

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 4/10/22**

This week I forwarded you all an article on Passover that was sent to me by our classmate Meryl Lieberman. The article underlined the importance that the Exodus story has had for African Americans in particular, as it speaks to a sense of God's liberation and empowerment of oppressed immigrant peoples. Rabbi Sacks calls Passover "the eternal critique of power used by humans to coerce and diminish their fellow humans." Passover is a divine rejection of the values of Egypt, of the politics of empire.

Christians have connected the events of Holy Week to Passover, since they coincide in the New Testament, but we have tended to ignore the social and political implications of that feast, even though the heart of the story of Holy Week is the unjust conviction and execution of a Jewish rabbi by the Roman Empire. That story too is an eternal critique of human coercive power and the evils of Empire. But I doubt that very many Christians ever meditate on this theme on Good Friday. That is a good illustration of the main point of this class, that we have not taken seriously our Jewish roots, and have wandered off in a different direction entirely. So even though Christians regularly remember Jesus' last supper with his disciples (weekly or less frequently, depending on the church), and even though most Christians imagine it to have been an actual Passover meal, nothing in any Christian communion liturgy that I know of speaks of this fundamental meaning of Passover as an act of political liberation. It has all been spiritualized out of existence. So I wanted to share this article with you to meditate on this week as we commemorate the most important events of our faith.

Last week we began a discussion of a little-known part of the life of the Apostle Paul, a story that has to be pieced together from various discussions in his letters about his travel plans. It is a story only hinted at in Acts, about Paul taking up a financial offering from a number of different Gentile churches to take back to the economically struggling Jewish church in Jerusalem. In so doing Paul hopes to unite the Jewish and Gentile factions in the church and demonstrate their fundamental unity. He also hopes to demonstrate that his ministry to the Gentiles is not an anti-Jewish one, a theme Luke does emphasize in Acts. For me this story is important because it helps give us a different image of Paul from the one that we have inherited from our traditions.

The book of Acts only mentions this collection in passing. After he has come back to Jerusalem and been arrested for causing a disturbance in the Temple, Paul tells the Roman governor of Judea, "I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings" (Acts 24:17). To find out more about this, we have to turn to his letters.

Paul always insisted that he had a special calling to bring the good news about Jesus to Gentiles, to non-Jews. This seems to have created a certain amount of tension between him and some of the Jewish members of the Christian assemblies, especially the one in Jerusalem, the mother church, if you will. Paul alludes to this in his early letter to the

Galatians, but says that the pillars of the church, James and Peter and John, who were a kind of inner circle of Jesus' disciples, all supported his mission to the Gentiles with Barnabas his companion and recognized the divine nature of his calling (Gal. 2:9-10).

But, he adds, the Jerusalem elders had one request: "*that we would remember the poor,*" something Paul says he was eager to do. Certainly the Torah that these disciples had learned from Jesus insisted that his followers pay special attention to the needs of the poor and Paul would have learned the same thing from his teacher, the prominent rabbi Gamaliel.

But here in Galatians I think "the poor" has a more specific meaning. The Jerusalem church always seems to have struggled economically, and its leaders are reminding Paul not to forget them and their needs as he ventures off into Gentile territory. We know from Acts that somewhere around this same time, Paul and Barnabas had been involved with the church in Antioch (in Syria), and because of a prophetic word that there would be famine, they took up a collection for the Judean community, which they sent with Saul/Paul and Barnabas to give to the elders there (Acts 11:27-30). So "the poor" here refers specifically to the Judean Christians.

Paul continues to remember the poor, and years later comes up with a plan to collect monetary gifts from various churches that he has been involved with to take to Jerusalem. It is a project that he works on for quite a while as he travels and eventually he risks his life to see it accomplished. This is more than just charity for Paul, as we will see. It speaks to his larger vision for the church as a whole.

The first we hear of this collection is in **1 Corinthians 16:1-8**. Paul is writing from Ephesus, in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) where he has already spoken with other churches about this collection.

*"Now concerning the collection for the holy ones: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift (charis) to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. But I will stay here in Ephesus until Shavuot (Pentecost)."*

Paul says he plans to visit Corinth after passing through Macedonia, where he is also raising money. The Corinthians already know about the collection and seem to have asked Paul about it in a previous letter. Here he responds to their question by giving instructions about taking up this special offering. These are not general remarks on regular tithing or giving in the offering plate on a Sunday, despite the many sermons you may have heard on this passage. This is a special offering, an additional gift over and above what they are putting in the collection plate. Paul wants them to regularly set aside whatever they can for the Jerusalem community, and have it ready for him when he gets there. He does not want to have to spend time fundraising. People are asked to give what they can afford to this extra collection.

