

Biblical Insights from the Rabbis Part 2

I. Introduction

Amy-Jill Levine, an Orthodox Jewish New Testament Scholar, in her book *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, talks about growing up Jewish in a Catholic neighborhood in New Bedford. She had mostly Christian friends but she also experienced nasty anti-Semitism from other Christians. When she reads the New Testament (“Why would you want to read such anti-Semitic stuff?” her aunt asks), she discovers where some of that comes from. “Yet,” she says, “I had, fortunately, been inoculated against seeing only hate [in the NT]. My Christian friends had modeled for me the grace and friendship that are at the heart of the church; my parents told me that Jesus was a Jew speaking to other Jews, and that his basic message was exactly the same as that of Judaism: to ‘love the Lord your God’ and to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” She concludes: “So I knew that, although the New Testament could be read as being anti-Jewish, *it did not have to be read that way.*”

For 2,000 years, the Bible has been used to justify hatred, vicious mistreatment, and even slaughter of Jews. And Christian doctrines have largely been shaped by that hostility towards Judaism. I have been trying for several decades now to rethink how we read the Scriptures so that they are not understood as anti-Jewish.

Jesus says that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). Yet traditional Christian theology has ignored the history of Israel in its telling of its own story, in the way we understand what it means to be a Christian. We go from creation and fall to salvation through Christ, omitting everything in between. I would argue that this is a flawed and incomplete caricature of biblical truth. I am convinced that the anti-Judaism of our Christianity, especially in the Protestant tradition, has left us with a shrunken and anemic gospel that focuses on future salvation rather than present responsibilities, that cares about people’s souls but not their bodies, and that has become utterly corrupted by the militant individualism of our culture. We have lost our ability to understand the Scriptures properly because of our attempt to define Christianity apart from the story of Israel. Christian anti-Judaism has blinded us as to how to read the Bible clearly.

The New Testament is not the Bible. It cannot stand on its own and never was meant to stand on its own. The Old Testament is the foundation upon which the NT is built. The NT is inadequate by itself. It does not have extensive treatments of important topics covered in the Old, such as care for the physical creation, or the world of nations and politics, or ownership of property, economic justice and debt relief, or the meaning and purpose of sacrifices. The NT takes these OT topics for granted, and a problem only arises because the church tends to treat the NT as if it were the whole Bible. The church has embraced the individualism of our pagan Western culture and so redefined words like redemption and salvation in ways that differ radically from how those words are used in the OT. And Jesus’

sacrificial death is understood in ways that are almost totally foreign to the OT understanding of sacrifices. So we are left with a self-centered, spiritualized, feel-good, “He did it just for me,” religion that ends up being just another modern version of the self-help movement. Such an environment is perfect for the growth of such heresies as the prosperity gospel and people’s grotesque fantasies about the end-times.

A quick example: this week I was looking at a talk that Cornell West gave where he says that in our churches Christians are praying for God to bless them whereas in fact we ought to be praying to be a blessing. That fundamental biblical insight comes from Torah, from Genesis 12:1-3.

So the teaching of the NT understood in isolation from the Old is bound to be distorted and incomplete, which is reflected in the unbalanced, insipid, and sentimental nature of much that passes for Christian teaching and faith in our world. ***The problem for most Christians is that they have been trying to live on the second floor of a building with no foundation.***

I have been arguing that we need to return to our Jewish roots, which Paul declares provide the rich sap that supports and nourishes our spiritual lives (Rom. 11:18). Last fall we returned to Torah, this time reading it with the help of insights from the rabbis, both ancient and modern, who provided us with some remarkable insights that are virtually unknown to Christians to help us rethink our own biblical traditions. We looked at some of Torah’s central themes and concerns and saw important connections with Jesus and the New Testament, connections that have not always been appreciated by Christians. We were challenged to think about the gospel in new ways. We will be continuing where we left off, and for anyone who did not participate in those discussions, the class materials are on Carole Copeland Thomas’ website, and you can review in detail what we covered.

The Notorious R.B.G. and the High Holy Days

But first, I wanted to speak briefly about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died a week ago on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year’s Day, as well as review some of what we discussed about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Holy Days. I didn’t really know anything about Justice Ginsburg’s relationship to Judaism, how observant she was or what her personal faith was like. But I did find a talk she gave in 2004 at the US Holocaust Museum that gave a small window into that issue, and directly connects to what we discussed last year.

She says, “My heritage as a Jew and my occupation as a judge fit together symmetrically. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish history and Jewish tradition. I take pride in and draw strength from my heritage, as signs in my chambers attest: a large silver mezuzah on my door post, [and] on three walls, in artists’ renditions of Hebrew letters, the command from Deuteronomy: ‘*Zedek, zedek, tirdof*’ — ‘Justice, justice shall you pursue.’ Those words are ever-present reminders of what judges must do that they ‘may thrive.’” (quoted in the *Washington Post*, Sept 19, 2020).

