

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

F. Faith as Protest

We have all grown up with the Sunday school version of Noah, the perfectly righteous man in the midst of an utterly sinful world who does exactly what God commands him to do. Yet that childish telling of the story omits the biblical ending: Noah, passed out drunk and naked, shaming himself and his family (Gen. 9:20-23). What is the Bible doing with this story? Why does it end this way?

The rabbis wrestled hard with this question. Rather than ignoring it and insisting on Noah as a model of righteousness, they looked again at the narrative and noticed something odd. When the rain stops, the floodwaters recede, and the ark rests on dry land, you expect the family to emerge. Instead, Noah waits 40 days and then goes through an elaborate procedure to see if the flood is over that lasts a couple more months. Eventually, God has to order Noah out of the ark (Gen. 8:15-16).

There is a fascinating midrash on this text:

Once the waters had abated, Noah should have left the ark. However, Noah said to himself, "I entered with God's permission, as it says, 'Go into the ark' (Gen. 7:1). Shall I now leave without permission?" The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Is it permission, then, that you are seeking? Very well, then, here is permission, as it is said 'Come out of the ark'" (8:16).

Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai said: "If I had been there, I would have broken down the ark and taken myself out" (Tanhuma Buber, Noach 13-14).

Rabbi Sacks notes the exasperation with Noah in this midrash. ***"When it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission"*** (Genesis, p. 45). Throughout the story, Noah has been silently obedient to God (6:22; 7:5, 9, 16). He does exactly what God commands him to do. Yet, Sacks argues, what the story of Noah tells us is that ***"obedience is not enough."*** God wants us to develop maturity, responsibility, not simply unthinking obedience. Torah ends Noah's story on a sour note so that we will go back and look more closely at what is missing from the story.

Ultimately it is Abraham, not Noah, who is the model of faith in Torah (and for the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus as well). When God sets about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sinfulness, Abraham does not just passively go along with it. He steps forward and challenges God: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Gen. 18:23-25).

Abraham continues to argue with God over the destruction of the wicked cities. If he had been in Noah's shoes, he certainly would have tried to save the world. Noah saved

only himself and his family. R. Sacks draws a devastating conclusion from Noah's story: "Noah's end—drunk, disheveled, an embarrassment to his children—eloquently tells us that if you save yourself while doing nothing to save the world, you do not even save yourself. Noah, so the narrative seems to suggest, could not live with the guilt of survival" (*Genesis*, p. 46). More than anything, God wants us to care passionately about the lives of others and about the world around us, not simply to be concerned for our own personal salvation.

The difference between Noah and Abraham is captured in another midrash by R. Yehudah bar Ilai (one of the most important 2nd century rabbis): ***“Noah walked with God’ (Gen. 6:9)—the meaning of this phrase can be understood by a parable. A king had two sons, one grown up, the other a child. To the child he said: ‘Walk with me.’ But to the adult son he said: ‘Walk before me.’ So it was that to Abraham, God said: ‘Because you are wholehearted, walk before me’ (Gen. 17:1). But of Noah, the Torah says that he ‘walked with God’”*** (*Bereshit Raba* 30:10). Noah was like a child who dutifully obeys his father, nothing more. Abraham was mature, grown up, able to walk ahead of God down the path God had set out but willing to challenge God when necessary in order to fully understand and follow that path.

This, I would argue, is what God is thinking about when he deliberates whether to tell Abraham what his plans are for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:17). God's purpose for Abraham is not simply that he be faithful but that he become a teacher of his children about following God's way, the way of righteousness and justice (v. 19). I think God decides to tell Abraham what He is planning precisely because God wants Abraham to question God's justice as part of Abraham's growth into maturity as a man of God (we will see more of this in the next section).

We see this same passion for justice driving other biblical figures to question and argue with God. Moses repeatedly does this on behalf of the people. When they fall into idolatry with the golden calf, God wants to wipe them out and start again with Moses (Ex. 32:10). Moses may be flattered but unlike Noah he tells God no, using an argument that has its roots in sanctifying the name. If God were to do so, the Egyptians would question the goodness of God's purposes in liberating the Israelites (v. 12). God relents and the people are spared. A second time, after the people embrace the fearful report of the ten spies and plan to return to Egypt, God again wants to wipe them out and start over with Moses (Num. 14:11-12). Again Moses argues against the plan in the same way, that it would look bad to the Egyptians. Moses encourages God to show his greatness by forgiving the people rather than destroying them (vv. 17-19). A third time, when Korah challenges Moses' authority and God seeks to destroy the community, Moses argues the justice of punishing all for the sins of a few (Num. 16:22).

There is an astonishing midrash that imagines God reflecting on Moses' challenge to his plan. ***“Thus said the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘When I win, I lose; and when I lose, I win. I defeated the generation of the Flood, but I lost thereby, for I destroyed my own creation.... The same happened with the generation of the Tower of Babel and the people of Sodom. But in the days of Moses who defeated me [by persuading me to forgive the***

Israelites whom I had sworn to destroy], I gained for I did not destroy Israel'” (Pesikta Rabbati 9). The midrash recognizes that God does not take delight in the destruction of the wicked. They are still his creation, his children, created in his image. So God celebrates Moses’ arguing with him, because in losing the argument, in fact God wins on a deeper level.

