

[for 5/31]

<https://www.pbs.org/show/viral-antisemitism-four-mutations/>

PBS documentary on the recent rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and America well worth watching. I will send link.

In our discussion last week, I began to elaborate on an idea I found in Rabbi Sacks, that the Bible starts with love not as the answer but as a problem, the source of division, resentment and violence. Only one time in the whole book of Genesis is the word “love” used in a positive context (speaking of Isaac’s love for his new wife Rebecca, which will soon be replaced by his love for Esau). Biblically, says Rabbi Sacks, love is not enough. We also need law. This is a problem for Christians, who have been brought up to look down on the Law and think of it as opposed to love. But I argued that love and law are intimately intertwined and interconnected in the idea of the covenant, that they are part of the new covenant as well as the old. God creates a community through covenant.

A couple of examples from last week: in a law that many people have seen as oppressive, Paul says women should cover their heads while speaking or praying in church. This was a rule that many women used to follow, from Catholic women wearing veils to the church lady hats of many Protestant groups. Whereas men are supposed to remove their hats in church out of respect for God. What is interesting to me is that in the orthodox Jewish tradition, men are supposed to cover their heads in synagogue and at prayer as a sign of respect for God. Jewish men don’t see this as an oppressive law. In fact many modern Jewish women have argued that it is oppressive to them not to be able to wear *kipot* and have started doing so. Cultural signifiers change with time and the way we use laws must have a certain flexibility. But the law itself is not essentially unloving.

I also cited James 5:16—confess your sins to one another in the body of Christ as a step towards healing. For this biblical

commandment to be obeyed, we have to create a community that values and practices strict, legalistic confidentiality. Such “legalism” is necessary for everyone to follow if the loving concern for healing is to work. So the law creates a specific type of community in which certain behaviors can flourish. At the same time our society has recognized the need for exceptions to this law: if a person confesses to something that is seen as an immediate danger to themselves or to others. So the loving concern for the person (confidentiality) is limited by a loving concern for the larger community expressed in the law.

Someone last week made the important point that law and justice are not the same thing. But both Torah and Jesus affirm that the goal of the Law is justice and compassion, and it is precisely the people who interpret the laws—the judges—who must be guided by that compassionate justice (Deut. 16:18-20). How you apply the laws, how you use them in specific situations, makes all the difference as to whether the law is oppressive or liberating. Laws themselves are not essentially unloving, but they do require loving application.

Jesus makes the same point in a passage that has been misused by our anti-Jewish tradition: “*Woe to you, experts in the Law and Pharisees, show-offs! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the Law—justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you should have practiced without neglecting the others*” (Matt. 23:23). Here Jesus tells us how he understands the Law of Moses. I have argued that Jesus reads the Law through the eyes of the prophets, who stressed the importance of justice (*mishpat*), mercy and faithfulness to God. Jesus here seems to be echoing Micah 6:8, but such teaching can be found throughout the prophets.

Most Christians have read this verse as another example of Jesus overturning the narrow legalism of the Jews, but the problem with that reading is that Jesus says just the opposite. Jesus is giving priority to the Law’s demand for justice and mercy, but he also affirms the validity of the rest of the Law, even the validity of a meticulous

observance of the Law. He is not simply declaring, “Love is all you need.”

A faithful commitment to God’s compassionate justice should be the starting point for how to fulfill the Law, including tithing mint and dill and cumin. If you are a “hypocrite” (the Greek word means “actor”), just acting for an audience, if you are just showing off your piety for others, or claiming to be more “spiritual” than other people, then you are not acting in love. Or if you are using the law as a club with which to beat up other people, then you are not acting in love. There are ways of using the Law that lead to life and well-being and community, and there are ways that lead to isolation and condemnation and death. Jesus and Paul and Moses say, “Choose life” (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 30:19; Rom. 8:2).

Interestingly, the rabbis also carry on extensive discussions about the whole issue of motives in following the Law, the reasons a person has for doing good deeds like helping the poor. They recognize that people can do good things for selfish motives, hoping for personal gain or recognition, or out of fear of punishment. But the rabbis don’t condemn those who obey the Law out of self-interest. They argue that even if someone gives charity for the wrong reason, the poor are still being helped and that is what is most important. The Talmud says, “One who gives charity and says, ‘on the condition that my child is healed from sickness,’ or ‘on the condition that I earn a reward in the world-to-come,’ this person is completely righteous” (*Pesachim* 8). The recipient of the charity still benefits, so the motivation ultimately is secondary.

The rabbis also argue that doing good things for selfish reasons may eventually help develop the moral character of the giver so that they begin to act for the right reasons. “A person should always engage in Torah study and good deeds, even if not for their own sake [i.e., because they are the right thing to do], because through the doing of them not for their sake one gains understanding and comes to do them

for their own sake” (*Pesachim* 50b). We often have mixed motives for our actions, but as Jesus says, faithfulness in little things will help us develop greater faithfulness. Paul says that some people preach the gospel out of love while others do it for selfish ambition, but to him the motives don’t matter, only that Christ is preached (Phil. 1:15-18). Following the Law in Judaism is a kind of spiritual discipline, shaping your character and the character of the community.

Ultimately of course it is better that our giving and other acts of kindness be done out of unselfish love and concern for the other person and out of a passion for justice. The prominent medieval rabbi Maimonides wrote a 14-volume explanation and discussion of the laws in Torah, and in a remarkable passage outlined 8 levels of charitable giving (*tzedakah*). The lowest form is to give unwillingly, grudgingly. But that is still charity. He proceeds up what has been called the Golden Ladder, recognizing the higher value of giving anonymously, so the donor isn’t giving in order to get recognition. (Jesus affirms the value of such anonymous giving as well: Matt. 6:1-4). And it is even better for the giving to be done privately, in such a way that the poor person is not publicly shamed by having to be the recipient of charity. The highest level is to give or make a loan or find employment for someone so they will no longer need to be dependent on others. In this whole discussion the rabbis are really thinking through the practicalities of how to follow God’s Law out of love for others and a concern for justice.

God didn’t just give Israel the three love commandments. God gave them the Law as a way of helping them think more deeply and more practically about what it means to love Him and love one’s neighbor. There are two types of law in Torah. The first are absolute requirements: do this or don’t do that. We see these primarily in the Ten Commandments: don’t make idols, don’t steal, keep the Sabbath, honor your parents. But most of the laws are situational: if you find yourself in a given situation, this is what you should do. Those laws

serve as examples that should help us in thinking about similar circumstances. But they do not cover every conceivable situation.