

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis**  
**Class Notes 4/19/20**

(A Strange Kind of Justice, cont.)

Two weeks ago we began looking at two important biblical words *tzedakah* and *mishpat*, which are usually translated as “righteousness” and “justice.” We saw that in English those two words have distinct meanings—righteousness referring more to a person’s character, one’s individual holiness and integrity, while justice is a more public, social word that seeks equality for all members of a community. Justice is a political word while righteousness is a religious word. But in the Bible those two words are much more closely related and at times are even interchangeable. Together they define the kind of community and the kind of people God wants. God tells Abraham that God’s way, the path God wants Abraham and his family to follow, is the way of doing righteousness and justice (Gen. 18:19).

I went on to point out the strange quality of this righteous justice in Torah. It is a justice that is not completely impartial or blind to the needs of the less fortunate. We saw that it requires business owners not to try to maximize their profits but to share what they produce with the poor. Torah also prohibits lenders from charging interest to the poor. For example, Lev. 25:35-37 says: “If any of your own people become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that your poor neighbors may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit” (see also Ex. 22:25; Psalm 15:5; Ezekiel 18:17; 22:12). Jesus clearly affirms this principle as part of what it means to do good, to be righteous (Luke 6:34-35).

Torah also mandates the cancellation of all debts every seven years (Deut. 15:1-4). Torah recognizes ongoing debt as a burden that can easily grow oppressive and even life-threatening, and thus makes provisions for keeping the debt spiral under control. Jesus also spoke repeatedly about the importance of cancelling debts and uses it as the basis for some of his teaching about forgiveness in general (Matt. 6:12; 18:23-34; Luke 7:41-42; 16:1-9). Only by cutting ourselves off from how Jesus’ teaching is grounded in Torah has it been possible for the church to spiritualize what Jesus says and ignore what he says about down-to-earth economic justice.

These are radical ideas that seek to limit the excesses of a market economy that allows the rich to get richer while the poor get poorer. From the standpoint of a strictly impartial justice, they don’t make sense, because they seem unfair to businesses and lenders. But the strange quality of biblical justice is that it includes compassion for those in need. The wealthy should not be profiting off the poor.

These biblical principles, by the way, are the reason for the unique business model of Habitat for Humanity, which sells its homes at cost (taking no profit) and provides homebuyers with an interest-free loan. The founder of Habitat, Millard Fuller, was a Christian man who understood the economic inequities of our society and looked to the

Bible for an alternative way of thinking to help provide decent affordable housing for the underclass. The international success of Habitat for Humanity is a testimony to the strange kind of justice found in Torah.

Biblically, a society is judged by how it takes care of the least advantaged, the outsider and the powerless, the stranger who is passing through (we will talk about this more in a couple of weeks). A just society, ultimately, will have no poor people, no people whose basic human needs are neglected (Deut. 15:4). Torah is more concerned about the well-being of the community as a whole rather than what we think of as most important, individual rights. Remember, Israel was to construct an alternative society, a nation unlike all others, a nation without the gross economic disparities that existed in other nations of the world.

This is a central theme not only in Torah but in the prophets as well. Jeremiah, speaking to the king, says, “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness (*tzedakah*), his upper rooms by injustice (*mishpat*), making his subjects work for nothing, not paying them for their labor. He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.’ So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father [King Josiah] have food and drink? He did *mishpat* and *tzedakah*, and it was well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so it was well. Is that not what it means to know me?’ says the Lord” (Jer. 22:13-16).

Jesus also tells his disciples that this is what it means to know him. He says you can perform all sorts of signs and wonders, you can preach electrifying sermons, you can have a powerful TV deliverance ministry, you can hold dynamic conferences on spiritual gifts and prophecy and the end times, and still not know him (Matthew 7:21-23). If you have not recognized the face of Jesus in the poor and needy, then you don’t know Jesus (Matt. 25:31-46). If people who call themselves Bible-believing evangelicals were to define knowing God, having a personal relationship with God, in this biblical way, the church and our world would be a different place.

Interestingly, the word *tzedakah* in post-biblical Judaism comes to refer specifically to acts of what we would call charity, giving to those in need. Rabbi Sacks argues that the Hebrew word is ultimately untranslatable because it joins together two concepts that are opposites in other languages: justice and charity. Justice is something that can be legally mandated and is expected to be impartial while charity is a voluntary act of love and compassion. Yet in Judaism, charity is a strict requirement of the law and can be enforced, if necessary, by the rabbinic courts. (*To Heal*, p. 32).

Giving to others in need is such an important part of Judaism that the rabbis insist that even the poor need to give to the poor. The Talmud states: “Even a poor person who lives on *tzedakah* is obligated to give *tzedakah* to another” (*Gittin* 7b). At first this might strike us as ridiculous. But Rabbi Sacks argues that it makes sense if we understand that biblically, giving is essential to human dignity.

He cites a passage from Primo Levi's account of his time as a prisoner in Auschwitz (*If This is a Man*). When the Germans abandoned the camp because the Allied troops were closing in, they left behind the sick prisoners who were unable to walk. It was a cold January, and Levi and two of his friends decided to find a way to build a fire in the unheated hospital. As the warmth began to spread, he says that something seemed to relax in them, and another prisoner who was suffering from typhus proposed to the others that they offer a slice of bread to those who had made the fire. A day earlier this would have been an unthinkable act, because the unwritten law of the prison was to hoard what you could for yourself. Levi says that this moment can be seen as the beginning of the change in them from prisoners back to human beings again. Desperately poor people still need to be able to give to others. It is part of their humanity.

We were created to share with others, to give, and not just to take from the world. The poor person is a human being like any other who needs to have the empowering and soul-shaping experience of giving to others in need. The rabbis recognize that our self-worth, our humanity itself, consists not in what we possess but in what we give. Such giving is the essence of a just righteousness, a righteous justice. And it is the heart of the kind of society God wants his people to create.

At Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, there is a special garden commemorating those whom they call the "Righteous Gentiles," non-Jews who helped save Jewish lives from the Nazis. Not all of them were people we would think of as "good people," people whose lives were characterized by personal holiness. Perhaps the most famous of these righteous Gentiles is Oskar Schindler, a profit-driven, somewhat shady businessman who hired Jews for his factory because they were cheaper than other laborers. He was also a member of the Nazi party and his factory produced armaments and cookware for the military. Yet he can be numbered among the righteous because of his willingness to use his wealth and risk his own life to save people who were considered vermin. That is biblical righteousness, a righteousness that necessarily fights for justice in the world, especially for those the world ignores or hates.

So when people mistakenly speak of the God of the Old Testament as a God of justice and wrath while the God of the NT is a God of love and compassion, as if those were two completely separate things, they show their ignorance not only of Scripture in general but also of the biblical concept of justice, a strange kind of justice that incorporates compassion and concern for those in need, a justice that recognizes that the political and legal and economic systems often are weighted in favor of the wealthy and powerful and seeks to mitigate that situation by championing the cause of those who are left out. Justice and righteousness, fairness and compassion and love for all, are closely intertwined and together they define what it means to walk in the way of the Lord.