

**Journey to the Heart of God: Part I: "Torah, Prayer, and Acts of Kindness:
The Three Pillars of Judaism."**

**by Rabbi A. Brian Stoller,
Senior Rabbi, Temple Israel**

Transcription

Countryside Community Church

October 22, 2017

Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for having me here today. It's really an honor to be here. Pastor Chris, thank you for inviting me. I'm really excited to be part of Tri-Faith. I'm new to Temple Israel, as they said a few minutes ago. And it's just really a joy for me to be here.

So I know you're all looking at me and you're like, "What is this guy wearing?" Okay. It's a good question. And I'm wearing this, all of this, deliberately so that I can use it to teach you about Judaism. This is what we call ritual clothing. I have a number of items on me. One, at the very top of my head, I have what's called a Kippah. Kippah is a head covering that I wear all the time and it's a reminder that I am always in God's presence. Wherever I go, whether it's in the synagogue or in my ordinary daily life, in and out of the various things that I do, it's a reminder to live in a way that honors God and is dignified and respects our tradition and respects the fact that God is always with me and I am always in God's presence.

This prayer shawl around my shoulders is called a tallit. And it's something that we wear every morning in Jewish prayer. We wear it because of these fringes that are attached to the four corners of the tallit. You may know from the Hebrew Bible, in Numbers chapter 15, there is a statement that you shall attach fringes to the four corners of your garments. This is fulfillment of that commandment by God. And the fringes are a reminder of God's commandments. The Torah consists of many commandments, actually 613 to be precise; 613 commandments. The fringes are a reminder of them so that when we come to pray in the morning, we wrap ourselves in the tallit and the fringes are here to remind us of our obligations to God as members of the covenant.

Now, here on my arm and on my head I'm wearing what's called tefillin. A tefillin comes also as a fulfillment of a commandment in the Torah, in Deuteronomy chapter six, which says, "You shall bind these words of the Torah as a sign upon your hand and let them be a symbol between your eyes." And our tradition interprets that verse quite literally such that inside these boxes that are here on my arm and on my head, there are small pieces of parchment with passages from the Torah inscribed on them. And they're enclosed here so that when I put these on my arm and on my head I am quite literally binding the words of the Torah to my body. And they, too, are a reminder of my responsibilities as a Jew to God, so that when I come to pray in the morning, I'm reminded I am in God's presence and that I have obligations to God as a member of the covenant.

When I talk about the covenant, what I mean is the special relationship established between God and the Jewish people. First between God and Abraham, and then later it's reestablished between God and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. In Jewish tradition, we

describe that moment when the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah from God as a marriage. A marriage between God and the Jewish people. A marriage is a covenantal relationship whereby both parties in a covenantal relationship have obligations and responsibilities toward one another, just like a marriage that you might be part of or a deep friendship that you might have. Those relationships have certain terms and expectations that you owe to one another as being part of a covenantal relationship. And that's what makes that kind of relationship holy.

When we talk about God giving the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, at that marriage, the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, is the marriage contract. Right? Spelling out the terms of our relationship. And I also think about this attached to my arm here. Can you see it's attached to my finger right there? As kind of like the wedding band. Right? Just like if you wear a wedding band on your finger, you feel it present there and you remember. Yeah, I have a spouse. There's certain things that I need to do to be a good spouse and to live in a holy relationship with that other person. That's what these tefillin do for me when I pray.

Now, I wear these because of what I want to teach you today. I think it's very intimately connected to the three pillars of Judaism that I'm going to speak about today. So, if you look at the screen here, I have a statement from our sages, the ancient sages of Jewish tradition. Shimon the Righteous, he said, "The world stands on three things: on Torah, on prayer, and on acts of kindness." And I think these tefillin that I'm wearing correspond very nicely to Shimon the Righteous's teachings.

So right here I have this box with the parchment and words from the Torah written on them, and they sit right at the crown of my head by my brain, the seat of my mind. And it's a reminder to me that I have a responsibility to use my mind in the service of God through learning. Right over here, I have a box that sits on my bicep and if I let my arm lie like this, it points right toward my heart. And it's a reminder that I have a responsibility to serve God with all my heart. And that's prayer. We'll talk about that in a few minutes.

And then, if you look here at my arm, I have the tefillin bound to my arm with leather straps. And on my hand, the straps are laid here in a very deliberate way to form a Hebrew letter, the letter shin. The letter shin is the initial of one of God's names in the Torah, Shaddai. So what I've done here is inscribed God's initial on my hand as a reminder that I am obligated to use my hands in the service of God in the world. And I do that through acts of kindness.

So I'm going to talk briefly about each of these three pillars on which the world stands. Torah, which is Jewish learning, prayer, and acts of kindness. So, Torah. Let's start with a verse from the Hebrew Bible. The verse is from Deuteronomy chapter 28, verse 9. And I'm going to read the verse in the Hebrew and then read the English translation. [Hebrew 00:10:15] and that translates as, "The Lord will establish you as his Holy people as he swore to you if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in God's ways."

