

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

I want to make sure that people understand the distinction I am making between antisemitism and what I call anti-Judaism. I use the term “antisemitism” to refer to a racist ideology that sees Jews as an inferior people, a corrupt and corrupting influence on the rest of the world. In one of the recent Zoominars that I attended, someone suggested that rather than “antisemitism” we should speak of “Jew-hatred.” That is exactly right. Historically, such hatred has existed both within and outside of the Church.

But I am using the term “anti-Judaism” to refer specifically to a negative Christian attitude (although it may exist in other faiths as well) towards Jewish beliefs and practices. Judaism is seen as the wrong sort of religion—a narrow-minded, legalistic system obsessed with outward rituals and “works righteousness”—from which Jesus came to save us with his new superior type of religion that was all about love and grace and forgiveness. This is the model we have been given by our Christian tradition and it continues to shape how we read the Bible. We have looked at numerous passages in the New Testament that I have argued have been misinterpreted because of these anti-Jewish presuppositions. But such anti-Judaism persists in the Church even in well-meaning people who are not intentionally trying to slander Judaism. In the past few months we have had sermons at Bethel by both Rev. Carrington and Pastor Gloria that reflected this tradition, even though I am sure neither of them is at all antisemitic or harbors any ill-will towards Jews. My argument in this course is not simply that such a way of reading the Bible is wrong, but that it has robbed us of many of its treasures and kept us from appreciating just how deeply Jewish Jesus and his teachings were.

I have been giving examples of hope for overcoming the historical sibling rivalry between Jews and Christians. We saw the story of African bishops asking to meet with Jewish seminary students to learn more about Judaism, and how that ended in a festive meal with stories, songs and dancing. I gave the example of the friendship and love shown to Amy-Jill Levine by her Christian friends, which allowed her to open the New Testament and give to the world a fresh understanding of the Jew Jesus.

3. A third example: One of the books I read as I was working on this course was called *The Jewish Approach to Repairing the World (Tikkun Olam): A Brief Introduction for Christians*, by Rabbi Elliot Dorff. When I first opened the book I was astonished to see that Rabbi Dorff dedicated the book to his good friend Richard Mouw, who was president of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, an Evangelical Christian seminary comparable to Gordon-Conwell here in Massachusetts. (I almost went there and my parents were friends with Richard Mouw.) In the introduction Rabbi Dorff speaks warmly of the productive interfaith relationship he has had for 35 years with Professor Mouw, whom he calls an “intelligently committed” Calvinist.

But their relationship is about more than simply being open to learning from one another. What allowed the relationship between Rabbi Dorff and Prof. Mouw to grow and develop was not just the professor's intellectual gifts but his genuine Christian character and commitment. Rabbi Dorff puts it this way: "Richard manages to fix the world each and every day in many, many ways. He is a true model of what we Jews call a mensch, a human being of real character—indeed a model for us all." This is a Jewish way of speaking about him, valuing his commitment to *tikkun olam*, making the world a better place. The two men could be theological sparring partners, but they found common ground in their shared commitment to the responsibility that God has given all of us to care for this world.

Despite our painful past, if we can eat together and sing together and tell stories together and dance together and study Torah together, then we can find ways to work together in a deeply divided and divisive world and be a light to that world. The descendents of Jacob and Esau can come together again in peace, embrace one another, and bless one another, and then decide not to go our separate ways. As Abraham's children together we can carry on his family legacy and his calling to bring healing and blessing to the world. That is my vision of what it means to be a Christian.

C. Life Before Death

In August 2021, in the midst of surging COVID cases and deaths, the governor of Mississippi said that Southerners are less scared of the virus because they believe in the Christian teaching about eternal life. (By "eternal life," he was referring to the common misconception that eternal life means going to heaven when I die.) He was clearly using this belief in life after death to justify his refusal to impose any COVID restrictions, resulting in his state having the highest per capita rate of new corona virus cases and deaths in the US, followed by other so-called "Bible Belt" states Florida, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana. There's something wrong here.

Someone once told me they had a good way of trying to convince people to become Christians. He wanted to ask them, "If you were to die tonight, do you know what would happen to you?" When I told him I didn't think that was the right way to begin with people, that Jesus did not present his good news by asking such a question, the person was puzzled and a bit frustrated. He, like most Christians, just assumed that this was the most important issue in a person's life, and that you could provide a simple, quick answer to that question. I challenged both those assumptions, and probably left him wondering if I had completely lost my faith.

