

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 10/25/20

We have been reviewing the major points of our discussion of Torah last year. We saw that the creation story teaches us something radical about both God and humanity. God creates humans in his image and gives them ruling authority over the world. In doing so, God makes humans partners in creation and gives us responsibility for the care and cultivation of the world. We saw that this was a risk for God, an act of faith in humanity. And even when they screw up, God continues to put his faith, his trust, in us and give us responsibility for this world and for each other. God allows humans to fail and encourages them to get back up and keep going.

Because we have been taught a certain way of reading the creation story, we miss something fundamentally important in it. Eden is not the world. Even though the text makes this perfectly clear, people seemed a bit bewildered by the idea last week. “The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the human whom he had formed” (Gen. 2:8). The garden is a specific place (it has a name) in a specific location (the east), a small part of the larger world, which God makes as a lush, fertile home for the human. It stands in contrast to the rest of the world outside, which we find out clearly when the humans are forced to leave the garden. There, outside the garden, life will be much more difficult for them.

But even Eden is not a vacation paradise for humans; it is a place that they are to work/serve and take care of/protect (2:15). Even Eden has its challenges, its serpents. Genesis does not present the serpent as a supernatural creature but simply one of the animals that God created (3:1). Humans were given dominion over the creation but failed to exercise properly that dominion, that authority, with regard to the serpent.

Eden also has its limits. Not everything God has put there is for human consumption. That is one of the great themes in God’s discussion of his creation in Job. God holds up for Job whole areas of the created world that have nothing to do with human beings and their needs. So when they eat of the off-limits tree, they have failed to adequately protect and serve the world, but rather have mistakenly seen all its resources as there simply to exploit for their own personal desires. (We will talk more about this when we look at the kosher laws.)

So the story is about more than simply disobeying a somewhat arbitrary rule God gave them. It is about a failure to be who they were created to be, to live up to the faith God has placed in them. It is about their failure to take proper responsibility for the world.

With respect to our discussion of the false dichotomy between a literal and figurative reading of the Bible, what I say here is true regardless of whether you consider Adam and Eve to be real, historical people or poetic creations.

The creation story also illustrates another theme that we have been discussing: that God's blessings, God doing things for us, does not usually result in humans behaving well. It is only when Israel begins to respond by doing things for God, building the Tabernacle, that they develop some spiritual maturity. Torah begins with God building a home for humans. Now Israel builds a home for God, makes a place for God in the middle of their community. Torah teaches us what that holy nation is supposed to look like.

b. "Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue"

Torah defines "the way of the Lord," the path God wants Abraham and his descendants to follow, as "doing righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). These two crucially important words appear in the Bible many times together, as well as separately, but are difficult to translate precisely. In English, the words "righteousness" and "justice" seem very different from each other. For us, justice has a public, political and legal flavor, referring to how a community behaves, while righteousness is a religious term that speaks of individual moral purity.

In Hebrew, the meaning of these words overlaps considerably, and biblically they are closely connected. Together they define the essence of this community that will be a home for God. Biblically, justice has a distinctive meaning that differs from the way we usually use the word. It includes a focused concern on the needs of the poor and disadvantaged and the immigrant. Justice must be tempered by compassion, as many of the laws in Torah illustrate. The Law of Moses does not wear a blindfold.

Biblically, a just society will have no poor people, no people whose basic human needs are neglected (Deut. 15:4). Torah is more concerned about the well-being of the community as a whole rather than individual rights. Remember, Israel was to construct an alternative society, a nation unlike all others, a nation without the gross economic disparities that existed in other nations of the world. So when people mistakenly speak of the God of the Old Testament as a God of justice and wrath while the God of the NT is a God of love and compassion, as if those were two completely separate things, they show their ignorance not only of Scripture in general but also of the biblical concept of justice, a strange kind of justice that incorporates compassion and concern for those in need, a justice that recognizes that the political and legal and economic systems often are weighted in favor of the wealthy and powerful and seeks to mitigate that situation by championing the cause of those who are left out. Justice and righteousness, fairness and compassion, are closely intertwined and together they define what it means to walk in the way of the Lord. Constructing a society characterized by compassionate justice is the heart of what it means to do something for God.

c. Faith as Protest

In Torah, this passionate commitment to justice defines what faith means. The rabbis contrast the behavior of Abraham and Moses, the two greatest examples of faith, with Noah, whose righteousness consists in silently obeying what God tells him to do in order to save his own life. Abraham, when told that God wants to destroy Sodom, protests God's plan: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...Shall the judge of all the

earth not do justice?” (Gen. 18:23-25). Abraham here illustrates the righteous justice God desires (v. 19). Moses too on three different occasions also challenges the justice of what God wants to do. But Noah remains silent, only concerned with his own personal salvation, and his story ends badly. Abraham is an example of mature faith; Noah is not.

R. Sacks says that “*Abraham was the first person in recorded history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God.*” God indeed has entered into a partnership with us and has created us to be responsible with him for this world. That means dialogue with God, and even debate. In Torah, God not only speaks, God listens. True faith does not simply accept what comes as God’s will. People of faith do not glibly repeat, “It’s all good.” The Bible teaches a religion of “sacred discontent,” a faith, in Rabbi Sacks’ words, that at times means protest.

The most radical biblical figure who embodies this type of faith is Job, who angrily challenges God’s justice, God’s management of the world. At the same time, Job stubbornly maintains his trust in God. Many sermons have been preached that make Job into a pious figure of unrelenting faith. But it is a faith that is protest—protest against the inequities of life, and protest as well against all forms of religious piety that teach acceptance of those inequities. The Bible gives us, not an escape from this world, nor simple passive obedience, but rather the daunting and at times painful responsibility of active engagement with this world, an engagement that may lead us into conflict with God Himself. The name “Israel” itself refers to this wrestling with God in a partnership that is not always easy or straightforward (Gen. 32:28). Faith is a struggle precisely because the world is unjust.