

## SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2015

### SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2015: IS GOD INSECURE?

#### I. “The Banishment of Adam”

July 2, 2015

For several years now I’ve been offering a summer sermon series – five or six sermons on a particular theme. We’ve looked at some of the great unknown heroes of Jewish history; some of the grand themes of Judaism; texts from the little-known body of literature called “Pseudepigrapha.”

This year’s theme might sound a bit irreverent, but I think raises some interesting questions about how we look at certain biblical texts, and what we can learn about our perceptions of God and Judaism. I titled the series “Is God Insecure?” which sounds somewhat flip, so let me describe the question this way, and some of our upcoming topics:

God punishes Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, as if God really wanted humans to remain forever in a state of ignorant bliss. Was God afraid that knowledgeable humans might present some threat to God’s power? In the Tower of Babel story, humans wanted to build a tower to God’s realm in Heaven; but God wanted no such contact, and confounded their languages so that the building project had to be left unfinished. But why *not* let humans get closer to God? God sees evil in the world, and in a fit of anger decides to scrap the whole project in a giant flood, sweep away even animal life, and start over; maybe God was lashing out because of how badly God felt that He couldn’t get it right the first time. God really seems insecure when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac – did God really need such a test?

Can you imagine God saying to himself: “If Abraham *really* loves me, he’ll do whatever I want, even slaughter his son; let’s see what happens!?” Same thing with the Golden Calf episode: The Israelites stray into idolatry when Moses stays atop the mountain too long; they had no idea where he was because 4G access hadn’t been invented yet, and when God learns about the Golden Calf God gets so incensed that He decides to annihilate the entire people – until Moses calms Him down. Sounds to me like God had some real anger issues in those days!

In the story of Adam's fall, of course we can't really know what God was thinking. The very concept of God thinking, or hatching up a plan to tempt Adam and Eve in order to figure out whether they would blindly follow instructions or not is problematic. But it does seem rather strange that our Torah starts with several chapters about creation – especially the creation of the magnificent Garden – only to discover that mankind, the pinnacle of creation, can't follow instructions and will have to be banished. Why bother? It's as if a master craftsman were to build a huge, perfect dollhouse – then lock the front door and throw away the key because one of the dolls was naughty. What's going on here?

The Christian view is clear: The Christian view is that God knew about the sin, indeed allowed the serpent to tempt Adam and Eve in order to force them to make the choice – to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Why? In the Christian view Adam and Eve's decision results in every person being born with a sinful nature, a tendency to sin. Their decision is what ultimately required Jesus to die on the cross on their behalf, to show that our faith in Christ can free us from sin's consequences and, ultimately, free us from sin itself.

Jewish tradition believes that we are born with a clean slate, free to make our own decisions for better or worse; we reject the concept of original sin, though we agree that the story demonstrates that we humans have free will. We may be tempted, and we have to suffer the consequences of making bad decisions, but free will is one of Judaism's core concepts.

Another core Jewish teaching is that we are created in the image of God. The "image of God" is not physical, of course, but a concept – the concept of holiness. "You shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy," in Leviticus 19. The classic commentators explain that humans alone are endowed – like our Creator – with reason, a sense of morality and free will.

You would think, then, that eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge would be precisely what God would want the first humans to do – in order to actualize the idea of being created in the image of God. But as it turns out, gaining knowledge is not the issue. The sin was that eating the fig – our tradition says it was a fig – was a direct act of disobeying a command from God. The result? One Jewish teaching is that sin creates insensitivity – just as one mitzvah leads to another, so does one sin lead to another, removing us stage by stage from holiness and godliness. The more we disobey the natural order of things, the more insensitive we get, until we get locked into such a downward cycle that we can never return to a state of true holiness.

Yet a third Jewish core teaching is that there is no core teaching when it comes to understanding the texts before us – which is why we have so many different commentaries, often blatantly contradicting each other. Unlike some faith traditions that are utterly certain they know what the text says or what God means, Judaism is more concerned with how we treat each other, and doesn't define what we must believe.

Now we might think that these biblical texts have no relevance to how we actually live our lives today – maybe of passing interest during some discussion on a Shabbat eve, but not really having any practical impact. On the contrary: How we understand the Bible is of crucial importance, with a very direct impact on daily life. I say this in thinking about the Supreme Court's decision on same gender marriage, and how some of Alabama's top officials and politicians have reacted to it.

The most egregious example is a letter sent on Tuesday of this week from Win Johnson, one of Alabama Chief Justice Moore's attorneys, to Governor Bentley. Johnson writes that public officials are ministers of God, "assigned the duty of punishing the wicked and protecting the righteous." He writes that the U.S. Supreme court cannot take something that God calls a crime and declare it not a crime. "You cannot serve two masters," he writes, "you must pick – God or Satan." He starts his letter by pointing out that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, who rules over all the world, including the civil government and all the institutions of life. He sees the civil government as a persecuting power, and calls upon public officials to stand up for the law of God, whatever that might mean. And he regards the law of the land as meaningless – in his words, "There is no law any more, there's just opinion." In Johnson's opinion – and remember, he serves as legal counsel to the Chief Justice of our State Supreme Court – "The laws of Jesus Christ are not subject to the vote of man."

Personally, I like to wrestle with Bible texts, and I have fun pulling out different interpretations, and playing out the possibilities as to what a text might mean. In the Adam and Eve story, there is a vast collection of commentary on the role of the serpent, conversations between God and Satan, what life was like in the Garden, and why God chose the punishment He did. To me, it's all metaphor and we can pull all kinds of meaning from the ancient Creation myths.

But there is a tremendous danger in taking these texts too seriously. As we have seen this week, there is, among those who take their translation of the Bible as a literal word of God, a strong undercurrent of demagoguery, self-righteousness

and prejudice that is so deeply rooted as to be impossible to address. The outrageous views of Win Johnson and his boss Judge Moore render them completely unqualified for public office, in my opinion; their views come dangerously close to advocating a theocracy in this country which is the antithesis of everything this country stands for – aside from having no understanding of what the biblical texts on homosexuality actually say or mean.

The story of Adam and Eve shows that we are mortal, and imperfect. I think that's actually the point of the story, because in other ancient Near Eastern texts, the earliest heroes were all gods; our earliest heroes are most decidedly human. We are not God – though we see ourselves as being in God's image, and we strive to emulate the qualities we ascribe to God of being holy and righteous. Being created in God's image – all humanity being created in God's image – I interpret that to mean that we are all created equal in the eyes of God [metaphorically]. And no Bible-thumping demagogue can take that away, or force their narrow-minded opinions on the rest of us. To try to do so is a sin that removes just a bit of holiness from our world.