

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 12/27/20

We have been looking at the Sabbath, and seen that in both the Old Testament and in Jesus' teaching, the Sabbath is seen as God's gracious gift to humanity. And we saw that in Judaism observing the Sabbath is more than simply a list of things you can't do on Saturday. The Sabbath is very much about what you should do, about living a different type of life one day in seven. We saw that the rabbis considered the Sabbath rest, *menuha*, to be a divine creation, a way of life that ultimately is a foretaste of the world to come, a life of peace and well-being, a life of *shalom*.

The book of Hebrews sees the Sabbath in precisely these terms (Heb. 4). The book of Hebrews, which is really a sermon, not a letter, takes as its main text Psalm 95, which speaks of the wilderness generation of Israelites who were kept from entering the Promised Land because of their complaining and lack of trust. In verse 11, the Psalmist has God saying, "They shall never enter my rest (*menuha*)."

This is not a literal quote from Torah; the original reference is to the Promised Land (Num. 14:20-23; Deut. 1:34-35), but now, centuries later, the Psalmist uses that as a way of talking about the life of loving care that God, who is both king and shepherd, has for his people (vv. 3, 7). We saw that Psalm 23 uses this same word *menuha* to speak of the life the shepherd provides for his sheep, a life of peaceful rest and refreshment.

The writer of Hebrews picks up on this and in a rabbinic-style *midrash* connects the psalmist's use of the phrase "my rest" with Genesis 2:2, which refers to God's Sabbath rest. The unstated connection between the two passages that underlies both the Psalm and the book of Hebrews is Deuteronomy 12:9-10, where God speaks of the Promised Land as a place of rest (*menuha*). So from Torah to the Psalms to the book of Hebrews, God's promised inheritance for His faithful people, the end, the goal that we are heading for, is a place of Sabbath rest, a life of *shabbat shalom*. Christians continue to speak of the life to come in terms of the Promised Land, but because we have misunderstood the Sabbath as simply a Jewish religious ritual, we have lost this biblical understanding of the Sabbath as a piece of Heaven on earth.

5. Judaism on the Sabbath

So Judaism sees the Sabbath as a wonderful gift and blessing from God, a special day of rest and refreshment and joy and peace, a small taste of the world to come. I want to look briefly at some of the ways they celebrate it.

Shabbat is welcomed on Friday night in two ways: by a service in the synagogue and a festive meal in the home. The traditional service welcomes the Sabbath using a number of Psalms that all contain the theme of God's kingship, declaring God's rule over all creation and celebrating God's power (Psalms 29, 95-99). It also includes the singing of a 16th century song, *Lechah Dodi*, which means, "Come, my beloved." Its chorus goes: "Come, my beloved, to meet the bride. Let us welcome the presence of the Sabbath." (At Temple Israel, while singing this song people turn to face the doorway to symbolically welcome *Shabbat*.) That song is based on an account in the Talmud, which tells us that "R. Hanina would wrap himself in his cloak and stand at sunset on Sabbath eve, saying, 'Come and we will go out to greet Queen *Shabbat*.' R. Yannai put on his cloak on Sabbath eve and said, 'Come, O bride, come, O bride.'" (*Shabbat* 119a) The Bible itself does not speak of the Sabbath as a bride. However, the Hebrew verb "to sanctify" also means "to marry," because the couple are sanctifying each other, setting themselves apart from the rest of the world (see our traditional wedding service that speaks of marriage as a "holy union" that involves "forsaking all others"). So medieval Jewish mystics understood Genesis 2:3, that God sanctified the seventh day, to suggest that God took *Shabbat* as his bride. *Lechah Dodi* takes its imagery from the Song of Songs, and it sees the coming of *Shabbat* as a promise of God's coming messianic redemption, which is also seen as a great marriage celebration. The New Testament speaks in similar imagery about the coming messianic age.

An aside on the Ugandan Jewish community (seen in the slide): Abayudaya ("people of Judah"). Founded about 100 years ago by a local leader who had been at least nominally converted to Christianity by the British. But in his ongoing reading of the Bible he was especially drawn to Torah. He noticed that Christians had changed some of Torah: they did not observe the Sabbath on Saturday, for example. And he wanted to be circumcised. When he was told this would make him a Jew, he decided to become a Jew, all on his own. The small community he began has been through difficult times, especially during the reign of Idi Amin, who banned the practice of Judaism and destroyed their synagogues. All the Abayudaya could do was pray fervently, and they believe that their prayers were directly answered by God. Why? Because the day Idi Amin was deposed from office was the beginning day of Passover. God had once again delivered his people from the oppressive power of the tyrant.

Today the community has a dynamic rabbi who is also a member of the Ugandan Parliament. A remarkable man who, when told one of the perks of being a member of Parliament was a car, asked for an ambulance for his

community to help save lives. The Abayudaya have built a hospital as well as two schools. Those schools are open to all, and have Christian and Muslim teachers and administrators, as well as Jewish ones. Their goal is mutual respect and cooperation among the different faiths. They have also created an interfaith coffee growers cooperative for the economic benefit of all the communities. They are known as well for their religious music; one of their albums was nominated for a Grammy in 2005. To me the Abayudaya are a fascinating example of God's sense of humor, choosing the lowly in the eyes of the world to be a light to that world.

