

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 5/3/20

Last week I raised a problem I find with the Golden Rule and the command to love your neighbor as yourself. I made the point that should be obvious, that this is not a command to love yourself, despite what many preachers say. I have come to agree with R. Ben Azzai that to understand the command to love your neighbor, we should start not with ourselves and our subjective sense of what love looks like. Rather we should start with the basic principle that all human beings are created in the image of God.

Rabbi Sacks says that this monumental assertion at the very beginning of Torah that humans are created in the image of God is a revolutionary idea that has changed humanity. The idea that a human could bear the divine image was nothing new. That is precisely how Mesopotamian kings and Egyptian pharaohs (and later, Roman emperors) were regarded. That was the basis for their authority. Torah's astonishing declaration is that all humans, regardless of class, culture, or creed, share this divine image, not just rulers. In fact, God's decision to make humans in his image is closely tied in the text to the dominion or rule over creation that God gives to them (Gen. 1:26-28).

This was a radically democratic principle that did not find its complete expression in society for several thousand years. Without it, Thomas Jefferson could not have written: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." This statement is so familiar to us that we don't stop to realize that historically it had been anything but self-evident that all men are created equal. Going back at least to Plato and Aristotle, people believed that humanity was made up of an elite ruling class and then the lower classes, and that these hierarchical structures were inherent in the nature of creation and humanity itself. Jefferson is simply plagiarizing the Bible, but we have seen since his time how even in America this assertion has never really been self-evident or universally embraced. So Torah, with or without attribution, is really the foundation of our democratic ideals. No one is more valuable than anyone else, no more worthy of receiving justice or of being loved.

A couple of examples of the problem

1. I used to say about people I didn't like that by shunning them I was only following the Golden Rule: I was turning my back on them and hoping that they would turn their back on me. Though I would say this partially in jest, it highlights the problem of using oneself and one's subjective inclinations as the measure of what it means to love. Love can become very narrow. We will talk in our next section about how the Bible tries to avoid that happening.

2. Someone told me a long time ago that we are not always loved by others the way we want to be loved, but that does not mean that they are not trying to love us. They simply are loving us in their own way, the way they think we should be loved. Sometimes that is for our best. But sometimes what people do for us comes more from their own personal needs and desires, like Homer Simpson giving his wife a bowling ball for her birthday. Loving others the way we would want to be loved sometimes means that we impose our neediness on them rather than being sensitive to their real needs.

So R. Ben Azzai's insistence on the fundamental importance of the idea that we are created in God's image I think is justified. Our own self-esteem, our love for ourselves, is based not on how we subjectively view ourselves—on what family we were born in or on what we have accomplished or on what we have, but rather on the fact that we bear the very image of God, that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). I am not saying that we shouldn't love ourselves, only that the basis for that love should be what God says about us, not what the world says about us or what we think of ourselves.

So also the love we are to show to others should not be based on our own feelings or sense of self-worth or on how we love ourselves, but on who they are as persons who bear the very image of God. Love asks us to look to their needs, to their well-being, not our own, and to see God's face in theirs. Again, the New Testament argues the same point: “If one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need yet closes his heart toward them, how can the love of God be in you?” (1 John 3:17). Our love for others is founded on our love for God and for the image of God that they bear.

That is true of all people, regardless of our relationship to them, our feelings for them, or how society views them. It is true of criminals as well as saints, people who look like you and people who don't, Republicans and Democrats, even people who have hurt you and made your life miserable. How we treat others is a reflection of our love for God.

So when thinking about love, our focus should be on God and on the needs others, on their welfare, not on ourselves. The Bible assumes we will have some sort of basic self-love, that is, concern for our own well-being, and wants us to apply that to others as well. The other is someone just like you, despite whatever differences there may be, someone equally created in the image of God.

I. The Third Love Command

Most people are familiar with the two major biblical love commandments: to love God and to love your neighbor. Because Jesus explicitly connected them (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27), they are often thought of as a Christian teaching. But as we have seen, Jesus is teaching nothing new but simply quoting and affirming two central commands in Torah (Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18). The idea that Christianity is all about love while Judaism is all about following a bunch of rules is a gross misrepresentation of both faiths.