Justice Ginsburg is not just proof-texting here. The Hebrew words come from a passage we discussed last year: “Appoint for yourselves judges and officials throughout your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous justice. Justice, justice shall you pursue, in order that you may live and take possession of the land that the Lord your God

is giving you” (Deut. 16:18, 20). This passage is specifically referring to the kinds of judges God wants Israel to appoint. They are to pursue what I called the strange type of justice found in the Bible, a righteous justice, a compassionate justice that does not always conform to the strict letter of the law but rather which takes into account the needs of the poor and the precarious situation of the immigrant. Ginsburg clearly has reflected on the meaning of this passage for herself and her vocation as a judge. Although the passage literally reads, “in order that you may live,” Ginsburg quotes the JPS 1985 translation, “that you may thrive,” which is really what that verse means. The pursuit of justice is the biblical foundation for genuine, healthy life, an abundant life in community.

In Jewish tradition, a person who dies on the eve of Rosh Hashanah is considered to be especially righteous. I am not the one to judge the validity of this tradition. But another Jewish tradition has a more solid biblical basis. The Talmud states: “Any judge who issues a true judgment, it is as if he [or she!] became a partner to the Holy One in the creation” (*Shabbat* 10a). In other words, a faithful judge is doing God’s work in the world, upholding creation itself. We saw last year that one of the most astonishing teachings in Torah is that God has delegated his ruling authority over the world to humans and that, in the words of the rabbis, we become partners with God in creation. Since God is the ultimate Judge of the world, those human judges who issue fair, righteous, compassionate judgments are doing God’s work. Clearly, Justice Ginsburg understood that she had a divine calling, a calling to make the world a better place.

For Jews, the High Holy Days are a time of renewal and recommitment to that calling into a partnership with God. Tonight (September 27) is the beginning of Yom Kippur, the most important day in Judaism. It is the culmination of the Jewish High Holy Days, what are called the “Days of Awe,” ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah (New Year’s) that are dedicated to reflection, penitence, rectifying wrongs and turning back to God. Traditionally, Rosh Hashanah is understood to be the day that God created the world, and its central theme is God’s kingship, God’s rule over the world. The sense of awe during these days comes from a recognition of God as the one who holds the power of life and death in his hands. Jewish tradition teaches that during these days of awe, God decides who will live and who will die in the coming year. So people should humble themselves before God and turn away from things that are harmful and destructive so that they may have their lives inscribed in the Book of Life for another year.

So Rosh Hashanah is a celebration and welcoming of the new year. But it also has a somber tone. In order that Rosh Hashanah not turn into a grim holiday, the rabbis encouraged Jews to observe it in a spirit of optimism, confident that God will accept their repentance and give them a “good year,” which is the literal meaning of “*l’shana tovah*,” the greeting for that season. To that end they ordained that apples dipped in honey be served at all Rosh Hashanah meals to express their prayer for a sweet year.

Rosh Hashanah is marked specifically by the blowing of the *shofar*, usually a ram’s horn, an action that has been given multiple meanings. It is a proclamation of God’s kingship over the world; it recalls Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac; it echoes the trumpet sounds on Mt. Sinai as God gave the law to Moses; it is a wake-up call to repentance and return to God; and it foreshadows the trumpet sounds that will herald the coming of the

Messiah. The *shofar* is usually blown 100 times on Rosh Hashanah, as well as again to mark the end of Yom Kippur. The *shofar* is also blown during the month preceding Rosh Hashanah to call people to repentance.

Although Yom Kippur is one day specifically focused on repentance and forgiveness, in actuality the process begins a month before Rosh Hashanah, with special prayers and rituals throughout that month to help people reflect on what they have done in the past year. This time of reflection is to be used to set things right with people one has wronged, to ask forgiveness and make restitution. The idea is that you repair those human relationships so that on Yom Kippur you can effectively seek God's forgiveness. In Judaism, repentance (*teshuvah*: "to turn, return") is a complex process of recognizing, confessing, and turning from sin and returning to God.

As part of this process, during the Days of Awe some Jews perform a ceremony called *tashlikh*, which involves symbolically throwing one's sins into a body of water. Many Jews in New York City perform the ceremony from the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges; others go to the ocean or a river or small pond. We saw a family doing this last Sunday in Central Park. The practice reflects Micah 7:18-19— "*Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*" It is a dramatic way of releasing the burden of sin.

Yom Kippur itself is the one day of required fasting in Judaism, and except for small children and those whose health does not allow it, the fast is absolute: no food or drink of any kind for 25 hours. In addition, as part of the day's self-denial, you are not supposed to bathe or wash, use cosmetics or other forms of self-adornment, wear leather shoes, or engage in marital relations. Wearing white clothing is also traditional. There are five different prayer services in the course of the day, which include lengthy private and public confession of sins. The community humbly recognizes its corporate sinfulness and asks God's forgiveness.

In keeping with the theme of fasting, it is customary in synagogues to read Isaiah 58 on Yom Kippur. There the prophet insists that fasting is not simply a private spiritual exercise where we focus on ourselves, but rather it should reorient our focus to others, to those who are without food and other necessities of life, to those who are suffering injustice and oppression (vv.6-7). Don't come to God pretending to be a nation that practices righteousness while in fact having forsaken God's justice (v. 2). Without an active practice of God's righteous justice, says Isaiah, God simply will not hear your prayers or your repentance (v. 4). Your fasting and piety and spiritual disciplines are useless. As I have been emphasizing in this course, biblically your claims to having a relationship with God are meaningless unless you are engaged in pursuing God's compassionate justice in the world. That, I think, is the Jewish foundation for Ruth Bader Ginsburg's pursuit of justice in her career.