering for sin on Yom Kippur was not a lamb but two goats, and the Passover lamb, which is often mistakenly assumed to be John's reference here, was not a sacrifice for sin. (The passover lamb could be a goat as well: Exodus 12:5). Both passages must be talking about something other than forgiveness of individual sins.

We saw when we looked at animal sacrifices that they are not thought of as some sort of payment for sin, but were first and foremost acts of loving, thankful worship, acts of

self-sacrifice. In fact, sacrifices did not address the issue of serious, deliberate sins at all. No sacrifice was possible for things like lying or adultery or theft, although the Yom Kippur sacrifice did serve to cleanse the whole community of the effects that such individual sins had on the ability of God to reside in their midst. But for such serious individual sins, you could only repent, return to God and God's ways, and throw yourself on God's compassionate mercy and forgiveness. A contrite and repentant heart was what God really desired, as David well knew (Psalm 51:17).

Both Testaments assume that people can be righteous before God, even though they are not sin-free. They can live lives of faithfulness and integrity and Torah can be written on their hearts, can be the shaping force in their life. Keeping the Law does not mean living a perfect life, but taking advantage of its offer of forgiveness for sin and returning to God through repentance. That is how Luke can characterize John the Baptist's Jewish parents as "both righteous before God, walking blameless in all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). Paul himself can claim that in his pre-Christian days as a faithful Pharisee, he was righteous and blameless with respect to the Law (Phil. 3:6). Neither passage suggests that they never sinned, and yet they are blameless before the Lord. Such biblical teaching flies in the face of the evangelical gospel of sin management.

Based on passages like Genesis 6:5 and 8:21, the rabbis would develop the notion that the human heart contains both an inclination to do evil (*yetzer hara*) and an inclination towards good (*yetzer hatov*). It's a little like the cartoon images we are familiar with of a person with a good angel on one shoulder and a bad angel on the other. Modern day Rabbi Shai Held says, "*Torah asks us to embrace complexity and to reject one-dimensional understandings of human potential. The Jewish view is that human beings are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. We are inherently complicated, pulled in many directions at once, capable of breathtaking kindness and self-sacrifice as well as horrific cruelty and staggering indifference*" (*Heart of Torah*, Vol. 1, p. 6). This Jewish understanding emphasizes human free will as opposed to the more deterministic and fatalistic concept in Christianity of original sin that dooms us always to failure and views even the good that we do as fundamentally flawed. The Bible is quite aware of the depths of human sinfulness yet still assumes that we have the power to do good. People can be "righteous before God."

Interestingly, I stumbled upon a messianic Jewish translation of Romans 8:4 which reads what Paul is saying there in these terms. I think this interpretation is on solid ground when it understands Paul's phrase "who walk not according to the flesh" as referring to the *yetzer hara*. I think this makes better sense of Paul's use of the word "flesh," which refers not simply to what we call "sins of the flesh" (historically a Christian obsession) but things like pride and greed and anger and envy and gossip. But I doubt that *yetzer hatov* is an adequate understanding of Paul's phrase "according to spirit," which seems to indicate an interaction of the human spirit with the divine Spirit. Presumably the *yetzer hatov* would incline a person to follow God's Spirit. But at least this interpretation helps us see how Paul's imagination continues to be shaped by his Jewish learning. It frees Paul from his enslavement in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany and brings him home to first century Israel.

Rabbi Heschel comments: “The question of original sin is not of primary importance for the Jew. The problem is not how shall I be saved. The problem is how shall I serve God at this very moment.” (*Moral Grandeur*, p. 386). That, I would argue, expresses what Paul’s main purpose is in all of his letters. Paul is not writing to Christian churches telling them how to get saved. He is writing to tell them how to get along, with each other and in the world. He is telling them how to serve God at that very moment.

Dealing with sin in our lives takes effort, and we saw when we talked about repentance that such effort is complicated. Deuteronomy contains two seemingly contradictory statements about that effort. First, Moses tells the Israelites, “Circumcise your hearts and no longer be stubborn” (Deut. 10:16). That is, change how you are thinking and acting and turn to God and to God’s ways. Later Moses tells them, “This commandment that I am giving you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it” (Deut. 30:11, 14). Obedience to God’s laws is obtainable. But at the same time, Moses tells them, “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendents so that you may love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, that you may live” (30:6). So there is a tension between these two passages. Who is responsible for shaping human behavior, divine grace or human effort?

As we have seen, the rabbis understand the relationship between God and humans as a cooperative partnership. Commenting on the proverb, “God gives grace to the humble” (Prov. 3:34), the Talmud says, “one who attempts to purify himself is assisted [by God] in the process” (*Shabbat* 104a). This perfectly captures the teaching in Deuteronomy. So also the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus tells the Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for God’s good purposes” (Phil. 2:12-13). It is not enough to pray for God to wave a magic wand and effortlessly change us. We must do the work ourselves, knowing that God is with us and supporting us and guiding us in that effort.

Rabbi Shai Held has a very interesting comment on the two Deuteronomy verses about circumcising the heart: “*Some modern Jewish thinkers write as if humanity has the capacity for limitless self-transformation. But Deuteronomy is skeptical. It takes both strenuous human effort and profound divine blessing to transform the human heart. We are not our own redeemers. In order for the human heart to open and soften, both will and grace are necessary. Many modern Jews find it difficult to acknowledge the limits we face in trying to reshape who we are. We live in a culture that values autonomy and we see it as weakness to acknowledge we can’t do it ourselves. We also reflexively fear sounding ‘too Christian’ so that we cannot allow ourselves to admit ‘I cannot do this alone.’ Deuteronomy teaches that we are called to open our hearts and return to God even as we acknowledge that for that very turning we need God’s help*” (*Heart of Torah*, vol. 2, p. 220). The process of circumcising the heart, engaging in self-transformation into the people God wants us to be, involves a partnership between God and humans.