However, Rabbi Sacks points out that Torah contains a third, often overlooked, love command: “When a stranger/foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress/mistreat him. The foreigner living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:33-34). This commandment occurs only a few verses after the command to love your neighbor and clearly echoes its language. While the command to love your neighbor appears only once, this third love commandment, the commandment to love the foreigner and not mistreat them, is repeated again and again throughout Torah.

Translation note: English translations vary widely in how they translate the Hebrew—stranger, sojourner, outsider, alien, foreigner, immigrant. It refers to more than just a

stranger in the sense of someone you don't know personally. It means someone not part of the extended family of Israel, someone who has come from another place and has no land rights, that is, no economic stake in the land of Israel. Hence they are not only foreigners, but economically and socially vulnerable, as the comparison to the Israelites in Egypt makes clear. They have no claim to the kind of help and support that families were supposed to give each other. They are outsiders, immigrants who have come to Israel because of difficult circumstances in their own land: war, famine, persecution, economic uncertainty.

Torah contains numerous warnings against mistreatment of foreign immigrants, and makes it clear that loving the stranger is part of the divine character that we are to imitate. "For YHWH your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He administers *mishpat*, righteous justice, for the orphan and the widow, and loves the foreigners residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (Deut. 10:17-19). Here God's greatness is demonstrated by his love for the powerless, supremely demonstrated in the redemption of Israel from Egypt. To be godly is to love the immigrant by making sure that they are not economically or politically oppressed. Israel is to make sure that their basic needs—food, clothing, shelter—are taken care of.

Notice that these passages commanding Israel to love the foreigner remind them of their collective experience of mistreatment as foreigners in Egypt as the basis for this command. We have seen that Israel was allowed to suffer oppression in Egypt so that they would learn why God wanted them to build an alternative society that did not look like other nations, that did not enslave people economically, especially immigrants. God repeatedly calls on them to remember that experience so that they will behave differently.

Unlike the more general command to love your neighbor, Torah's insistence that we love the stranger is spelled out in much more detail. The basic principle is: "You are to have one law for the foreigner and native alike" (Ex. 12:49; Num. 15:15-16; Lev. 24:22). You are not to treat foreigners differently under the law. You are to administer only one type of righteous justice, *mishpat*, for everyone living among you. Multiple times Israel is told not to mistreat them or oppress them or take advantage of them in any way (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33; Deut. 24:14). Even though they are not Jews, they are to share in the Sabbath rest, giving them the same labor benefits you enjoy (Ex. 23:12; Deut. 5:14).

And there is to be a financial safety net for all those who are economically vulnerable, including non-citizens. As we have seen, landowners, people with capital, people with businesses, should not seek to maximize their profits but rather leave something for the poor and the foreigner who don't have that economic stake (Lev. 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22). Every third year your tithes shall go to the poor and the immigrant (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12). Normally the tithes, which were a tenth of the produce of the land as well as animals, were to be brought to the temple in Jerusalem, primarily to support the Levites, who had no land, and to a lesser extent the priests, who were given a tithe from the tithes given to the Levites! This means that not all Israelites were expected to tithe, only the landowners who raised crops and animals. There is no command for day laborers and other

salaried workers, servants, fishermen, carpenters, etc. to tithe. And every seventh year, when fields were to lie fallow, no tithe was taken at all. (What this means for preachers who regularly flog the importance of tithing for everyone is not clear.) But every third year the tithe was to remain in the local towns and be distributed to the poor and the foreigner, as well as the Levites.

With reference to an economic safety net for foreigners, Leviticus contains an astonishing command: “If any of your fellow Israelites 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” (Lev. 25:35-38). Here it is assumed that people are taking care of needy foreigners, and they are told to extend that generosity to their own people! Notice again the insistence in verse 36 that the wealthy are not to make a profit off the poor, and that it is God himself who has established this principle (v. 38).

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. Foreigners are to be given the same personal and economic support that Israelites enjoy. Torah contains a strong warning: Do not deny them *mishpat*, the righteous justice we have looked at already, because if you do so, you will be cursing yourselves (Deut. 27:19).