

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 11/28/21

Concluding thoughts:

A few weeks ago Lauren Lapat, our class member from Temple Israel, recommended a book on the Jewish spiritual practice Mussar called *Everyday Holiness* by Alan Morinis. The heart of the book is a section on 18 different personal qualities or “soul-traits” that Mussar seeks to develop, things like humility and gratitude and patience. I noticed with particular interest that the final chapter in that section is called “*Yirah*,” which is a Hebrew word. He begins the chapter by explaining that he leaves this word untranslated because it merges two aspects of human experience that are linked together in Hebrew but separated in English: fear and awe. Does that sound familiar?

I was delighted to discover that in the chapter he says pretty much exactly what I have been saying in this section on fear of the Lord. He even begins with an illustration about experiencing both fear and awe as one stands looking at the edge of the Grand Canyon. And he quotes the same discussion of awe in Rabbi Heschel that I quoted earlier in this class!

But I laughed out loud when I came to the final section of the chapter, where he talks about how to cultivate this attitude of being in the awesome presence of God. He says there are many ways to do this but that it is especially helpful to have something specific that helps us focus our concentration on God’s presence. Then he goes on to say: “It’s for that very reason that I wear a *kippah*” (p. 243). The reason I laughed is that months ago when I wrote the conclusion to this whole section of our discussion, I also chose to talk about the practice of wearing a kippa. So I was amused and pleased that his discussion was so similar to mine.

One of the distinctive practices of many Jewish men is wearing a small cap called a “kippa” in Hebrew or “yarmulke” in Yiddish. This practice is usually thought to come from a saying in the Talmud: “Cover your head so that the fear of Heaven may be upon you, and pray for Divine mercy” (*Shabbat* 156b). In the context of this passage it is clear that covering your head as you pray means covering it with your cloak, and that it was not a universal practice at the time. It is actually a mother’s practical advice to her son to help shut out the world around him and keep his attention focused on God.

Another passage in the Talmud connects this practice with living a life of humility. It states that R. Huna ben Yehoshua (4th century) never walked 2 meters with his head uncovered, because he said, “The Shekinah (Divine Glory) is above my head” (*Kiddushin* 31a). For R. Huna, recognition of God’s presence is more than just an occasional religious act; it is a regular part of everyday life. Again, R. Huna is cited as an example of something that not everyone did.

Eventually this practice was adopted as normative for Jewish men even though it is not a specific commandment in Torah. Technically they are only required to cover their heads when praying, which they often do with a *tallit*, a prayer shawl, but this explains the general practice among some of covering their heads all the time, an act of sanctifying the Name, of living with a constant physical acknowledgement of their reverence for God. Increasingly nowadays there are also Jewish women who wear kippot (plural of kippa) as an act of worship.

During the second Trump impeachment proceedings, we saw the somewhat distracting behavior of one of his lawyers, who every time he took a drink of water would cover his head with his hand. That is because he was silently saying a blessing over the water before drinking. It is not clear to me why he just didn’t wear a kippa; he later said that he didn’t want to offend anyone, though I’m not sure who would have objected to that common practice. (He may not have wanted to offend all the anti-Semitic white supremacist supporters of his client.) He said that it would have been an awkward thing that people would stare at. But his odd behavior was even more awkward and caused even more stares. However, as an Orthodox Jew, in his own somewhat inept way he was acknowledging God’s awesome presence and God’s gracious blessing even in the simple act of drinking a sip of water and even in the midst of a Congressional hearing. That was indeed an act of great faith!

Alan Morinis, in the book *Everyday Holiness*, explains: “Jewish practice attaches blessings to so many of the ordinary events of everyday—awakening, washing, eating, drinking, going to the bathroom, going to bed—to remind us that God is in every moment, if only we would be open to that presence” (p. 243).

We saw that during the Civil Rights movement, kippot became popular among some non-Jewish marchers. Black leaders had learned that Jews wear the caps at prayer because one’s head must be covered in the presence of the Lord. So they adopted this practice as a sign that God’s presence was there in

their marches for freedom. As Rabbi Heschel said, the march from Selma to Montgomery was an act of worship and he felt his legs were praying. A couple of weeks ago we saw the picture of Rabbi Shai Held wearing a kippa and prayer shawl as he sat protesting the killing of Eric Garner. By that action he too was indicating that his protest was an act of worshipful prayer, an act that was the result of his fear of the Lord. If you only go to church or synagogue to worship God, you are not really worshipping.

Interestingly, the first century Pharisee Saul of Tarsus argues for just the opposite practice. In a somewhat mysterious passage discussing issues related to the Corinthian worship services, he says that a man should not cover his head when praying but a woman should (1 Cor. 11:4-16). This is a notoriously difficult chapter to interpret, but it has been the basis for the longstanding practice in some Christian circles of women wearing some type of head covering or “veil” while in church. (It may also be the background for the elaborate church lady hats.) I want to look a bit closer at this passage and have supplied a somewhat woodenly literal translation to help us see more clearly the issues involved in understanding it.

