

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 5/10/20

We were talking about tithing in the context of a discussion of the third love command: to love the foreigner or immigrant as yourself. The primary purpose of the tithes was to support the poor, including the foreigner. Those who owned land, who had economic capital, were to share some of what they produced with those who didn't. This was only one of the ways Torah mandates help for the poor.

We saw that Torah insists repeatedly that God's people should love and care for the foreigner living in their midst, and the Bible spells out in practical ways what that looks like. Immigrants have a right not only to live in Israel and be treated as equals under the law, but also to share in its welfare provisions if they are unemployed or underemployed. Torah contains a strong warning that if you deny them *mishpat*, the righteous and compassionate justice we have talked about, you will bring a curse on yourselves as a nation.

The rabbis go even deeper in thinking about these laws. They look at Exodus 22:21 that says "Do not mistreat or oppress the foreigner" and ask what the difference is between mistreatment and oppression. They conclude that oppression refers to economic wrongdoing, taking advantage of their vulnerable situation to rob them or use them as cheap labor or withhold their pay. Mistreatment, the rabbis said, refers to verbal abuse, denigrating foreigners because of their family or ethnic background. Their elaboration of this difference is fascinating: "Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: verbal abuse is worse than monetary wrongdoing. Rabbi Eleazar said: one affects the person, the other only his money. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said: for one restoration is possible, but not for the other" (*Bava Metzia* 58b). Financial mistreatment can be rectified but hateful speech both damages the public reputation of the other and subjects them to shame and emotional pain. That is a sin that cannot be easily rectified or made right, and therefore repentance becomes much more difficult. For the most vulnerable in society, care must be taken not only to treat them fairly and provide for their basic needs, but also to uphold their personal dignity and worth. That is what it means to love the foreigner as yourself.

This command to actively love the stranger raises a separate issue. In our day, love is usually seen as an uncontrollable emotion that you just have to

follow wherever it leads you. (Allen Callahan once said that it is a form of mental illness.) Because of this, many have questioned how the Bible can command people to love. Most biblical scholars, Jewish and Christian, have responded that love is not a feeling, it is an action—helping others and meeting their needs no matter what we may feel.

For decades I subscribed to this viewpoint, and it contains an important truth, as we saw when we considered the command to love your neighbor as yourself. Clearly love does refer to actions and not just feelings. Torah says, “If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, don’t hesitate; be sure you help your enemy with it” (Ex. 23:4-5). Jesus tells his disciples to do good to their enemies (Luke 6:27), and Paul quotes Prov. 25:21: “If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Rom. 12:20). As we saw, the command to love your neighbor is given in the context of a situation where you have been wronged and feel angry and want to take revenge. The Bible clearly indicates that how you feel about people or what kind of a relationship you have with them should not prevent you from helping them when they are in need. You don’t have to like someone to love them.

But in a discussion of the love commands, modern day Rabbi Shai Held questions the common explanation that by love, the Bible is only talking about actions. He looks more closely at the text itself, and points out that the command to love your neighbor is contrasted with a hateful heart and the desire for revenge, a strong feeling that the text connects with bearing a grudge (*The Heart of Torah*, Vol. 2, p. 61). These are emotional states, not simply actions. The subsequent command to love the stranger, the third love command (Lev. 19:34), is based on empathy, feeling with them and for them, of understanding their plight from the inside because Israel has shared that experience. As we have seen, Israel’s love for the stranger is to be heartfelt, growing out of not only their love for God but also out of their painful experience as strangers in Egypt. Israel is to be the opposite of Egypt, no more so than in how it treats foreigners. Israel literally knows “the soul of a stranger” (Ex. 23:9) because they have been in their place. That is one of the purposes of the Passover celebration: to remind Israel of the pain they suffered as foreigners in Egypt, so that they will not act the same way. Torah commands us to use our negative experiences to develop empathy for others, to develop compassion for their situation, rather than to turn bitter and resentful.

Concrete actions matter, but so do feelings. We are to love God with all of our heart and soul, all of our inner self, including our feelings. Torah asks us to

feel passionately about God and to observe his commandments. More than just outward show, our inner life must be transformed so that our love of God and others comes from the heart. So when the Torah commands us to love, it calls for doing *and* feeling, not doing rather than feeling. Sometimes, it is true, in order to develop that feeling, you have to begin with compassionate actions, with doing the right thing whether you feel like it or not. I cannot love everyone with the same passionate commitment I have for my spouse or children but I can learn to care about my neighbor, and even my enemy, even when I have been wronged. We can learn to respond to them as human beings like ourselves, created in God's image and are loved by God. If we love God with all our heart, we will also love in the same way all those created in God's image, whether they are our neighbor or a stranger.

