

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 12/6/20

M. Shabbat Shalom

I began this course commenting on the confused nature of Christian thinking about Torah, about the Law of Moses. A few years ago as part of the incessant culture wars going on in America, a judge in Alabama surreptitiously installed a 5,200 pound granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the state judicial building. When the state had it removed, so-called evangelical Christians protested angrily. It struck me as odd that Christians, not Jews, were fighting for the Law of Moses, which supposedly no longer applies to us. And even more oddly, they were fighting for a set of laws which none of them actually try to observe in their entirety. Specifically I am referring to the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Despite Christian promoting of the Ten Commandments historically, very few Christians have ever actually observed the Sabbath as a day of rest. (We also ignore the prohibition of graven images, which technically would include this monument!)

Yet the Ten Commandments, however poorly applied in practice, have been central to Christianity from very early on. So much so that the ancient rabbis actually began to downplay their importance. The Talmud says that when the Jerusalem Temple was still standing it was customary to recite the Decalogue before the Shema in the daily morning service. (The AME liturgy reflects this ancient practice.) Yet the rabbis decided to remove it from the service. Why such a radical change?

In a discussion of the daily prayers, the Talmud records this statement: “R. Matna and R. Shmuel bar Nahman [third century] said: It would be proper to recite the Ten Commandments every day. And why don’t we? Because of the disputations of the heretics, lest they say: These alone were given to Moses at Sinai” (Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 1:4; Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 12a). “Heretics” here almost certainly refers to Christians, who evidently were saying that only the Ten Commandments were of divine origin, thus rejecting the rest of the Law. So the Ten Commandments became associated more strongly with Christianity, while Judaism “demoted” them from their pride of place in the liturgy in order to emphasize the importance of the whole Law. (Again, this lends support to my theory that Christianity and Judaism defined themselves over against each other.)

Along the same lines, modern day R. Norman Lamm argues that Christians rejected the ritual aspects of Judaism and only embraced its moral precepts as

taught in the Ten Commandments (Lamm, *Leviticus*, p. 117). Lamm says that what Christians did was very modern: reducing religion to a “simple formula,” ten steps to success and happiness. “All of our Western culture is colored by Christianity, a religion which won its millions of converts by boiling down Judaism to its easiest regulations, by accepting the Ten Commandments—and even those not completely—and rejecting most of the rest of the Torah” (Lamm, *Exodus*, pp. 96-97). I think this is what many Christians believe about Jesus as well, that he came to set us free from the burdensome Law and give us an easier religion of grace and love.

To my mind that is utter nonsense. Rabbi Lamm here is working with a stereotype of Christian belief and practice, one that many Christians have embraced, but those Christians who believe along with him that their faith is “easier” than Judaism must never have read the gospels. (Far too many Protestant Christians are content to understand their faith in terms of a couple of verses from Romans). Rituals are relatively easy to perform and get right; moral precepts like loving your neighbor or your enemy, avoiding anger, not coveting material wealth and social status—those moral values are hard to live by, whether you are Jewish or Christian. As we have seen, Jesus and the rest of the New Testament wholeheartedly embrace the hardest parts of the Law, not the easiest. Christianity does not free us from the “burden” of the Law.

Yet the paradox exists that most Christians, like that Alabama judge, see the Ten Commandments as universal, binding moral teaching while viewing Sabbath observance as an unnecessary Jewish ritual. I would like to explore with you how the Jewish (and biblical) understanding of the Sabbath is much more than simply a religious ritual; it is *torah*—teaching or instruction in righteousness.

1. Torah on the Sabbath

First we will look at the main Scriptural passages that talk about the Sabbath. I have provided you with a somewhat ridiculously literal translation to help make clear some important points.

Genesis 2:2-3

And God completed on the seventh day the work which he had done and he stopped on the seventh day from all the work he had done. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he had stopped from all the work that God created and did.

You will notice, if you are following along in another translation, that the word I have translated as “stopped” is usually rendered “rested.” Literally it is the verb *shabat*, from which we get “sabbath,” and its regular meaning is to stop or cease. To help us hear the text more clearly I have usually translated “sabbath” as “stopping day.”

Exodus 20:8-11

*Be mindful of the stopping day to make it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day is a sabbath to Yahweh your God. You shall do no work, you and your son and your daughter, your male slave and female slave, and your beast and the resident alien who is within your gates. **Because six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them and he rested on the seventh day. That is why he blessed the stopping day and made it holy.***

This is the version of the commandment we are most familiar with, which God gave the people from Mount Sinai. It clearly refers to the Genesis creation story, but note that here the actual verb for “to rest” is used. “Remembering” in the Bible is more than simply having nice thoughts about something. It is being mindful of something so as to act in a certain way. When the insurrectionist on the cross asks Jesus to remember him, that is what he means. As a good Jewish revolutionary (not “good thief”), he wants to be made part of Jesus’ coming kingdom. When Jesus tells his disciples, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he is saying, “Let my loving act of self-sacrifice that you share in this meal shape how you act in the world.” Being mindful of the Sabbath means being intentional about how you observe it.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

