

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 7/5/20

We started a discussion last week about Simon Wiesenthal's question: did he do the right thing in not forgiving the Nazi officer? (For further details, see last week's class notes.) Rabbi Sacks argues that from a Jewish perspective, Wiesenthal could not forgive the man for something he had done to other people. We also saw that Judaism insists that you must first seek forgiveness from humans for how you have sinned against them, before you seek God's forgiveness.

Jesus is in fundamental agreement with this rabbinic understanding of repentance. He tells his disciples that if they have offended someone else, before they go to the Temple to offer a sacrifice and draw near to God, they must first go to that person and do whatever is necessary to be reconciled (Matt. 5:23-24). Jesus also has a lot to say about the other half of that relationship. If you are unwilling to forgive, God will not forgive you (Matt. 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35; Luke 11:4). You can't make things right with God until you have made things right with others. But what does such repentance look like?

The Jewish concept of *teshuvah* is complex and comprehensive. The rabbis look to texts like Ezekiel 18:21-22 for their development of the idea of *teshuvah*: "If the wicked turn from all the sins that they have committed and keep all my decrees and do *mishpat* (justice) and *zedakah* (righteousness), they will surely live. None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them." No sacrifice or ritual of atonement is mentioned here, but rather the act of turning, which means not just feeling bad but abandoning sin and embracing God's way of righteous justice.

Although different rabbis and Jewish scholars speak in slightly different terms about what is involved in doing *teshuvah*, they all have certain fundamental components in common. *Teshuvah* must include a recognition of the sin, remorse for the sin, and confession to God and to whomever you have sinned against. In that confession, one must detail the sin itself and not just offer a vague general admission of guilt. (Contrast the Episcopal confession: "by what we have done and what we have left undone" or the AME: "Our manifold sins and wickedness which we from time to time most grievously have committed" or what many half-sincere people say: "If I have done anything to offend you"). Such generalities do not constitute true repentance in Judaism.

Equally important is making restitution for the wrong committed, repairing and restoring any damage caused by your actions. If the damage was financial, the general principle in Torah is that repayment must include a 20% penalty (Lev. 5:16; 6:5; Num. 5:5-7). If the damage was personal—for example, slandering someone's reputation—of course restitution is much more difficult. That is why the rabbis, as we saw a few weeks ago, considered verbal abuse to be a more serious sin than financial wrongdoing, because undoing how your words have hurt someone else or the impact they have had on other people may be almost impossible. But true repentance must try to do just that. That is why an act of murder is so serious, because restitution is not possible. The Nazi soldier not only could not ask forgiveness of those he had killed, he also could not restore their lives.

The final ingredient of *teshuvah* is a strong resolve not to repeat the behavior, a commitment to changing one's life. "One who says, 'I shall sin and repent, sin and repent,' or, 'I shall sin and Yom Kippur will atone for me,' Yom Kippur does not effect atonement" (*Yoma* 8:9). As Paul the Pharisee taught, you can't keep on sinning and depend on God's grace to cover it (Rom. 6:1-2). Repentance includes a sincere commitment to not persisting in sin, not continuing down the same road but turning in a different direction. You cannot take God's grace and forgiveness for granted and simply live the life you want.

In the Mishnah, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (early 2nd cent.) is quoted as saying, "Repent one day before your death" (*m. Avot* 2:15). What I think this somewhat paradoxical statement means is that one's life should be characterized by an attitude of repentance, not in the sense of walking around with a heavy load of guilt and remorse but in the positive sense of constantly turning to God and seeking to follow God's ways. It refers to a lifestyle, not merely an occasional act. "The concept of *teshuva* or repentance does not merely mean to experience regret and mend one's ways, as much as it implies the concept of spiritual movement, of growing, of changing for the better" (Rabbi Norman Lamm, *Genesis*, p. 174). *Teshuvah* is not merely about lamenting the past: it is a process of character formation, spiritual development, a part of becoming the person God wants you to be.