I have been talking about the importance of the idea that we are all created in God's image as the basis for the love commands. But Rabbi Sacks points out something puzzling and paradoxical about this idea. Torah emphasizes time and again that *God has no image*. God is above nature and incapable of natural representation. Idols are wrong because they limit and diminish who God is by restricting God to a certain image. When Moses asks God's name, God tells him, "I will be what I will be" (Ex. 3:14; most scholars think this is a better understanding of the Hebrew). R. Sacks says that this refers to God's creative freedom. God cannot be limited by a particular representation of who he is because God is always doing new things, unexpected things. God is much bigger than our human imaginings, and God refuses to be put in a box. Humans somehow bear the image of a God who has no image. We have the creative freedom to be who we will be, for good or for ill.

The ancient rabbis help us understand this paradox and its implications. Speaking of the creation of the first human, the Mishnah says, "For a man strikes many coins from the same die, and all the coins are alike; whereas the Holy One, blessed be He, struck every man from the die of the first man, and yet no man is quite like his fellow" (*Sanhedrin* 4:4). We are all created in the same image, and yet because it is the image of the imageless God, we are all different. So it is precisely in that difference that we see God's image. The implication of this is clear: ***To see God's image only in those who resemble us is idolatry.*** That means to love only those who are like us is idolatry.

Rabbi Sacks comments: "The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his." (*The*

Dignity of Difference, p. 201). The celebration of diversity is not just a politically correct attitude: it is a celebration of who God is as reflected throughout humanity. It comes from this profound understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God.

That is why the Talmud draws a surprising conclusion from Abraham's act of welcoming strangers (Gen. 18:1-8). Commenting on this passage, Rabbi Yehuda says, "Welcoming wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence (*Shekinah*)" (*Shabbat* 127a). This comes from a close reading of the Hebrew text and an ingenious way of understanding what is happening in this story. The rabbis raise the question: does Abraham have three visitors or four? Most Jewish and Christian commentators have seen three men coming to Abraham, with God somehow as one of the three men. But the rabbis notice that while the pronouns in verse 3 are singular (where Abraham addresses one person, whom he calls "my lord"), they switch to plural in verse 4. English translations hide the difference because we don't have singular and plural yous. (I have used "Southern" English to show the difference in the following translation.)

Abraham said [to God], "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by."

[Then turning to the three men, he said,]

"Let a little water be brought, and then you all may wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you all something to eat, so you all can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you all have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

There are two rabbinic solutions to the issue. One is to see Abraham addressing the leader of the group in the singular (verse 3), and then switching to address the whole group (verse 4). But the more daring understanding, adopted by some rabbis, is to see Abraham addressing God in verse 3 and then turning to the three men in verse 4. To me, this makes slightly better sense of the text. So there would be four visitors, not three.

In this reading, as the Lord appears to Abraham, three strangers show up, and so Abraham asks God to wait while he attends to the strangers (v. 3). Then he turns to the men and addresses their needs. In other words, given the choice of listening to God or offering hospitality to humans, Abraham chooses the latter.

But how could this example of faith turn his back on God? R. Yehudah Loew of Prague (16th century), commenting on the Talmud's radical teaching, explains that "welcoming guests is tantamount to honoring God. To welcome a guest into your home and treat him with respect because he is created in the likeness and image of God—this is considered like honoring the *Shekinah* itself." We are obligated to treat other human beings with the honor and respect due to God himself because they bear God's image. Abraham's turn away from God is in another, more profound sense, a turning toward God.

And in this reading of the story, God does indeed wait. Another rabbi argues in that same discussion that this shows the difference between God and humans. In the human world important people don't get asked to wait by those who are socially less important, while here God acquiesces to Abraham's request. God honors Abraham's choice to provide sustenance for traveling strangers because by doing so, Abraham is in fact honoring God.

As a result, Abraham becomes a model for one of the central biblical virtues: hospitality (Heb. 13:2; cf. Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8; the Greek word for hospitality literally means "love of strangers"). Torah highlights Abraham's actions by juxtaposing the story of his hospitality to strangers with the story that follows: the horrific abuse of strangers in the city of Sodom (ch. 19). Biblically, lack of hospitality to strangers is the real sin of Sodom, not homosexual behavior (Ezek. 16:49). Jesus refers to this understanding of the story when he tells his disciples that those who do not welcome them will face a judgment similar to Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:11-15). Jesus makes it clear in no uncertain terms that how we treat strangers in need has eternal consequences for us (Matt. 25:31-46). Note that in this passage Jesus speaks specifically about welcoming strangers (v. 35). And then there is that wonderful story in Luke where two of Jesus' followers on the road to Emmaus engage in conversation with a total stranger, and offer him lodging and food (Luke 24:28-30). Precisely when they break bread together they discover that the stranger to whom they had given hospitality was in fact Jesus, the risen Lord. Welcoming strangers is tantamount to honoring God himself.