

REMARKS FOR TEMPLE BETH RISHON | NOVEMBER 17, 2023

I want to thank Rabbi Waxman for the very generous invitation to speak tonight. And an additional thank you to Cantor Dubin and President Greene for your hospitality in having me here. Rabbi Waxman preached at Advent this past spring. The reflection he gave made such an impression on me that it ended up as part of my Easter sermon. And so it's a privilege to be here and try to return the favor.

One brief note before we get into things. It's now been a little over a month since Hamas launched a horrific terrorist attack against Israeli citizens. I know that many of you are grieving those who have died. I know many of you are worried for those still being held hostage or and concerned for your family and friends who live in Israel. I know many of you are anxious about the humanitarian situation on the ground in Gaza and what this war means for the future of a stable, dignified, and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. And I know that many of you are alarmed by how criticism of policy choices made by the Israeli government seems to have given way to antisemitism and hostility toward Jews in general.

That these are griefs, anxieties, fears, and hopes that we hold in common. St. Paul encourages us to "weep with those who weep." So we have also been praying for peace and justice and mercy alongside you. If you take nothing else from my visit tonight, please remember this. If you are weeping, grieving, and fearful, please know that you are doing none of these things alone.

There's an old story about a professor who used to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. And on the first day of class with his new students every year, he would get a big stack of books from the Hebrew Bible. And while everyone was chatting before class, he would lift up the stack of books and drop it on the table. And it would make this enormous *thud*. The room would go completely silent. And he would ask, "What does it say?" And all the students in the class would sit there and not say anything. And after a long and uncomfortable silence, he would say, "You're exactly right. It doesn't *say* anything. Because you have to *read* it."

One of the gifts of the Jewish faith to other religions is this appreciation for active and critical reading of scripture. It doesn't say anything. We have to read it. And whenever we read it, we are always making decisions about which texts to read, how to translate these texts, which texts should be the most important, and how the historical context these texts were written should affect how we interpret them. Whenever I hear Christians say, *The Bible says it. I believe. That settles it.*, I can't help but think, *I'm guessing this person doesn't know about the Talmud.*

So with a great deal of appreciation, I want to offer you another way to think about the role of scripture. And hopefully this way of reading scripture, which comes from my tradition, might be edifying in your own spiritual and liturgical practice.

If you come to church at Advent some Sunday, you'll notice that we spend a lot of time reading scripture out loud. A typical Mass setting will have a reading from the Hebrew

Bible, a musical response from the Psalms, a reading from the New Testament epistles, and a reading from one of the gospels.

And when we read scripture this way, we come to appreciate how scripture reads us. We are not the active agents reading these passive pieces of ink and paper. But the word of God is a living word that is actively changing, shaping, and molding us. So even when we set the book back down, the word never really lets go of us.

And we believe that the word of God acts on us in two primary ways. First, it commands. It tells us how to act. Like what? Well, just think about the Decalogue. Don't have other gods. Don't make wrongful use of God's name. Don't murder. Don't bear false witness.

We have these commands in the New Testament, too. In St. Luke's gospel, a rich man asks what he has to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus's response? "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor." In St. Matthew's gospel, one of the disciples asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive. "Seven? Seven seems like a good faith effort, right?" Jesus responds, "Not seven times... but seventy-seven times."

The subject of these commands is always "you." And the "you" is not just the characters in the stories thousands of years ago. It's also all of us who are listening to these stories today.

And that can be a problem. Because I don't know about you, but I'm not doing so great with all of those commands. I don't bear false witness, but I tend to be more lenient when judging myself than in judging others. I don't kill, but I often respond to the world's suffering with ignorance or indifference. I don't steal, but you better believe I covet. We need commands because they show us the world the way it actually is. Not just the way we like to pretend it is. These commands allow us to be honest.

But if all the scriptures did was give us commands, they would be nothing more than books of advice. What to do. How to behave. The gospel according to Emily Post. Something that points out my shortcomings but doesn't really empower me to live differently.

But that's not all the scriptures do, of course. They also promise. This is the second way the scriptures act on us. Some examples from the Hebrew Bible. From the flood story: "The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." From Abraham's call: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." From Jeremiah: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." And we have similar promises throughout the New Testament, too. What we call the sacraments are really just physical reminders of verbal promises.

Who is the subject in all of these promises? It's not us. It's God. And that makes all the difference. Because God doesn't just describe the world as it is. And God doesn't just point out our shortcomings. But God promises to act in ways that create a new future for us to live into. These promises pull us out of our cycles of violence and despair and nihilism. They create faith in us and allow us to trust in God. And they empower us to live as if what we do—the ways in which we live and serve—really matter and make a difference. If commands allow us to be honest about the world, promises allow us to believe a different world is possible.

And while commands and promises both run side by side throughout scripture, it's promises that have the first and final word. Even the Decalogue, the famous set of commands begins with what? Not a rule. But with a promise. "I am the Lord your God." God promises to be God not just for the people at Sinai. But God promises to be God for all of us.

We acknowledge this truth whenever we refer to Judaism and Christianity as Abrahamic faiths. This isn't just pointing out that Abraham shows up in both of our scriptures. We are claiming that we are a people who live in and from the promises of God. To be Abrahamic means that our trust in God's faithfulness, the community that we live among, and the ways that we love and serve our neighbors do not come from our own striving or effects. They come as gifts of God. To use the language of Genesis, they are blessings.

And you, the people of Temple Beth Rishon, are a blessing to our community and to our world. Not simply because of the ways you faithfully respond to God's commands to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. But also because of the ways that you remind us of God's promises and God's lovingkindness from generation to generation. So for your ministry, leadership, and service, we say Thanks be to God.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor