

ROSH HASHANAH EVENING
Wednesday, September 28, 2011

Our generation is filled with many Jewish adventure stories. Most of them have to do with daring escapes from the Nazis or successes by the early Zionists battling for the establishment of the State of Israel.

This evening, I want to tell you of another and very different adventure story. The unlikely main character is a Romanian born Talmud scholar named Solomon Schechter.

Before coming to New York at the end of the 19th century to become the first president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, he was a reclusive scholar at the University of Cambridge. While at Cambridge, he met two maiden sisters, who had traveled widely in the Middle East. They found an ancient manuscript of the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, which they asked him to examine.

This set Dr. Schechter on a life-long adventure, with chapters played out in Cairo, Cambridge and in New York. You see, a treasure trove of documents was discovered in the attic of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo. Schechter climbed into the dusty, bug-ridden geniza, or manuscript attic, and discovered the very, early texts of Judaism. He liberated many, many documents, and they were deposited at universities in England and here in America. Schechter was hailed as the hero that he certainly was.

For us Jews, texts – especially early texts – are fascinating. Many of Schechter's early texts have marginal comments and other paraphernalia which help us to understand the original

meaning of the text, and how Jews through the ages interpreted the contemporary meaning of these ancient texts.

I. READING ANCIENT WORDS

Rabbis spend their time reading ancient texts. We are taught early on to respect them, to honor them, and to learn how to use them in our rabbinate.

At the Hebrew Union College, one of the first books that we are asked to study is called *Mikraot G'dolot*. Actually it is a set of books, one for each volume of the Hebrew Bible. Each verse appears in the middle of the page in Hebrew, and it is surrounded by different commentaries in Hebrew covering hundreds of years. We were taught immediately that the Bible needs to be read as it was first written, and additionally with the observations and interpretations of scholars. The notion that each person is free to read the text by himself or herself, without scholarly knowledge, is antithetical to the Jewish tradition.

Not only is this procedure followed with the books of Hebrew Bible, it is the essence of the Talmud itself.

The purpose of the Talmud is to take ancient biblical laws, ancient mishnaic law, and bring them up to date – to interpret them for the contemporary Jew.

Not only did the rabbis seek to interpret the text for each age, for their contemporaries, they also were faced with texts, which they felt were irrelevant or incompatible with modern life. Let me give you two examples.

In the Books of Leviticus and Numbers, there are chapters devoted to the details of the sacrifices to be performed in the

Temple of Jerusalem. But after the year 70 of the common era, there was a small problem. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans. What is one to do with all this material? But Jewish life went on. Rebuilding the Temple was impossible. Jewish life took a new and creative turn. We mourned the Temple, but we created new structures and places for worship without sacrifices. Synagogues grew as a replacement for the Temple in Jerusalem. Sacrifices were abandoned; they were replaced by prayer. (Sacrifices were, for the rabbis, a rather primitive religious custom.)

The rabbis also found sections of the Torah to be morally unacceptable for a new age. The instruction “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” was too harsh for the rabbis, so they interpreted it to mean “the value of an eye for an eye, and the value of a tooth for a tooth.”

The literal meaning of the text was eschewed. The words of the tradition had to be modernized and brought up to date for contemporary people.

II. WHAT CHRISTIANS DO

The Roman Catholic Church has its own method of interpretation of scripture. Just as we Jews have a Rabbinic tradition, the Church's version is called the Magisterium. It is the collective wisdom of the Church, its teachings by the Church Fathers, its traditions.

When Martin Luther led the Reformation of Christianity, it was the Magisterium of Church, which was abandoned. The Church in Rome lost its authority. Its interpretations of the Hebrew Bible were set aside; its traditions ignored.

Instead of the Church in Rome as the authority, Luther established the Bible as the sole authority for his new version of Christianity. And his anti-institutional approach went even further. Every individual was entitled to interpret the Bible by himself or herself.

While wonderful in theory, the notion that each person is entitled to have the Bible speak individually is scary. And scary is what it became. What was presented as democratic became an invitation to sanctify ignorance.

And since the Bible was usually read in translation (Hebrew was mostly a forgotten language), the translator of the text into German, English, or any other language was an opportunity for the translator to introduce new nuances into the original meaning of the text.

A "maiden" in Isaiah became a "virgin", taking a simple Hebrew narrative and making it into a prediction of a messiah.

But even more scary is the notion that the text, in its translation is to be taken literally. Each word takes on a sanctified meaning, whether or not it had anything to do with the original intent or meaning, My suspicion is that this approach is that of people whose knowledge is rather unsophisticated.

Thus, we are now faced with a curious phenomenon. We hear preachers on television all the time who take texts, which had one meaning in a particular setting, placed totally in an alien context.

Most frequently, the usage is to authenticate a previously held opinion, having nothing to do with the original context.

The rabbis, for example, take the creation story and play with its allegorical meaning, allowing the inner message of the text to come through. The rabbis understood that the creation story was not a scientific statement, but rather how ancient peoples understood how the world came to be.

III. THE LITERAL CONSTITUTION

For me, and perhaps for you as well, it is quite surprising to hear some Christians assign to the Constitution of the United States the same principles that they use when discussing biblical literature. Every word in the Constitution is parsed and analyzed, as if the founding fathers wrote immutable language. They seek the original meaning of the Constitution. They take the Constitution literally, as they do the Bible.

While we do not really know what the writers and editors of the Bible had in their mind when they wrote their texts, we do very well know what the founders of this country knew and understood.

We know that they were responding to the revolutionary times in America. We know that there were squabbles and political posturing. We know that some of the founders' ideas were inconsistent with modern understanding of our world.

The words of the founding fathers have been modified and changed by the American case law system, and the opinions of legal scholars. Their body of literature is tantamount to being the Talmud and the commentaries of Jewish scholars through the ages. Many of the strict Constitutionalist literalists disregard the entire process of American legal writing, especially when it disagrees with their previously held positions.

The American issue of slavery is a fascinating topic. The founding fathers of this country were slaveholders. They used the slavery passages in the Torah to justify and validate their views. The issue of slavery was at the heart of huge debates in the Christian community. Some churches were split asunder.

Denominations disagreed radically. The creation of the Southern Baptist Church is a result of the disagreements among Baptists. The American Baptist Church was created by those, for whom slavery was an anathema.

Similar splits occurred in other religious groupings, including the Episcopalians.

The Civil War ended the discussion. When the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted in 1865, it was against the wishes of the founding fathers, whether they were slaveholders or not.

Times had changed. Values had changed. The amendment process of the Constitution makes provision for changing times. Therefore, it is shocking to hear literal interpretations of the constitution hold sway in places like the United States Supreme Court.

The Bible, in our Jewish view, is a changing and evolving document, whose basic understandings are eternal, even though the details may change. And so is the Constitution is a changing document, as societal issues change through the ages.

CONCLUSION

The Rabbis and teachers who lived in the years after the Temple was destroyed knew and understood that their entire conception of religion had to change. They had no Temple in Jerusalem any more. The entire rhythm of life in Ancient Israel was undergoing massive change. Worshiping at the Temple in Jerusalem was no longer part of the pattern of life.

For them, the Torah was a changing and emerging document. Yes, of course, basic essential ideas needed to be retained. The essence was holy and sacred. But the way life was to be conducted was emerging.

This is why Judaism has survived for the ensuing 2000 years. The text was both sacred and changing. The work of Solomon Schechter and generations of scholars proved this to be true.

For us Jews, holy and sacred are not synonyms for rigidity and inflexibility. Sacred and holy are part of the process of intelligent living.

May all understand this message. Amen.