For me, this Christian focus on and obsession with the afterlife is a serious problem, and the governor's comments are a clear illustration of that problem. I am a big fan of traditional, old-time gospel music but sometimes it bothers me to hear so many songs that are hoping to leave this world and go to "heaven:" "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Goin' Up Yonder," "Highway to Heaven," and so on. We used to sing an old country gospel tune, "This world is not my home/I'm just a passin' through." And there is an element of truth in that song, but also something very wrong. Biblically this world is our home and will

always be our home. We don't look forward to going to heaven; heaven is God's home. Our hope is for a new or renewed earth, and, as Rabbi Sacks says, our goal is to make a home for God in this world. Or as Jesus taught his disciples, we are to seek for God's will to be done on earth. We are not "going" anywhere.

Because we are not firmly rooted in Torah, and because early Christianity was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, Christians have all too often viewed this physical world as evil and only the heavenly, "spiritual" world as good. This denial of fundamental biblical truth has led to all sorts of confused thinking and behavior, not the least in our attitudes towards sex. When Christianity turned its back on its Jewish roots, it was able to come up with the non-biblical idea that connected sexual intercourse with original sin and valued celibacy as a higher spiritual state. Sexual passion and desire was viewed as sinful even in marriage. So you have the development of a special category of holy people (priests, monks, nuns) whose sanctity came from their celibacy. This directly goes against the foundational vision of creation we are given in Genesis 1.

Christian fixation on the afterlife has served to undermine the biblical focus on this life and this world. Too often, as in the case of the Mississippi governor, that fixation has led to ignoring the needs of people in this life and a justification of the status quo. This is particularly true of the type of Christianity that says all you have to do is believe a certain set of doctrines about God and Jesus and you're good. We have been so concerned about life after death that we have devalued life before death.

When we looked at the story Torah tells, we saw that at its center is the liberation of the Israelites from the oppressive power of the Egyptians. I argued that biblically, salvation first and foremost refers to a social and political reality that occurs in this life and in this world. Redemption is not simply being saved from my sins but rather being rescued from the sins of others, about corporate, social, and political evil and not simply personal sins. The story of Abraham and his family teaches us that God's saving purposes are focused on creating a new community that will live as a light to the world because it is radically different from that world. Israel was not only liberated from Egypt; Israel was to be the antithesis of Egypt, the antithesis of a society that provided freedom and wealth for an elite few and poverty and oppression for the rest, the antithesis of a nation that enslaved foreign immigrants as its cheap labor, the antithesis of a world superpower whose military budget far surpassed anything it spent on helping its own people, the antithesis of a country where one man could rule with absolute authority and expect unquestioned allegiance no matter what he said or did.

Now most of us probably don't know a lot about ancient Egypt. But what everybody knows about, the most distinctive and fascinating aspect of ancient Egyptian culture for us, is its obsession with death and the afterlife. Thousands of years later, their pyramids and mummies and elaborate sarcophagi, built with slave labor and at enormous expense, continue to bear witness to the central importance of this preoccupation. Life is an elaborate preparation for life after death.

In contrast, Torah contains no reference to an afterlife or "heaven" that awaits the faithful. Some of its laws, such as the prohibition of tattoos and other bodily disfigurement (Lev. 19:28) are really cautions to people to avoid pagan rituals for the dead or ancestor

consultation (Lev. 19:31). As we have seen, Torah makes it clear that anything associated with death must be kept separate from worship and the sanctuary and God's presence. The God of the Bible is the God of the living (as Jesus said). The focus in Torah is squarely on this life.

This is true for the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures as well. The book of Job refuses to wipe away his concerns about the injustices of his life with a promise of a better life beyond the grave. David does not pray in the Psalms for God to rapture him out of this world to a spiritual paradise; he prays that God will rescue him from people who are threatening and oppressing him here and now. Jeremiah does not comfort the Judeans in the midst of their horrific suffering by holding out to them the idea that all things have some sort of spiritual purpose and that their slain children are in a better place. The book of Lamentations simply bewails loudly and at length the horrors that have befallen the Judeans. It ends by asking when God will stop being angry with them and restore to them what they once had.

So also the author of Ecclesiastes affirms that everyone has the same fate as the animals—death—and that we don't know what happens after that (3:18-21), so one should simply enjoy whatever pleasures there are in this world without indulging in excess. The prophets demand God's compassionate justice here and now, in this world, in this life. Judaism does not deny the afterlife, but it focuses its energies on this life and this world. Even the rabbinic hope of *'olam ha-ba*, the "world to come," typically refers to a redeemed world under the rule of the Messiah, which is exactly what the New Testament teaches. The well-known passage in the Talmud that declares "All Israel have a share in the world to come" quotes as biblical support for this assertion Isaiah 60:21—"Your people all will be righteous, and they will inherit the land forever" (*Sanhedrin* 90a). Here clearly the prophet is talking about the land of Israel (although the Hebrew could also mean "the earth"), not some heavenly paradise. This is one of the many Scriptural passages that Jesus echoes when he promises that the humble will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5).