Unlike Noah, Abraham and Moses, the two greatest figures in Torah, challenge God on behalf of sinful people. Rabbi Sacks says that God not only speaks, God listens, because God wants to hear our voice, not just his own. “God did not create humankind to demand of it absolute submission to his all-powerful will” (*To Heal*, p. 23). As we have seen, God indeed has entered into a partnership with us and has created us to be responsible with him for this world. That means dialogue with God, and even debate. It means, contrary to Karl Marx, that faith does not simply accept what comes as God’s will. People of faith do not glibly repeat, “It’s all good.” The Bible teaches a religion of “sacred discontent,” a faith, in Rabbi Sacks’ words, that is protest.

The most radical biblical figure who embodies this type of faith is Job, who angrily challenges God’s justice, God’s management of the world. At the same time, Job stubbornly maintains his faith in God, despite his wife’s advice to curse God, to give up on God, and die. And many sermons have been preached that make Job into a pious figure of unrelenting faith. But it is a faith that is protest—protest against the inequities of life, and protest as well against all forms of religious piety that teach acceptance of those inequities.

Rabbi Sacks again provides us with a fresh perspective on Job. He says that the book is not so much about Job’s faith in God, but about God’s faith in Job (*To Heal*, ch. 14). That is the starting point of the story: God holds up Job as a trustworthy human who will be faithful no matter what happens to him. God affirms his faith in Job (1:8; 2:3), is willing to engage in dialogue with him, and criticizes Job’s friends for their false religiosity. “You have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has,” God tells them at the end of the book (42:7). It is Job’s protest, not the friends’ pious platitudes, that is the sign of true faithfulness.

So a mature faith includes a willingness to protest, to challenge God’s justice. In doing so, we are walking side by side with other biblical figures—with the Psalmist’s “How long, O Lord?” (13:1; 35:17; 74:10; 89:46; 94:3): how long will the wicked be prospering while the righteous are beaten down? How long before you act to rescue us and make things right? With Jeremiah’s protest: why do the wicked prosper and live content? (Jer. 12:1). Or with Jeremiah’s lament: why have you forgotten us completely? (Lam. 5:20). With Habakkuk’s “How long will I cry for help and you not listen?” (1:2) and “Why do you keep silent while the wicked devour the righteous?” (1:13). Faith, at times, means singing the blues.

Jesus understood this as well. He tells a parable about a widow who persists in demanding justice from an indifferent judge (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus assures his disciples that God is indeed just, but also exhorts them to cry out to God for justice day and night. The parable holds up the widow as an example of the kind of faith/fulness that Jesus is looking

for (v. 8). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus himself prays in anguish for God to change his mind and come up with some other plan that doesn't involve the cross. Almost certainly this is not the first time Jesus challenged what God asked him to do, nor will it be the last.

Such faith, even Jesus' own faith, at times is a struggle, a wrestling match with God. We see this depicted clearly in Torah in the strange story about Jacob the night before he is to meet his brother Esau, after 22 years of living in fear that Esau wants to kill him (Gen. 32:22-30). Jacob has made every preparation he can think of for the meeting, but his nighttime grappling with a mysterious figure reveals his ongoing inner turmoil. His rift with Esau began with his stealing Esau's blessing. Yet here he is, still struggling with God for a blessing. Surprisingly, he prevails, and is given a new name, **Israel**, meaning "*the one who struggles with God.*" That struggle has cost him something, left its painful mark. Yet Torah sees this as a defining moment in the history of God's people, the moment that gives them their name. They will be a people of faith, a faith that wrestles with God (and with humans) and prevails (v. 29).

Rabbi Sacks comments: "The classic function of religion throughout history has been to reconcile people to the random brutalities of fate, the injustices of society, the triumph of might over right, the brevity of life itself and the pains and disappointments with which it is fraught. In a thousand different ways, religion has represented an alternative reality, a 'haven in a heartless world,' an escape from the strife and conflict of everyday life into the quiet spaces of the soul, or the thought of life beyond death." Words like religion, spirituality, and faith, he says, for most people mean peace, serenity, inwardness, consolation. "Judaism is the great exception" (*Genesis*, p. 237).

Biblical faith is the opposite of a religion whose primary focus is on life after death or eternal bliss or spiritual escapism. True Israelites are those who struggle with both God and the world for justice, freedom, human dignity, integrity and compassion here, not in heaven. R. Sacks says that "*Abraham was the first person in recorded history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God.*" The Bible gives us, not an escape from this world, nor simple passive obedience, but rather the daunting and at times painful responsibility of active engagement with this world, an engagement that may lead us into conflict with God Himself.

Jesus is often quoted by pious preachers to suggest that all you need is a child-like faith (Mark 10:15). But clearly here Jesus is talking about entering the kingdom, becoming part of the family and people of God. He is not saying that your faith should remain on that childish level. Faith needs to grow and develop and mature (see the parable of the sower). The rest of the NT affirms this: we can't remain as infants in the faith (I Cor. 3:1-2; 13:11; Eph. 4:11-16; Hebrews 5:11-6:1). We are to be growing into maturity as we exercise our faith, a faith that is never comfortable with the way things are but always restlessly seeks to follow the "way of the Lord," the way of righteousness and justice in an unrighteous and unjust world, even if at times that faith has to protest the seeming injustice of God Himself.