

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 7/12/20

We have been looking at the Jewish idea of repentance, *teshuvah*, and seen that it involves a complex series of actions that include identifying the sin, remorse for the sin, confession of the sin, repairing the damage done by the sin, and committing oneself not to continue in that sin. *Teshuvah* is more than simply an occasional act of contrition; it is a life-long process of spiritual growth and development.

That is one of the reasons I think that Yom Kippur is the most important day in Judaism. It is the culmination of what are called the “Days of Awe,” ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah (New Year’s) that are dedicated to reflection, penitence, rectifying wrongs and turning back to God. Yom Kippur is about spiritual and personal and communal growth.

In actuality, the process begins a month before Rosh Hashanah, with special prayers and rituals to help people reflect on what they have done in the past year, to take what the recovery movement calls a moral inventory. This time of reflection is to be used to set things right with people one has wronged, to ask forgiveness and make restitution. The idea is that you repair those human relationships so that on Yom Kippur you can effectively seek God’s forgiveness.

As part of this process, in the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, some Jews perform a ceremony called *tashlikh*, although actually it may be performed any time in the following three weeks. *Tashlikh*, which means “cast off,” involves symbolically throwing one’s sins into a body of water, sometimes by casting small pieces of bread, although this is a disputed part of the ritual. Many Jews in New York City perform the ceremony from the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges; others go to the ocean or a river or small pond.

The practice is thought to reflect Micah 7:18-19— *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.* But one can also see parallels to the scapegoat ritual: visually, physically casting off the sins of the people to a place where they can do no harm.

Yom Kippur itself is the one day of required fasting in Judaism, and except for small children and those whose health does not allow it, the fast is absolute: no food or drink of any kind for 25 hours. In addition, as part of the day’s self-denial, you are not supposed to bathe or wash, use cosmetics or other forms of self-adornment, wear leather shoes, or engage in marital relations. Wearing white clothing is also traditional. There are five different prayer services in the course of the day, which include lengthy private and public confession of sins. The community humbly recognizes its corporate sinfulness and asks God’s forgiveness.

In keeping with the theme of fasting, it is customary in synagogues to read Isaiah 58 on Yom Kippur. The prophet insists that fasting is not simply a private spiritual exercise where we focus on ourselves, but rather it should reorient our focus to others, to those who

are without food and other necessities of life, to those who are suffering injustice and oppression (vv. 6-7). Don't come to God pretending to be a nation that practices *tzedakah* (righteousness) while in fact having forsaken God's *mishpat* (justice; v. 2). Without an active practice of God's righteous justice, says Isaiah, God simply will not hear your prayers or your repentance (v. 4). Your fasting and piety and spiritual disciplines and words of repentance are useless. As I have been emphasizing in this course, your claims to having a relationship with God are meaningless unless you are engaged in pursuing God's compassionate justice in the world. Yom Kippur does not let you get lost in your own personal piety while ignoring the needs of others. True repentance reorients your life in a new direction, returning to God and following God's way of compassionate justice (Gen. 18:19).

So the practice of repentance is central to Judaism. The ancient sages actually argue that God created repentance before creating the world (*Nedarim* 39b, *Pesachim* 54a, *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:4). God knew that by giving humans freedom of choice, they would mess it up from time to time and repentance would be needed. The rabbinic insight is that divine forgiveness preceded the very act of creation, for without it, humanity would be completely lost. In the Law, God recognizes that people will sin and fall short of the standards God sets for us, and so God makes provision for dealing with that sin. Neither Torah nor Judaism teaches that one must keep the Law perfectly or be forever lost from God's love and grace.

Keeping the Law includes repentance and making sacrifices for sin. That is how Paul can say that in his pre-Christian days he was blameless before the Law (Phil. 3:6) or how Luke can say that the parents of John the Baptist were "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and decrees of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). None of this means that these people were sinless, but both passages indicate that there is a way of living under the Law that is righteous, pleasing to God. So to say that Jesus had to come to die for our sins because the Law was inadequate and unable to make people righteous before God simply isn't true. Yet that anti-Jewish thinking has been the basis of much of Christian theology for 2000 years.

As we have seen, Yom Kippur is the holiest day in Judaism, the center of Jewish belief and practice. At its core Judaism, like Christianity, proclaims a God who is loving and willing to forgive repentant sinners, even though that God also holds humans to high standards. The Jewish understanding of *teshuvah*, repentance, is a rich and complex practice that ideally results in a change in behavior, a new way of life, and a deepening of one's relationship with God. That kind of repentance is what it means to offer a true sacrifice, to draw near to God in worship.

In contrast to this, I think most Christians have limited the idea of repentance to confession of sin. The Catholic Church formalized the confession of sin into a sacramental act with a priest: you confess to the priest and are assigned some sort of penitential act and offered absolution from your sins. Protestants threw out this practice and said, in effect, all I need to do is confess to God. The end result of this in Western society was the creation of

a whole industry of secular confessors, professional priests to whom we go and pay money to hear our confession of sin. We call them psychiatrists. Pastors also have had to adopt this role.

The Bible indicates that there is something fundamentally important about confession of sin, not just to God, but also to others. “Confess your sins to one another and pray to one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Note that it does not say just to God or to a priest or to the pastor, but to one another. Confession of sin to other people, bringing the deeds of darkness into the light, leads to healing and restoration. That public confession has been the heart of the secular recovery movement but also historically has been a part of AME church practice.

This is why I believe that we have misunderstood and misused 1 John 1:9, that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. We read into that verse two extra words: “to God.” So it becomes a verse about private confession to God in the isolation of our “prayer closets.” But looking at the context, that verse comes at the end of a series of statements about what we say, what we say to others and what we tell ourselves. So I would argue that John here, like James, is talking about confession of sin to others, not just to God.

Interestingly with reference to our study of sacrifices, here John says that Jesus’ blood cleanses us from sin (v. 7) if we are walking in the light. For John that means much more than simply confession: it means a whole change in the way we live, in how we treat others. We have seen in Judaism how this is precisely what repentance, *teshuvah*, means. True repentance is at the heart of sacrifice, the gift we offer to God.