Okay. So. Two key elements of that verse that I'd like to point out. The one is, keep the commandments of God. Right? That's the terms of the relationship. There are 613 of them. And we have to know how to fulfill God's commandments. We have to know how to live the way God wants us to live. We have to know how to walk in God's ways. The study of the Torah is the way by which we know God's will for us, how God wants us to live on a daily

basis. So study is essential for us to carry out our obligations in the covenant. And that's the practical reason to learn Torah.

But there's more to it than that because our tradition says that even above that, a level above that is what we call Torah [Hebrew 00:11:37], Torah for its own sake. The study of Torah is a commandment. It is a religious obligation. It is a religious endeavor. The study of the Torah for its own sake is regarded in Judaism as a spiritual experience, an act of worship, an act of service to God. When we use our minds to contemplate the realities of human life and human nature, to seek to gain insight into the mysteries of the world and the mysteries of God, and we uncover just a little bit more of the face of God through our learning, that is an act of worship. That is Torah for its own sake. And our sages say that when two people or more sit together and study the Torah, the divine presence sits with them. It is through study that we know God and we experience God. The world stands on Torah.

Thank you. That was beautiful. And they were singing in Hebrew as you could probably tell. That's a passage from the Song of Songs [Hebrew 00:15:38] and means my beloved is mine and I am his, he browses among the lilies. The Song of Songs, according to Jewish tradition, is a love poem between God and the Jewish people. And that passage is a song that we sing oftentimes on the Shabbat, the Sabbath.

So I'd like to talk now about the second pillar on which the world stands. And that's prayer. And I'd like to read the verse from the Hebrew Bible on which this pillar is based. It comes from Exodus chapter 23 verse 25. I'll read it in the Hebrew and then in the English. [Hebrew 00:16:31] and that means, "You shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water, and I will remove sickness from your midst."

Now, this phrase at the beginning of the verses, you shall serve is the key element. The Hebrew word for service in the Bible is Avodah. Avodah means service and in the context of the Hebrew Bible, service refers to sacrifice. So if you're familiar with the Hebrew Bible at all, you know that some of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and a good chunk of the book of Numbers, is all about sacrificial rituals, the sacrifice of animals and grains and foods and whatnot, as the form of worshiping God. In the ancient world, that's how the ancient Israelites worshiped. They brought sacrifices, offerings of animals and things, to a temple that stood in the center of Jerusalem where the priests made the offerings on their behalf.

Have you been to Jerusalem before? Anybody been to Jerusalem before? Okay. Or if you've seen images of it, you know that in the center of Jerusalem, there's a big elevated plaza. Right now, there are two mosques that sit on top, one with the gold dome and one with a black dome. It didn't always ... It wasn't always that way. 2000 years ago, there was a temple, a Jewish temple that stood on that elevated plaza. And it was at that temple where the ancient Israelites brought their offerings to the priests and the priests slaughtered the offerings in service of God.

All of that changed in the year 70 of the common era. That was a watershed moment in Jewish life because it changed Judaism forever. Several years before that, the Jewish people living in the land of Israel had revolted against the Roman empire which ruled them. And they fought for a while but ultimately Rome quashed the rebellion. They destroyed the city, destroyed the temple that stood in the middle of Jerusalem, and exiled the Jews through the Roman empire. In fact, you know about the western wall in Jerusalem? The reason why the

western wall is such a significant site is because it's all that remains of that original temple that stood there. It's the only thing left of it.

After the destruction of the temple, the practice of animal sacrifice came to an end. We don't sacrifice animals anymore and haven't done it for 2000 years. So you need to know that. I don't know if you've ever been to Temple Israel or to another synagogue, but let me tell you, Jews don't sacrifice animals anymore. You won't come to our synagogue and find us slaughtering a lamb in the sanctuary. We haven't done that for 2000 years. Instead, what happened was that upon the destruction of the temple and the priesthood that attended to the temple, a new leadership emerged in the Jewish community.

A sect of scholars known as rabbis became the leaders of Judaism and they reinterpreted the Torah for a new era. And they read this verse, "You shall serve the Lord," the word Avodah. And they said, "Avodah refers to not the sacrifice of animals, it refers to the sacrifice of the heart." And what is the sacrifice of the heart? That's prayer. The sacrifice of the heart is prayer. When I wear this tefillin on my arm and the box points toward my heart, it's a reminder that I'm obligated to serve God with my heart. And I do that through prayer.