Note that at this point his plans are to send the money to Jerusalem with appointed emissaries and letters of introduction. Later, he will decide to go along as well. This collection is personal for Paul. He is not just sending a check; he is sending representatives of the churches. It is this personal connection that seals the relationship that Paul hopes to establish with the collection. The importance of this collection for Paul cannot be overstated.

Note that here Paul uses a theologically loaded word to refer to the offering: *charis* (v. 3; literally “grace”). He has already used it in Galatians 2:9 to refer to the divine calling of his mission to the Gentiles. Here that mission takes concrete form in the money Paul is collecting. He will use this word ten times in 2 Corinthians 8-9 to refer both to God’s favor and to the financial donation given by Christians to others.

## **2 Corinthians 8-9**

After receiving Paul’s letter, the Corinthians seem to have promised a generous gift so Paul is sending people to collect it from them “*So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised*” (9:3-5). But their commitment may be waning over time, since Paul is still busy elsewhere, and Paul writes to them again to encourage them to keep their promise, explaining more at length in these chapters why it is so important to him. Paul is not just an evangelist trying to save individual souls. He is concerned for the whole church, and for building up the body. His travel plans are usually referred to as “missionary journeys,” which is really a misnomer, because much of Paul’s travel is revisiting churches to strengthen and encourage them. For Paul, what we AMEs call the “connectional church” is important: the unity of the whole community is a central theme in Paul’s letters. That is part of why this offering for the Jerusalem saints matters so much to him. Paul is not simply interested in doctrinal agreement, or some sort of invisible “spiritual” unity. Such abstract realities must be made flesh.

The collection itself reflects the central theme in 2 Corinthians, what Paul calls the “ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation” (5:17-19). Paul is hoping for reconciliation with the Corinthians, with whom he has had some difficulties. He regards them as co-workers in this ministry of reconciliation (6:1), and he is hoping that the offering he is collecting will be a sign of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. The collection will heal the growing breach between Jewish Christians in Judea and the largely Gentile church elsewhere. It will demonstrate to the Judeans the genuineness of the Gentiles’ faith and their desire for *koinonia* with the Mother Church. *Koinonia* is usually translated “fellowship,” but it actually means “sharing together, having things in common.” They will have fellowship with the Judeans by giving them financial help.

Throughout this long passage, Paul views the offering as a concrete incarnation of three of his most important theological words: *diakonia* (“ministry, service”), *koinonia* (“fellowship”), and *charis* (“grace”). Sometimes reading in translation, it is difficult to see this, because translators have to scramble to find adequate words. Paul is using these words that we think are purely “spiritual” in a very concrete, down to earth way. Notice especially 2 Cor. 8:4, which uses all three words. Literally it reads: “*They [the*

*Macedonians]* begged us repeatedly for the *charis* and *koinonia* of the *diakonia* to the holy ones.” All three words here refer to the financial offering the Macedonian churches are making. Whatever “spiritual” overtones these words may have for Paul, in these passages Paul uses the words “ministry,” “fellowship,” and “grace” to refer to cold hard cash.

In these chapters, Paul gives us his most extensive explanation for this offering, and uses a number of persuasive arguments to encourage the Corinthians to give. I would just like to highlight a couple of points.

First, Paul holds up the example of Jesus. “*Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this grace. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*” (8:7, 9) In light of their indebtedness to the grace of Jesus, defined as a lavish gift of selfless love, they too should give generously. The Corinthians were proud of their abundant spiritual gifts (*charismata*), and Paul wants them to abound in this *charis*, this gift of giving, as well. This is the height of Paul’s understanding of the incarnation, not an intellectual abstraction but down to earth reality: what you do with your possessions.

The heart of the gospel, the good news about Jesus, is this *koinonia*, the community of goods, the sharing in common of what we have. Further on in this passage, Paul makes that clear. “*Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others*” (9:13). “Obedience” to the gospel that we talk about means giving to others. It is an act of witness to the world, an act of sanctifying the name of God, making God’s name holy before others. For Paul, this offering is evangelism.