

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis**  
**Class Notes 3/22/20**

In our class two weeks ago, we concluded our discussion of the building of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*, a dwelling place) by noting that the New Testament picks up this idea of the faithful community as a sacred space that makes a home for God when it sees the body of Christ as God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:5). Specifically, in 2 Cor. 6:16, Paul quotes Lev. 26:11-12 (mixing it with phrases from Exodus 25:8 and 29:45), in which God speaks of placing his *mishkan* in Israel's midst and living among them. Paul uses this point to emphasize that the Corinthian believers should distance themselves from pagan practices, especially the idolatry present in Roman temples: the idolatry of wealth and power, the idolatry of the State, the idolatry of fertility rites and sexual pleasure. Remember, Israel was to create an alternative society, a community that was counter-cultural, a different kind of nation entirely from the Egyptian empire. The rationale for the laws in Leviticus is clear: "You shall be holy unto me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from other peoples to be mine" (Lev. 20:26). They are to be a holy people, a community that is completely distinct from the surrounding culture, so that they can be a sanctuary, a home for the living God. Paul is saying the same thing here about the Corinthian community, and about the church in general. 1 Peter makes the same point. We are to build a home for God in the midst of the darkness of the world by being a community of light, a community whose good works show God's glory to the world and cause God's name to be honored (2 Cor. 6:14-18; 1 Pet. 2:9-12).

As we discussed in class, for the early Christians, this might have serious political, social, and economic consequences. Declaring that Jesus was Lord meant that Caesar, (contrary to his widespread propaganda and daily tweets), was not, and therefore they could not pledge their allegiance to the Roman state. This shortly was to lead to imprisonment and death for many Christians. Faithfulness, removing themselves from the idolatry of the Roman temples, cost something: social and economic isolation, prejudice and persecution.

This is one reason I think it vitally important for the church to take a fresh look at the Jews and how they have lived as an alternative community in the world. They had to establish their own business networks, their own social welfare system, their own educational system. They were able to survive as a people by bonding together in mutual support. The early Christians had to do the same thing, and African Americans have often had to do that as well. Being a holy people in order to make a home in the world for a holy God will necessarily put us at odds with that world. But that is the only way we can be a light to the world.

#### E. Sanctifying the Name

One of the fundamental principles of Judaism is *kiddush hashem*, literally, "sanctifying the name [of God]." Jesus, as a good Jew, made this the first petition in the prayer he taught his followers: "Hallowed be thy name." It is a phrase we pass over quickly and

rarely think about what it might mean. The rabbis can help. The notion of sanctifying God's name, and its opposite, desecrating the name, come from Leviticus: "You shall keep my commandments and observe them: I am the Lord. You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel: I am the Lord who sanctifies you, bringing you out of the land of Egypt to be your God" (Lev. 22:31-33). Here again we see a reciprocal relationship between what God does for us and what we do for God. But what does this mean?

In the context of Leviticus, God is speaking about keeping the divisions, the boundaries He has established, between the sacred and non-sacred, holy and ordinary. God has sanctified, or hallowed—made holy—his people precisely by bringing them out of Egypt to be a people completely different from that Empire. The people are to maintain holiness, as we have seen, as a way of making a place for God in their midst.

The prophet Ezekiel expands the understanding of this phrase to refer to how God is perceived by the nations, by the other peoples of the world (Ezek. 36:16-27). Israel's sin not only polluted their land but also desecrated God's name. God promises to restore them to their land and cleanse them so that they will once again be obedient to God's commandments. Then God's name will again be sanctified in the eyes of the world. The world will understand who God really is. The whole point of holiness is not simply personal piety but to be a light to the world, to show God to the world.

The key point in Ezekiel 36 is that this will happen "in you" or "among you" (v. 23). As we have seen, God's glory, God's palpable presence in the world, finds a home in the community of God's faithful people (Ex. 25:8). God's name, God's very self, the essential meaning of who God is, is sanctified in the midst of a holy people. The holiness of the community proclaims the holiness of its God.

The Talmud associates sanctifying God's name with the command, "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deut. 6:5): "This means that the name of Heaven shall be beloved because of you" (*Yoma* 86a). Our love for God should result in others also loving God.

The Talmud goes on to say that a person who dutifully studies the Scriptures but is dishonest in business and discourteous in his relationship to others will in fact desecrate God's name. The behavior of a person who claims to love God brings honor or dishonor to the name of God.

When Moses in anger strikes the rock rather than speaking to it, God says: "You did not trust me enough to sanctify me in the presence of the Israelites" (Num. 20:12; see also Deut. 32:51). Although the precise nature of the offense is not clear, Moses' failure to sanctify God's name in the eyes of the people is serious enough that God denies him entrance into the Promised Land.

Rabbi Sacks sums up this fundamental Jewish idea: "We are God's ambassadors on earth. The way we live affects how others see him. God needs us...If we live well, becoming a blessing to others, we become witnesses to the transformative power of the divine presence. God lives within the human situation to the extent that we live his will" (*To Heal*, p. 67). Or as Rabbi Yeshua (Jesus) said, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to you Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Or as one of his Jewish disciples said, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles so that though they slander you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds

and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12). This is what it means to make a home for God in the world, a place where God can be seen by others. God desires to make his tent among us, in the midst of a faithful community of holiness, where his name is sanctified, made holy, hallowed by how we live with each other. This is the essence of what Jesus tells his disciples in his final speech to them before his death: that the disciple’s love for one another will show the world God’s glory and God’s truth (John 14-17). So when we pray, “Hallowed be thy name,” we are not to imagine that we are praying for God to do something. Rather, we are taking the responsibility upon ourselves to do something for God, to sanctify His name in the world, to make the world know that our God is the living God, an awesome, powerful, loving God.