In addition to the Friday night service, Jews also hold *Shabbat* services on Saturday. But as we have seen, the main purpose of *Shabbat* is not worship but rest. It is customary to eat three festive meals on *Shabbat*, because *Shabbat* is always a feast day—fasting is prohibited. Following Isaiah 58:13, Judaism teaches that the Sabbath should be made a “delight” (in Hebrew, *oneg*, which is what at Temple Israel they call the festive time of food and Israeli dance after the Friday night service). *Shabbat* is a day of celebration.

In the home, *Shabbat* begins 18 minutes before sundown on Friday night with the lighting of (at least) two candles and the reciting of a blessing, an honor typically reserved for women. The father (or mother) blesses the children and usually Proverbs 31 is read or sung, expressing admiration and gratitude for the hard work of the wife. There are other blessings: over cups of wine, over the challah, and after the meal a special extended series of blessings to God for his gracious provision. It is a celebration and a thanksgiving.

The Friday night meal is a special time for family, and when I was in Israel a few years ago I heard stories from Jewish seminary students recalling those meals and relating some of their individual family traditions. They spoke of memorable songs and games and jokes that their families would share. I was especially moved by one young man who spoke about the importance of the personal affirmation he received each week when his father would give him his blessing at the meal. I cannot quite imagine how my life might have been different had I experienced such a thing.

The ancient rabbis added a third meal on *Shabbat* (normally people only ate two meals a day), late in the afternoon as the day was ending, called *Havdalah*, which means “separation.” It marks the end of the Sabbath and the transition to the new week. A special braided candle is lit, a container of fragrant spices is passed around for people to smell, and a cup of wine is filled to overflowing, symbolizing prosperity. A blessing is recited over each, and a song is sung invoking the prophet Elijah who will herald the coming of the Messiah. It is

usually a simple meal but it is a feast for the senses and for the spirit. Some communities prolong the meal and the conversation well after dark out of a sense of reluctance to let *Shabbat* go.

So the Sabbath is not just about prohibitions, about what you can't do. *Shabbat* is about doing other things, "a day dedicated to the celebration of things that have value but no price" (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 261), things like marriage and family, friends and community, Torah and God. It is a day where the concerns of the rest of the week are set aside. One should avoid talking about money or business matters and ideally not even think about your job. It is a day to engage in pleasurable activities, and the rabbis saw the Sabbath as the best day for married couples to have sex. It is a day for contemplation of the things that really matter in life and a day to just stop and rest. In the midst of a grim and demanding world, it is a day that should be a delight.

6. The Uniqueness of the Sabbath

The Sabbath is an institution unique to Judaism. No other ancient culture divided time into weeks. Paganism thought of time in reference to the cycles of nature: the movements of the heavenly bodies, the seasons of planting and harvesting. Only Israel established a seven-day week that did not correspond to anything in nature, because it points to a God who created and transcends nature.

Because we take the idea of a seven-day week for granted, we fail to recognize the radical nature of its teaching. The seven-day week comes from a completely different view of reality. Basing your understanding of the world on the recurring natural cycles leads to a philosophy where everything remains the same. Humans are riding an endless carousel that ultimately goes nowhere. The seven-day week is part of a worldview that sees us heading towards a goal. The Sabbath is different from all other days, the climactic end of the week, the goal that we are headed for. Paganism produced myths, timeless stories; Judaism produced history, stories that take place in time.

Pagan religions projected their idea of God onto physical objects or natural phenomena, the sun, moon and stars, storms and mountains, rivers and trees. They made idols, physical representations of the gods. But Israel's God was completely separate from such physical objects and could not be embodied in a spatial representation. Israel's God was identified with events in time: creation and redemption, the calling of Abraham, the giving of the Law. R. Heschel comments: "Judaism teaches us to be attached to *holiness in time*, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of the year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals;

and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn: a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate: the day of Atonement” (*Sabbath*, p. 8). They carried those cathedrals with them, even into Auschwitz. Humans can control certain aspects of the physical world but time is exclusively in the hands of God. The Sabbath teaches us to sanctify time itself because that is where God is to be encountered.

The Sabbath completes creation by filling it with sanctity and blessedness (Gen. 2:3). In the creation story, God declares the physical creation “good” but the Sabbath he blesses and declares “holy.” Holiness and goodness are not the same thing. The goodness of creation is available to all humans, but holiness is available only to those who are in relationship with God, who are part of his covenant. The Sabbath is a witness to the Creator God who is separate from the created world and it calls those in covenant with that God also to declare their separation from that world once a week. (We saw that for Heschel, holiness did not just mean sitting in a monastic cell praying and reading Scripture. It meant marching with Dr. King to Montgomery.) Once a week we are to leave behind the cycles of the natural world and experience the holiness of eternity in time.

The Sabbath is a special sign of the covenant between God and Israel, but it is based on creation theology, not just the Law of Moses. Because the Sabbath is rooted in creation, it applies to all of creation, not just Jews. It is to be observed by foreigners residing in Israel and the animals as well (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14) Even the land itself, the earth, is to have a sabbath rest every seven years (Lev. 25:2-4). All of creation is to partake in the blessings of the Sabbath. As we have seen, Torah also connects the Sabbath with God’s redemption, God’s liberation of his people from slavery, from oppressive endless work (Deut. 5:12-15). As such it was a radical idea in the ancient world, which mocked Jews for being lazy because they took a day off. It was a radical idea in an agricultural society where not tending to the fields and crops for a day was risky. And it is a radical idea in our world, where people are increasingly expected to be on-line and on-call 24/7.