Prayer is the opening of the heart and the pouring out of the self as a gift to God. It's through prayer, of course, that we have conversation with God. It's through prayer that we seek guidance. It's through prayer that we gain insight. It's all of that. But in Judaism, prayer is that and much more. Prayer is an outward movement from the self toward God. All of us have this spiritual energy inside of us. The metaphor for it is water. Our spiritual energy is like water inside of us. And in prayer, the water kind of starts to rush, rush forward more intensely and more intensely, and there's like a dam, water's bumping up against the dam and it needs to go somewhere. Prayer is about opening up the dam and letting the water, the essence of the self, pour out toward God as a gift of love and a gift of service. Prayer is service, the sacrifice of the heart.

I'd like to read a quotation from one of my favorite Jewish philosophers of the 20th century by the name of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He describes this beautifully. He says, "The statement that since the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice does not imply that sacrifice was abolished when the sacrificial cult went out of existence. Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer is sacrifice. What has changed is the substance of the sacrifice. The self took the place of the thing. The spirit is the same. In moments of prayer, we try to surrender our vanities, to burn our insolence, to abandon bias, envy. We lay all our forces before Him. The word but an altar. We do not sacrifice. We are the sacrifice." Prayer, avodah, the sacrifice of the heart is one of the pillars on which the world stands.

That piece that we just sang is, it's beautiful. It's also rooted in Jewish ideas. The music selection is outstanding. And I appreciate it very much. The words of that piece are the musical interpretation of a treatise written by the scholar, Maimonides, in the 12th century, the thirteen principles of faith for the Jew. And that's a beautiful musical rendition of it.

The third pillar that I'd like to speak about is acts of kindness. And the scriptural verse for this is found in Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 11. The verse reads, [Hebrew 00:27:33]. And that means, "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you, open your hand to the poor and needy kinsmen in your land."

Okay. So the third element of the tefillin, which I talked about before, is the initial of God marked here on my hand, which is a reminder that I am obligated to use my hands in the service of God in the world. And hand in this case means my hands, but it's also symbolic of more. It's symbolic of my physical self, my hands, my body, my physical essence. And it is through our physical selves that we translate what we learn through the study of Torah and the insights that we gain through the act of prayer, we translate them into real, tangible, lived experiences in the world. We do that by serving others with our hands and with our being. We serve God through the service of others.

Now, you'll notice from that verse that it says, "I command you to do this." I command you. Acts of kindness in Jewish tradition is a commandment, a religious duty, a religious obligation. And this is one place in which Judaism may differ from some other ethical philosophies in the world. In English, we talk about the concept of charity. Right? And charity comes from the Latin word *caritas*, which is connected to the heart. It means a voluntary giving to help somebody in need because you're moved to do it by your heart.

In Judaism, we don't use the word charity. Instead we speak of *tzedakah*. That's a Hebrew word which means righteousness. And the concept of *tzedakah* is different from charity in so far as *tzedakah* is a commandment, a religious obligation. We, as Jews, don't give because we're moved to do it, although we surely are moved to do it. We give in the final analysis because we are commanded by God to do so. Giving is mandatory in Judaism. And what's interesting about that, I think, is that even those members of society, according to Jewish law, even those members of society who receive *tzedakah* from the communal fund, are themselves obligated to give *tzedakah*. Everybody's obligated to give because it is one of the commandments, one of the terms of the covenant. And we, as Jews, in this covenantal relationship with God, all have the responsibility to carry it out. Everybody among us.

So, the question arises, what does it mean to give and what is the definition of need? On one level, the verse speaks about the poor. Right? We are obligated to give to the poor and this is *tzedakah* in the financial sense of the term. Right? We give money. It's a commandment to give money, to give alms to the poor. But need and giving are not confined in that sense in Judaism. They are much more broadly construed. Every human being, according to our tradition, is needy. That's the human condition. We all have needs. They may not be monetary needs, they are spiritual needs.

And all of us have an obligation to give to those in need by doing acts of kindness. Apart from the monetary sense of giving, doing acts of kindness like being welcoming to the stranger, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, rejoicing with bride and groom when they celebrate their wedding, helping people who have difficulty moving around walk and get around, smiling, being kind. All of these things are acts of kindness and through them we help to meet real felt spiritual needs in human beings.

And the beauty of that second kind of act of kindness is that, unlike the first, money, which is limited by our financial resources, we're limited in our ability to do *tzedakah*, giving, by however much money we have, there is no limit to the acts of kindness we can do with our physical selves. Smiles, kindness, welcoming, comfort, these are unlimited resources. And we can give them all the time throughout the day. There is no end to it. And we are commanded by God to do that in service of our fellow human beings. By helping our fellow human beings with our physical selves, our hands, the essence of our being, we are serving God.

The world stands on three things. On Torah. I put my mind to use in the service of God to gain insight into the world and the nature of living. The world stands on prayer, the service of the heart. I open my heart and pour my heart out as a gift to God in a way of deepening our relationship. And the world stands on acts of kindness. I use my hands and my whole physical self to serve humanity because in so doing, I serve God. The world stands on three things. Torah, prayer, and acts of kindness.