

THE TESTAMENTS OF THE TWELVE PATRIARCHS
July 25, 2014

Shabbat shalom!

Jewish tradition has a central concern with preserving values and traditions. On an individual level, a tradition developed that we call the Ethical Will – not a will in the usual sense of passing down our material goods, but a very personal statement of the values we hold most dear, the personal legacy of ethics and teachings that we leave for our children and grandchildren – so that they can know, after we’re gone, who we *really* were – not just biographically, but what we stood for.

This is all by way of introduction to tonight’s sermon topic, the third in my series on the literature we call Pseudepigrapha – Jewish writings from the late biblical period that didn’t make it into our Bible, often for religious or political reasons that deemed these writings to be heretical or otherwise not deserving to be part of our canon. Tonight’s book is called the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and is the earliest example we have of the Jewish ethical will – in this case a collection attributed to each of the twelve sons of Jacob, the heads of the original twelve tribes. These texts go back about 2,200 years – an important collection of exalted, moving and inspirational statements that preserve, in the names of the founders of our people, what they felt Judaism must stand for in an increasingly challenging age. Exalted Jewish literature, but almost completely unknown because – unlike the Psalms and Proverbs that date from the same era – someone decided to leave it out of our Bible.

The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* wasn’t written by the sons of Jacob; it was common practice during the Second Temple period to attribute writings to a much earlier generation to give them cachet, just like the Psalms of David or Proverbs of Solomon were given historic weight by attributing them to famous kings. Like the Psalms and Proverbs, the *Testaments* were written after the Hasmonean revolution in the middle of the second century BCE. The Hasmoneans were the ones, after taking back Jerusalem from the Assyrians and rededicating the Temple in the ceremony we know as Chanukah, who proclaimed one of their own as High Priest, ousting the entire legitimate priestly establishment.

How did they justify this revolution, this *coup* that sent the legitimate priests into exile? By writing books. The Testament of Levi, for example – Levi was one of

Jacob's sons – has Levi writing in the first person, recounting how he was given a divine revelation conferring the priesthood on him and his descendants – and also temporal power. He recounts that God promised that his descendants (Levi's descendants, that is, not God's!) would become priests and judges and kings – instead of the descendants of Aaron. The purpose of this text was clearly to legitimate the Hasmoneans' right to hold the high priesthood and also to assume the title of "king," which was indeed the title that Hasmonean leaders assumed just a generation later.

Most of the Testaments, however, are moral rather than political in nature. Jacob's sons, feeling that their time of death is at hand, share their life's lessons with their children. Each patriarch gives a spiritual testament that treats different aspects of what it is to live a moral life. We don't know any of this from the Torah, by the way; indeed in some cases the stories in Torah show these patriarchs in such a poor light that finding something virtuous to write about wasn't so easy – these sons of Jacob had not by any means all been models of good behavior! According to Torah, Reuben had slept with his father's concubine; Simeon and Levi had massacred all the inhabitants of Shechem in revenge for their sister's rape, and Judah had married a Canaanite woman and then slept with his own daughter-in-law. The author of the *Testaments* had to find a way for even these people to preach on morality.

The solution was simple: the patriarchs would *not* all be paragons of virtue! Reuben, Simeon, Judah and others would use their deathbed addresses to their children in order to confess their wrongdoing saying, in effect, "I made mistakes; don't you make the same mistakes I did." Over and over again, we learn the Jewish values of repentance, pushing our children to do and be better, and finding divine favor in the way we acknowledge our sins and confront our past behavior in the most open way.

The writer of this work, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, had several goals: The first was to legitimize the Hasmonean dynasty that ruled Judaism under the Greeks, by showing that Levi, a son of Jacob, and his brothers had a divine right to spiritual and temporal power; a second was to highlight some of Judaism's great moral teachings by creating, in effect, ethical wills taught by each of the twelve. There was a third goal, and that was to look into the future. Each patriarch followed an ancient convention – there are many other writings along these lines – that afforded a glimpse of things to come. Thus each patriarch foretells that the Jewish people will be exiled, but will be saved and returned to the land of Israel.

Of course that was an easy prediction to make, because it had already happened! Remember, the patriarchs -- great grandchildren of Abraham and Sara -- would have lived long before the destruction of the First Temple, the Babylonia exile and the return to Israel. The Testaments were written to prove that the Patriarchs could predict the future, thereby adding a great air of authenticity to the writings, and to the contemporary leadership under which they were written. When most of the testaments include instructions to “obey Levi,” as the senior brother representing the priesthood, these were really exhortations to accept the current rule as legitimate.

So why don't we see these texts in our Bible? The Testaments were very popular. They were so popular that the early Christian community, right after the time of Jesus, adopted this work as their own. Predictions of exile and return were given messianic meaning -- as predictions of a second coming of Jesus. The book started to circulate as a book of Christian piety. Most Christian ethical teachings come straight out of Judaism, but as the early Christian leadership started to turn away from Judaism and focus more on the gentile world -- that's where the power was, after all -- the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* began to fade from Jewish consciousness. Today, while the scholarship is clear that the work is Jewish and predates Jesus by a good century and a half, if you do a Google™ search you'll see any number of websites accepting the work as Christian.

But the text remains as one of the most significant pieces of writing to have survived from the Second Temple period. It shines a unique light on the soul of Judaism during this crucial period. The most basic ethical concerns are addressed: What makes people sin? What is it that prevents us, despite our best intentions, from doing the right thing all the time? Are the causes of sin outside agencies, such as demons and angels, or inside ourselves? Most important, what do we need to do to avoid the usual pitfalls and strive for moral perfection?

Here is a passage from one of the *Testaments*. When I read it, I think about what I would say to my children, were I to gather them around and try to teach them how to live and the values that are so important if we wish to live lives of righteousness:

“My children, the love of money leads to idol-worship, because in the deception caused by money, one treats as gods those who are not, and it [i.e., money] causes the one who possesses it to be hypnotized by it.”

And a few verses later....

“So know, my children, that there are two Spirits that occupy themselves with a person, the Spirit of goodness and the Spirit of deceit. And in-between is the mind’s understanding, which inclines to whichever of these two Spirits it wishes. And people’s acts of truth and acts of deceit are recorded on people’s hearts, and the Lord knows every one of them. And at no time can the deeds of men be hidden, since they have been written down by the Lord Himself. And the Spirit of truth warns everyone and later accuses everyone; and the sinner is burnt up from out of his own heart and cannot lift up his face to the Judge.”

I like this teaching. “In between is the mind’s understanding.” We don’t just blindly follow instincts, but bring our mind – our conscience – to bear on how we act. It’s a powerful teaching for it recognizes that we ourselves are responsible for what we do, and that we are responsible for the name and legacy that will outlive us long after we are gone.