

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

We have been looking at the biblical material about the Sabbath, and discovered that the OT designates it as a day of rest from work. And we saw that the New Testament depicts Jesus and his followers as faithful observers of the Sabbath and that Jesus expected that would continue after his resurrection. We also saw that the main debate about the Sabbath that Jesus enters into with other Jewish teachers had to do with the issue of healing. Jesus argues that God created the Sabbath for the benefit and well-being of humans, and that therefore acts of mercy like healing are in fact a sign of what the Sabbath is supposed to be. Jesus does not overturn the Sabbath; he declares its supreme importance for all of creation.

4. The Rabbis on the Sabbath

a. On Healing

The sense that we get from these multiple stories in the gospels is that it was well-accepted in Jesus' day that acts of healing violated the Sabbath. But the odd thing is, nowhere else in any other Jewish source that has come down to us from that time is healing on the Sabbath declared to be wrong. Neither the Old Testament nor any Jewish literature closer to the time of Jesus prohibits healing on the Sabbath. Even a couple of hundred years after Jesus, when the rabbis identified thirty nine types of work prohibited on the Sabbath (*m. Shabbat* 7:2; *m. Beitzah* 5:2), in neither list is the act of healing an illness or treating a physical deformity prohibited.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, the issue of taking or giving medicine on the Sabbath does arise, and the rabbis' attitude there is a kind of *via media*. Any type of food that one would normally eat during the week or any type of ointment that one would normally use is permitted for use on the Sabbath, even if it also has a medicinal effect. But other substances used only for medical purposes are prohibited. So a person may not apply vinegar to sore teeth on the Sabbath, but they may eat bread dipped in vinegar, and if it has a medicinal effect as well, all to the good. You may not apply wine or vinegar to a sore hip, but you can apply a soothing oil that you would normally use for your dry skin, and if it has a medicinal effect, fine. The text goes on to specify that one may not apply rose oil, because that was an expensive ointment which an ordinary person would not use on a daily basis. But the *Mishnah* goes on to comment: "The children of royalty may anoint their wounds with rose oil, since it is their practice to anoint themselves thus on weekdays. Rabbi Shimon said: all Israel are royal children" (*m. Shabbat* 14:3-4). So here we see the rabbis both trying to be respectful of the Sabbath but also applying the same compassion towards humans that Jesus advocates.

We find further light on this subject in a separate discussion about the absolute fast on Yom Kippur. After prohibiting any food or drink on Yom Kippur, the rabbis go on to make exceptions for small children. And a pregnant woman may be fed if necessary. And a sick person may be fed if a medical expert recommends it. And if no doctor is available, the

person may be fed upon his own request. And a person who falls ill from hunger may be fed even non-kosher food! We saw in our discussion of Yom Kippur that it is a special kind of Sabbath (Lev. 16:31), a “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” the holiest day of the year, and yet even here the rabbis clearly make room for some forms of healing practices on that day even though they technically break the rules about fasting.

In that same discussion, one last example not only allows for medical treatment but also establishes a fundamental rabbinic principle. “Moreover, Rabbi Matia ben Harash said: if one has a pain in his throat, they may drop medicine into his mouth on *Shabbat*, because there is a possibility of danger to human life and every potential danger to human life overrides *Shabbat*” (*m. Yoma* 8:5-6; 85b). Notice here that the healing is permitted because of the chance a person’s life is in danger. The laws pertaining to the Sabbath are suspended if a life is threatened. This principle, that concern for human life supersedes the Law, will eventually be applied to all the laws in Torah except three: defaming God’s name/idolatry, murder, and forbidden sexual relations. To save a life you can break almost any commandment.

Interestingly, in another discussion of this principle that you may override the Sabbath commandments to save a life, R. Shimon ben Mennasia comments on Ex. 31:14—“And you shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy to you.” Emphasizing the phrase “to you,” he says, “Sabbath is handed over to you, but you are not handed over to the Sabbath” (*Mekhilta* 31:13). In the Talmud, R. Yonatan ben Yosef is quoted as saying something similar: “*Shabbat* is given into your hands but you are not given into its hands” (*Yoma* 85b). These rabbinic teachings from a couple of hundred years after the time of Jesus demonstrate that Jesus is not saying anything unique or wildly radical about the Sabbath, only establishing biblical priorities that are thoroughly in line with what other rabbis teach. The Sabbath is meant for human benefit, and human needs matter more than strict legalities.