*Guard the stopping day so as to make it holy, as Yahweh your God has instructed you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to Yahweh your God. You shall do no work, you and your son and your daughter, your male slave and female slave, and your ox and your donkey and all your beasts and the resident alien who is within your gates so that your male and female slaves may rest like you. **You shall be mindful that you were a slave in Egypt, and Yahweh brought you out from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. That is why Yahweh your God has instructed you to guard the stopping day.***

This version of the commandment comes 40 years later as the Israelites are on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses gives a summary of the laws that were given earlier (when many of his audience were not alive) as well as his own sermonic commentary on what their lives should be like in the land. But Moses is not simply repeating verbatim the earlier command. The rabbis were troubled by this, by the fact that Exodus says “remember” while Deuteronomy says “guard” or “keep.” They concluded that miraculously, when God issued the command, Moses was able to hear both words at the same time! That idea is reflected in the words of a song sung on Shabbat that we will look at shortly: *Lechah Dodi*. It says, “Keep and remember in a single utterance/The one God caused us to hear.” (The KJV and many other translations add the word “keep” to the Exodus version, which simply has the word “sanctify, make holy.”)

Notice here that the rationale for this commandment is also completely different. Exodus roots the Sabbath command in God the Creator, looking back to the creation story in Genesis, while here it is God the Redeemer, remembering God’s act of rescuing them from harsh, unending labor in Egypt. So not only are they to stop and rest but their slaves/servants are not to do the work for them, nor are they to make undocumented immigrants work without rest. Not even their animals are to be overworked. God’s saving purpose for the world encompasses all of creation, not just human beings. (We will talk about this more in the next section on the kosher laws.) Later in Leviticus (chs. 25-26) God will also issue a command for a sabbath year for the land itself. The whole of creation is to partake in God’s Sabbath rest. No exceptions. Not only are they to be intentional about the Sabbath, they are to guard it, protect its unique character, its holiness, and make sure that everyone else does so as well.

Exodus 31:12-17

*Yahweh said to Moses, “And you, speak to the Israelites, saying, ‘Nevertheless, my stopping days you are to guard, for that is a sign between me and you for your generations to know that I am Yahweh who makes you holy. And you shall guard the stopping day because it is holy for you. Anyone who treats it as ordinary surely shall be put to death, for whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. Six days shall work be done and the seventh day is the sabbath of complete stopping, holy to Yahweh. Anyone doing work on the stopping day is surely to be put to death.’ The Israelites are to guard the stopping day in order to make the stopping day a covenant for the ages for their generations. **Between me and the Israelites it is a sign for the***

ages, for in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he stopped and caught his breath.”

This is the least well-known version, and perhaps in some ways the most interesting because of its context. It comes in the middle of the lengthy instructions God gives the people for the building of the Tabernacle, the home they are making for God in their midst. After detailing those instructions, God somewhat surprisingly gives this reiteration of the Sabbath commandment.

Notice several unique elements here:

a. It is not only the day God has made holy, separate, set apart from ordinary use. It is also God’s people who are made holy through observance of that holy day.

b. It stresses the seriousness of the command, and the harsh penalty for breaking it, not just death, but being cut off from the community. The Sabbath defines and gives shape to this community, its relationship to God and to each other (as indeed it did in ancient times and continues to do). Sabbath observance creates a community that is different from all others, a community that is holy. Observing the Sabbath is part of what it means to be in that community.

c. It stresses the long lasting, enduring nature of this sign (“perpetual covenant” KJV, NRSV). The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant and a lesson in who God is. Rabbi Sacks makes the wonderful suggestion that in this third major statement of the Sabbath command, the focus is on Revelation, revealing something about God. So the three major versions of this commandment in Torah together encompass the three central biblical categories of Creation, Redemption, and Revelation. The Sabbath is connected to all aspects of God’s relationship with Israel and the world.

d. Instead of saying that God rested on this day, it uses a verb, usually translated “refreshed,” that comes from the word for “breath.” God stopped and caught his breath, or perhaps breathed easy (see Ex. 23:12; I owe this brilliant translation to Robert Alter).

Why does God repeat this commandment at just this point in the narrative as he is giving instructions for building the Tabernacle? I think God is telling them in sharp, direct language that ***even when they are doing God’s work, even when they are engaging in a mission for God, they are to stop and rest.*** They are not to allow the fact that they are doing something for God justify being overworked.

What does all this tell us about the Sabbath? And how are these biblical texts different from our usual Christian understanding of the Sabbath?

1. The Sabbath is the seventh day, Saturday. Not Sunday.
2. The Sabbath pattern is built into the very fabric of creation. It is not just a commandment for Israel. It tells us something about who God is as well as how we are supposed to live.
3. The Sabbath is a day of stopping, a day of ceasing from work, a day of rest and refreshment, of catching our breath. **THERE IS NO MENTION OF WORSHIP OR RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES.** Why? Worship in Israel happened every day.
4. The Sabbath is holy, set apart and different from other days of the week, just like the people are to be set apart, different from all the other peoples in the world.
5. Ignoring the Sabbath can lead to an early death.

If we are going to talk in a biblical way about the Sabbath, rather than relying on our human traditions, this is where we need to start.