1 Corinthians 11:4-16

4. Every man (husband) praying or prophesying having from his head hanging down shames his head.
5. But every woman (wife) praying or prophesying with her head uncovered shames her head. It is one and the same thing as having been shaved.
6. For if a woman (wife) is not covered, let her also have her hair cut, but if it is disgraceful for a woman (wife) to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, let her be covered.
7. A man (husband) should not be covered on the head, being the image and glory of God. But the woman (wife) is the glory of a man (husband).
8. For a man is not of a woman but a woman of a man.
9. Neither was a man created because of the woman but a woman because of the man.
10. Because of this the woman ought to have [a symbol of?] authority on her head because of the angels.
11. However, neither is woman without man or man without woman in the Lord.
12. For just as the woman is of the man, so also the man is through the woman. But all things are of God.
13. Judge for yourselves: is it fitting for a woman to pray to God uncovered?

14. Does not nature herself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is a dishonor to him?
 15. But if a woman wears long hair it is a glory to her. For the long hair has been given to her as a covering.

16. If anyone wants to argue about this, we have no such custom nor do the churches of God.

There are several major interpretive issues in this passage. First, is Paul speaking of men and women in general, or only husbands and wives (an equally possible translation of the Greek)? Second, is he speaking of prayer in general or only praying while in the Christian assembly? Third, what do the angels have to do with anything (v. 10)? Fourth, what does he mean by a head covering? Many traditional translations have inserted the word “veil” into the text but as you can see, Paul never uses that word here. He keeps talking about hair, long hair and short hair and shaved heads, and one quite possible interpretation is that Paul may simply be talking about a woman letting her hair hang long (and therefore covering her head), rather than having her hair cut short (or perhaps, tied up in a decorative knot). Paul concludes his argument by specifying that a woman was given long hair as a covering (v. 16). Finally, Paul seems to be assuming some sort of local customs (v. 16) but we are not sure what they are or what exactly they mean.

There are other problems with this passage, not the least of which is that Paul is making a questionable argument about the relationship of men and women (or husbands and wives) based on Genesis 2 while actually seeming to contradict Genesis 1, which maintains that men and women are equally created in the image of God and therefore would be equally bearers of God’s glory. The whole argument seems forced and *ad hoc*, which Paul himself recognizes, because in verses 11-12 he quickly moves to offer a counterpoint to his argument in verses 8-9. Those verses could be (and have been) interpreted as establishing a distinctive hierarchy of men over women. So now Paul has to backtrack on his shaky argument from Scripture to make the opposite point: in Gen. 2 the woman is taken from out of the man but in nature, men come from out of women. Here he argues not for a hierarchy but for mutual interdependence.

The rest of the passage drops the wobbly Scriptural argument and appeals to “nature,” to the established order of things in the world. Paul is arguing here from the Gentile, Greco-Roman culture of Corinth, where it seems to have been an accepted fact that women should cover their heads when performing

religious acts like prayer and sacrifice but that men did not. What is still puzzling is that even if that is true, why does Paul spend so much of the passage talking about hair?

Christians have often seen Paul here as establishing a universal practice for all time but it is hard for me to see how you can baptize a local custom for people living in very different places and times where the actions Paul is affirming may have very different meanings from those they might have in our culture. In the 70s, when some men were letting their hair grow long, some people would quote this passage and say that hippies were shamefully violating the Scriptures. I discovered a passage in the writings of John Milton, the 17th century English poet, where he argues based on what Paul says about men and long hair that this teaches us that men's hair should not come down any further than their shoulders, which was the custom in his day. That was a clear example of how such matters are quite culturally conditioned.

What the Church lost sight of in all its obsession with women's fashion and men's hairstyle is the fundamental assumption Paul makes in this passage that women were indeed participating in worship, both in corporate prayer and in prophesying, which is what we usually call preaching, declaring God's word to God's people. They were not keeping silent in the churches (which makes 1 Cor. 14:34-35 even more puzzling). Paul's concern here is only that things be done in an orderly way, in a way that made sense in the culture and social norms of his time. Beyond that, the details of the passage remain mysterious, known to Paul and his readers but obscure to us. So we should be quite cautious about using these opaque verses to establish fixed rules in the Church.

What we see both in the Talmud and in Saul of Tarsus is a concern for an outward physical act that recognizes God's presence and awesome power over our lives. God is head of all, here meaning not so much ruling authority as source of life, as in the headwaters of a river. That is clear from the context in this passage. For Paul man is the head of woman because in Gen. 2 he is the source of her life: she was taken from his side. But then he quickly goes on to say that woman is also the source of a man's life, so they are both dependent on each other. But the really important point is that all life comes from God (v. 12). That is what must be acknowledged when we come before God in worship and in prayer. For Paul, as for many Jews historically, that acknowledgement is not simply a silent inner personal attitude or feeling but an outer, physical,

public demonstration. How that is done may depend on local custom (as in Paul's letters) or on the practice of some exemplary people (as in the Talmud). Paul wants the women in his churches to cover their heads, and some Christian groups continued this custom, while Judaism eventually adopted the practice for men, even though it is clear from the Talmud that such behavior was not the norm in ancient times.

However it is done, ideally all of our life is lived with a conscious acknowledgement that we are in the presence of an awesome and fearful God, the Holy One of Israel who is beyond our ability to comprehend or manipulate. We come before God like Esther before the Persian king, aware of God's frightening and absolute power over us and yet confident that God will listen to us and consider our requests. We come to God in reverent fear, with a deep sense of God's mysterious holiness. We come before God in silent awe, in radical amazement at God's created works, including our own beings, fearfully and wondrously made. We come before God in worshipful obedience, painfully aware of our own shortcomings and sinfulness and yet joyfully delighting in the faith that God has placed in us and the responsibility God has given us to care for the world and all its creatures.