So clearly, even in later rabbinic material, the prohibition of acts of healing on the Sabbath is not uniform or absolute, and takes into account the human situation. And in these passages that we have looked at, the focus is not on healing *per se* as a violation of the Sabbath, but on some sort of action, like preparing medicine, that might constitute work. Healing itself is not prohibited. So when in the course of healing someone Jesus simply speaks to or touches them, he is not performing a prohibited action of any type. The disputed issue in the gospels is the act of healing itself, not the physical actions that accompany the healing. Which strikes me as curious, given the lack of evidence that other Jews considered this to be a flagrant violation of the Sabbath. I can only conclude that there must have been some people, perhaps only a very few, who shared the harsh rigor of the Dead Sea community or who were looking for any way to criticize Jesus and so adopted a strict position on healing that was out of the mainstream of Jewish thought. Jesus easily silences their objections. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was not breaking the Law or criticizing “Judaism,” or teaching that we should not observe the Sabbath, but rather illustrating what the Sabbath should look like.

b. On Work

As we have seen, Torah gives very few details about what it means to rest on the Sabbath. So the rabbis looked closely at the Scriptures to see what they could discover. They noticed, as we have seen, that Torah makes a close connection between the Sabbath commands and the construction of the Tabernacle (Lev. 19:30; 26:2). The placement of Ex. 35:1-3 in the middle of the description of the tasks involved in that construction led them to conclude that it was precisely those tasks which constituted prohibited work, along with the few specifics we have seen in other parts of Torah. Based on that, they came up with thirty-nine actions that were prohibited (*m. Shabbat* 7:2; *m. Beitzah* 5:2).

Of course over time, and with the changes in civilization and how humans live their lives, questions constantly arose about what constitutes work on the Sabbath, and later rabbis would have to make many legal rulings. In modern times, rabbinic authorities decided that turning on an electric switch or starting a car was akin to lighting a fire, and so those actions are prohibited. And to make sure you don't unintentionally violate the Law, the rabbis argue for what they call "putting a fence around Torah" (*m. Avot* 1:1), making sure that someone doesn't accidentally break one of the laws. So if business dealings and commerce are prohibited, then ideally you shouldn't handle money at all or talk or even think about your job. Because of this, Jewish synagogues don't take an offering in their services. The Sabbath itself is actually more like 25 hours long, to make sure you don't accidentally violate it, since people didn't know precisely when sunset occurred. This is literally "guarding" the Sabbath.

The strenuous nature of the activity is not the primary concern. Judaism understands the biblical concept of work to mean "creative tasks, constructive labor, craft," as illustrated in the building of the Tabernacle as well as God creating the world. Work involves the production, creation or transformation of an object. So you can handle, open, and close heavy books all day long on the Sabbath, but you can't strike a match. R. Heschel sums this up succinctly: "On the seventh day man has no right to tamper with God's world, to change the state of physical things" (*The Sabbath*, p. 31). For one day we are to leave everything alone and not mess with it.

c. On Rest

But the Sabbath is not simply about what you don't do. It is also very much about what you should do. R. Heschel comments: "The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living." In other words, the Sabbath isn't just a day off from real life. It is a day for a different kind of life.

The ancient sages notice something odd about the wording of Genesis 2:2. "On the seventh day God finished his work." They ask, didn't God finish his work on the sixth day and rest on the seventh? That is how most of us usually understand this verse when we read it, but in fact that is not quite what it says. From this verse a rabbinic midrash suggests that there must have been some sort of work of creation on the seventh day. "After the six days of creation—what did the universe still lack? *Menuha* [rest]. Came the Sabbath, came *menuha*, and the universe was complete" (quoted in Heschel, p. 22). For the rabbis, rest means more than simply ceasing to work. *Menuha* must be something real, positive, concrete; it took a special act of creation to bring it into being. "What was created

therein? Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 10:9). God, by resting on the Sabbath, brought that rest into being as an integral part of his creation.

The biblical concept of rest refers to a state of well-being and peace. Naomi prays for such a life, a life of *menuha*, for her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:9). And David envisions the divine Shepherd leading the sheep beside the waters of *menuha* (Psalm 23:2). That is why the standard Jewish greeting on the Sabbath is “*shabbat shalom*,” the peace of the Sabbath be with you. Resting on the Sabbath is not simply foregoing certain activities. It means embracing another type of life, a God-given life of peace, contentment, and harmony with others and the world.

Because of this, the Sabbath is considered a foretaste of the world to come, a momentary glimpse of eternal life, God’s life. This is a common assertion throughout the rabbinic literature. “The Sabbath possesses a holiness like that of the world to come” (*Mekhilta* 31:13). “The world to come will be a day that is all *Shabbat*” (*Rosh Hashanah* 31a). Rabbi Heschel says that the Sabbath is a preview, a brief experience of eternity in time (pp. 73-76).

In connection with this idea, Rabbi Sacks offers a fascinating reflection on Isaiah 46:10, where God says, “I make known the end from the beginning.” He says that while the Sabbath was the last day of the week for God, it was the first day of the week for the newly created humans. In the Sabbath, God reveals to us the end at the beginning. “*The Sabbath is not simply a day of rest. It is an anticipation of ‘the end of history,’ the messianic age.... We do not strive to do; we are content to be. We are not permitted to manipulate the world; instead, we celebrate it as God’s supreme work of art. We are not allowed to exercise power or dominance over other human beings, nor even domestic animals. Rich and poor inhabit the Sabbath alike.... The Sabbath is a full dress rehearsal for an ideal society that has not yet come to pass.*” He says that by revealing to us the end from the beginning, God wanted us to know where we were heading, what the goal of all our labor is, “so that we would not lose our way in the wilderness of time” (*Exodus*, pp. 281-282).