

A Covenant People Deuteronomy, Exodus, Matthew 5

As we consider the diversity of faith traditions, perhaps the most comfortable for us to examine would be the traditions of Judaism, after all, we follow Jesus and Jesus was a Jewish carpenter. We share religious texts with Judaism – what we refer to the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures ARE the sacred texts of Judaism. In the Jewish tradition, this is the Tanak – Torah (5 books of Moses), the Nevi'im – prophets: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Joshua, Judges, and Ketuvim – or writings, including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Chronicles...all of these are sounding familiar, and some of you are wishing you were in Confirmation so you could recall the songs to put them in order. Jesus read and knew the sacred texts of the Hebrew tradition, and when asked what was the greatest commandment; he recited the Schema, taken from Deuteronomy 6, those verses that would have been fastened at the door of his home and recited not so much from memory as from heart knowledge, understanding, and belief.

In Confirmation this past week, we had a brief discussion about the word covenant, and certainly this word and concept has its origin with God's covenant with the Hebrew people – a covenant with Adam and Eve, then with Abraham and Sarah, then with Moses and all the Israelites who followed him into the Promised Land. The covenant was a relationship between God and God's people. The Hebrew Bible tells of the covenant that God continues to make and the people consistently break, and God tries to guide them back through the prophets, teachers, and even Kings and Judges. The 39 books of the Old Testament tell the story as Albert Outler put it "of covenant making and covenant breaking." It tells the story of a tenacious God who persists in reaching out and striving to show God's People a better way.

There are branches within Judaism – Orthodox Judaism – like Hasidic Jews; Conservative Judaism, which tend to conserve Jewish traditions, which embracing more modern interpretations of the Torah; Reform Judaism, which allows for a more critical approach to studying Scripture, with emphases on pursuing justice and loving kindness, but not necessarily as much observance of kosher eating or some of the strict observance of the law. Reform Judaism allows for the ordination of women and gay and lesbian persons. In January, we will attend Immanuel Congregation, a Reform synagogue on the northside of Chicago.

Acknowledging the breadth of diversity within Judaism, there are a few aspects of Judaism that I would highlight today.

People of the Covenant Remember

Judaism teaches its followers the story of how God has interacted and claimed them as people of the covenant from the very beginning. The texts of Abram and Sarai and the people of Israel is the family history, and it informs the foundation of identity. The telling and retelling of the stories of identity are embodied in Jewish Shabbat services, as well feasts and festivals throughout the year. We understand the power of ritual, especially as we break bread and drink juice, remembering the actions of Jesus. Many Jews recite the Schema every morning

when they wake up and every night when they go to bed. This loving God and remembering that their identity is as a covenant people is vital to being a Jew.

People of the Covenant Listen for the Voice of God

The schema begins “Hear, O Israel.” Covenant people listen for the voice of God. Covenant people remember their history, but part of that identity means listening for God’s voice. They follow the commands of God, some highlighting some commands more than others, but faithfully listening for God’s voice is key. Judaism emphasizes not worshiping idols, including honoring the name of God by not writing it down completely. Judaism honors the Sabbath, seeking to keep it holy. Judaism remembers the covenant made with God by celebrating the feasts and fasts, recalling the importance of the identity as the people of God. Jews take seriously the concept of *tikkun olam* – repairing or healing the earth through peace and justice, demonstrating mercy and compassion, serving others, and practicing loving kindness. This is part of the covenant of Abraham to bless the nations. Jews differ on their beliefs about what happens after death, which is attested to in our Gospels. However, most Jews would agree that life on earth is important, and what happens after that is in God’s hands. We do our part and live into the covenant here and now.

People of the Covenant teach their Children

We diverge on our understanding of Jesus, although there is different perspectives on Jesus too. We diverge on what happens after death, but there’s some similarity there too in the unknowing. Jews reject the Christian concept of the Trinity, which may seem to some like there are 3 gods rather than one.

We would prefer to think that anti-semitism ended with the defeat of Hitler. Yet, we know all too well that is not the case. One year ago on October 27, eleven people were killed at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh during Shabbat services. Just this past April during Passover service in San Diego, another attack was perpetrated. Here in Park Ridge, there used to hang a sign that read Park Ridge, a nice Gentile Community, according to one of my fellow clergy folk. As we read our texts from the Gospels, we have to be attuned to the ways some translations cast blame on some segments of leaders for the death of Jesus. Those texts have been used by Christians around the world to perpetrate violence against our Jewish friends and siblings.

Adam Hamilton tells about a country club in Kansas City that didn’t allow Jewish members until the 1990s. The change happened because “Tom Watson, one of the greatest golfers of all time, resigned his membership from the club in protest of the club’s exclusionary policy. He said he would not play again at this club until it changed its policies. A few months later the club admitted its first Jewish family into membership. Sometimes, all it takes to help heal the world is one person to stand up for what is right and against what is wrong.” (*Christianity and World Religions*, p. 96)

As we continue to learn and grow and listen for God’s voice, claiming our part in being covenant people too – may we join hands with Jews and Hindus and Muslims and Orthodox and Catholic and Buddhists – to participate in **Tikkun olam**, “healing the world.”