

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2**  
**Class Notes 11/22/20**

We have been looking at Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and thinking about some of his teaching as his response to the Holocaust. We have seen his insistence that while some may be guilty of the actual crimes committed against humanity, everyone shares some responsibility for the flourishing of such evil in our midst. When we surveyed the history of Christian anti-Semitism a couple of years ago, I argued that although Nazism was not a Christian ideology, centuries of Christian demonizing of Jews had created the fertile ground in which Nazism could grow. In Heschel's terms, Christianity was responsible for, if not necessarily guilty of, the Nazi crimes. (Of course many Christians actually participated in Hitler's genocide.) We will come back to this theme shortly when we look at the Civil Rights movement.

We also talked about one of Heschel's most important theological ideas, the idea of the divine pathos, that the God of the Bible is not a distant, unfeeling abstraction but someone intimately involved in the affairs of his people, living in their midst and suffering along with them. We wrestled with the thorny and painful issue of unmerited suffering in the world and God's seeming reluctance to do very much about it. How can we have faith in a loving, compassionate God of justice in light of the Holocaust? Heschel says that God is there suffering alongside his people. Clearly not everyone will be satisfied with this as an "answer" to that very thorny question. But, what I would like to emphasize is that this is an accurate understanding of the God of the Bible, not only the Old but also the New Testament. This is the message of the cross, that in Jesus God has come close once again to his people and entered into their suffering. And this is what it means for Christians to take up the cross and follow him (Mark 8:34). The New Testament does not teach that Jesus suffered and died so that we don't have to. The New Testament teaches that those who follow Jesus will be treated just as badly as he was (John 15:18-20; 2 Tim. 3:12; cf. Matt. 5:11-12). Christianity proclaims the God who suffers.

### C. Heschel and the Civil Rights Movement

As I said earlier, I think that Heschel's involvement in the civil rights movement (as well as the anti-war movement) was his personal response to the Shoah, and his bond with Martin Luther King came from his recognition of King as a genuine prophet through whom God was raging, a prophet through whom God's anger at human sin and passion for compassionate justice was being expressed. Heschel and King first met at the "National Conference on Religion and Race" in Chicago in January 1963, commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Heschel gave the opening address and King was the closing speaker. A couple of main points from Heschel's fiery, prophetic speech "Religion and Race:"

1) Heschel highlights the special responsibility of Jews as former slaves to empathize with the oppression of African Americans. We have seen that Torah repeatedly tells Israel that their experience of suffering and oppression in Egypt is to teach them how to treat other people. Heschel sees the revolutionary story of the Exodus as relevant for the current

political situation. *“At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses....The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.”* Although Americans historically have deluded themselves into thinking that they are God’s chosen people and that America is the Promised Land, in fact, Heschel says, America is Pharaoh’s Egypt. *“The tragedy of Pharaoh was the failure to realize that the exodus from slavery could have spelled redemption for both Israel and Egypt. Would that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had joined the Israelites in the desert and together stood at the foot of Sinai!”* This idea resonated with King, who believed that the civil rights movement meant liberation not only for African Americans but also for the whole nation. I think this is an important point to emphasize in our current struggle for justice and civil rights, that this is not a zero-sum game. Working for the benefit of people of color, of immigrants, of the poor, benefits everyone. King insisted that white oppressors needed to be liberated as well. The story of the Exodus is for everyone.

### The Story We Tell

Here I want to take a slight detour to consider again the idea of the story we tell. We have talked about how the Bible is neither a theological treatise nor a textbook of ethics, but rather communicates its theology and ethics in the form of a story, and that it is vitally important to get the story right. Christians have left out the story of Israel from their own story and thus have distorted biblical teaching and their own self-understanding. We saw how central the story of the Exodus is, not only in Torah but in the whole of Scripture, including the New Testament, and my whole argument in this class is that Israel’s story is foundational, vital, necessary for understanding Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago, Sis. Beverly Williams sent out a link to a Ted Talk that Rabbi Sacks gave in 2017, shortly after Trump was elected, and in part it was his response to that contentious election. Now as you know I am a big fan of Rabbi Sacks and that talk was a good illustration of how charming and persuasive and thoughtful he was. But I was troubled by one of his points. He talks about facing the future without fear, which can only be done, he says, with others, as a united community. One of the things a community needs is a common story, and he thinks that is something that distinguishes America from Britain. Like the Jews, he says, Americans have a story that they tell over and over again that defines who they are. “When you tell the story and your identity is strong, you can welcome the stranger, but when you stop telling the story, your identity gets weak and you feel threatened by the stranger.” He thinks that sense of shared identity in America has broken down because we have stopped telling our story.

But I respectfully disagree. Rabbi Sacks has an overly rosy view of America. The problem in America is that the traditional story we have told about ourselves on holidays like Fourth of July and Thanksgiving and Memorial Day is a lie, or at least a very selective version of the truth, a myth. It leaves out the genocide of the native peoples and the systematic enslavement of Africans as an essential part of building this nation. It views the original colonists as coming here seeking religious freedom, but ignores their denial of that

freedom to other groups like Quakers and Baptists. And it sentimentalizes a bloody revolution against the legitimately established ruling authorities by middle class farmers and merchants who were tired of paying taxes. The current president is angry that now our schools are including some of this in the history they teach and has been trying to ensure that the censored version of this story be reinstated. A lot of school districts agree with him. So part of the divide in this nation right now is that we are telling (at least) two completely different stories about who we are. And despite what Rabbi Sacks says, I don't think we can ever get back to that one pristine story that will unite us all. It never existed.

Let me give an example of how that traditional story has played out in our times. Enshrined in one of our sacred documents, the Declaration of Independence, is the rarely discussed idea that when a government becomes oppressive to the people, it is their right and duty to overthrow it. The founding fathers essentially invented the oxymoronic notion of patriotic revolutionaries. I submit that the modern-day militias, like the one that tried to kidnap the governor of Michigan, see themselves as the rightful heirs of those revered "freedom fighters" in Lexington and Concord who fired the shot heard round the world. Their identity comes from taking the traditional American story, the one we celebrate on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and in our national anthem, quite seriously. The love affair with guns that is killing our country is not an aberration: it is a fundamental part of our national DNA. It comes from the story we tell about ourselves, a story of faith in redemptive violence.

So I agree with Rabbi Sacks, that getting the story right is not only important for understanding the Bible; it is also important for our nation. On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, we need to ask: Is America the Promised Land or is America Pharaoh's Egypt? It depends on who is telling the story.