

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 12/26/21

Last week I began my concluding remarks for this class by reflecting on the astonishing and even miraculous fact of the survival and persistence of the Jewish people despite the many attempts by other much more powerful nations to destroy them. I offered the suggestion that in part they have survived because of not looking to be in charge, not trying to be just another empire. I also quoted Rabbi Sacks on the power of ideas to bring positive change to the world rather than the idea of power, which simply causes divisions.

Rabbi Sacks himself was a good example of this. When he died, people from around the world, people of all backgrounds, gave testimony to the profound effect he had on their lives. This included powerful, highly placed individuals like Prince Charles, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and even the royal palace in Amman, Jordan. I doubt that the Jordanian King regularly sends condolences to the widows of other prominent rabbis throughout the world.

More astonishing, and in some ways more meaningful than all these, I think, is that among the tens of thousands of tributes that his widow received were handwritten letters from two convicted murderers in a high-security British prison expressing their sympathy for her loss and telling her of the inspiration his teaching had been to them when it was presented to them by the prison chaplain. So people from every walk of life have been blessed by Rabbi Sacks. This class is my own form of tribute to the power of his ideas in my life.

Yet he was a dedicated Orthodox Jew whose primary mission was to strengthen the lives and faith of Jews in Britain. At the same time he was able to reach people of other faiths with his teaching. He was convinced that Judaism made sense not only for Jews but for everyone, that Judaism had something to offer the world. This did not mean that everyone had to convert to Judaism. But it did mean that the fundamental truths of his faith speak to the needs and concerns of all humanity, and he was able to creatively articulate some of the ways in which that is true.

In his final book, he sums up this mission: “Our vocation is to be God’s ambassadors to the world, giving testimony through the way we live that it is possible for a small people to survive and thrive under the most adverse conditions, to construct a society of law-governed liberty for which we all bear collective responsibility, and ‘to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly’ (Micah 6:8) with our God...God calls on us to be *true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith*” (*Studies in Spirituality*, p. 247; italics in the original).

For me, the remarkable persistence of the Jewish people confirms what the Bible says, that God has an ongoing covenant with Israel that cannot be broken, even when Israel goes astray (Gen. 17:7; Lev. 26:44; Jer. 33:23-26; Ezekiel 16:60). In speaking of God’s covenant with Israel, Paul declares that it is irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). He vehemently insists that God has not rejected Israel (Rom. 11:1-2) and that God will continue to be

faithful to Israel. The miraculous persistence of the Jews as a distinct people is testimony to the faithfulness of that God.

When we looked at the book of Hebrews several years ago, I argued that the traditional Christian teaching that God has permanently rejected Israel creates a serious theological problem for Christians. Not only does it call into question the reliability of God's promises, it also raises the question: if Israel's unfaithfulness can lead to their rejection, why should God not also reject the very unfaithful Church? Why are we so sure that God has not also given up on us? As Hebrews itself insists, God's promises to Abraham and his descendants are firm and secure, because God cannot lie (Heb. 6:13-18). Any other way of reading the Bible, any doctrine that sees the Church replacing Israel, simply contradicts this clear message throughout.

So when Christians talk about a "new" covenant, it would be more precise to speak of a "renewed" covenant. That is really what the prophet Jeremiah is talking about, a renewal of the original covenant that the people had broken, now with its words written on their hearts rather than simply on tablets of stone. But what is written remains the same: God's *torah* (Jer. 31:31-33). We saw when we looked at Hebrews that for Christians the new covenant may have been inaugurated by Jesus but it certainly has not been completely realized. It is still a hope for the future, as it was for Jeremiah. Jews and Christians are both waiting for Jeremiah's words to be fulfilled. ***The new covenant is not a sign of God's rejection of Israel but rather a demonstration of God's faithfulness to Israel.***

If this is the case, then Christians need to radically rethink the Scriptures and the relationship of the church to Israel and to Torah. That has been one of my goals for many years now. If God still has an ongoing relationship with Israel and if God still intends to fulfill his purposes in the world through the descendants of Abraham, then the church needs to take the astonishing persistence of the Jews much more seriously. How do we fit into that plan? What does it mean for us to have been miraculously grafted into that tree? How do we relate to Israel through Jesus? Rather than starting with the church and trying to understand Israel, we should be starting with Israel as a way of understanding the church.

I think the church's task first and foremost is to learn from the Bible what it means to be Israel, not on the assumption that we replace the Jewish people but on the assumption that we have come to share in Israel's vocation to be a people shaped by Torah, God's instruction, and so be a light to the nations. Abraham's call was to create a family that would walk in the ways of the Lord, the ways of compassionate justice, and so be a blessing to all peoples. Above all, Israel is called simply to be Israel, to be a people distinct from and different from Egypt and Babylon and Rome. In the Old Testament that radically different light is viewed as attracting peoples from other nations (as it did in Jesus' day) to embrace the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The NT sends people out into the larger world with that same message but unless you have learned who you are, you cannot be a light to others. The good news is more than just a list of theological doctrines. It is those doctrines embodied in a way of life, in a counter-cultural community, in a people like Israel.

Just this week I was reading an essay by Rabbi Heschel written in 1949, where he comments, “The very existence of a Jew is a spiritual act. The fact that we have survived, despite the suffering and persecution, is itself a sanctification of God’s name.” Sanctification of the name, you might remember, is a central idea in Judaism, and one which Jesus made the first petition in the prayer he taught his disciples: “Hallowed be thy name.” By being a holy people God’s name is hallowed or made holy. That does not simply happen in some sort of private religious vacuum; sanctifying God’s name refers to how the world comes to know and understand who God is. The whole point of holiness is not simply personal piety but to be a light to the world, to show God to the world. God’s name is sanctified when the world recognizes who God is. Heschel here is affirming what I have been saying: that the very persistence of the Jews as a people is witness to the world about God.

Heschel goes on: “We continue to exist, in spite of the torrents of hatred and the dangers that constantly lie in wait for us. We always have had the option to solve the “Jewish Question” through conversion, and had we stopped being Jews, we would not have continued as thorns in everyone’s flesh, and we would not have remained an object of scorn” (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 55). Here, sanctifying God’s name, being a light to the world, also includes being a thorn in people’s flesh, being an irritant, which is one of the main ways I have always interpreted Jesus’ phrase “salt of the earth.” By being different, by being set apart, which is the main significance of the word “holy,” a community may become a light to the world but also will be a thorn in the flesh.

For further thought: Jesus called his disciples to “let your light so shine among all people that they may see your good works and give glory to your Heavenly Father” (Matt. 5:16), which is the essence of the idea of sanctifying the name. How might this give us a slightly different sense of our mission in the world?