

My friends, the Bible course I teach at Butler University covers both the Jewish and Christian Bibles, so I can tell you with professorial certainty that the Christian Bible begins with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Jewish Bible, on the other hand, does not begin with Abraham. We sometimes call Abraham the first Jew, although it would be more accurate to call him the first Hebrew whose life story is in the Torah. The Torah begins with Adam, Eve, and Noah—all of them universal figures. Why does the Torah devote its first eleven chapters to non-Israelites? To answer the following question: why are there Jews?

As I have said in the past, God is a tragic figure in Genesis. He created a world and judged it to be “very good.” But by the end of the first portion in the Torah, God is broken-hearted. He cared about one thing, that the one creature for whom God made the world, the same and only creature that God gave a moral compass, human beings, had a seemingly limitless ability to treat one another horribly. Caring about nothing more than how human beings treat one another, God regretted creating us at all.

What happened? The very first pair of brothers in the Torah, Cain and Abel, are also the first murderer and murder victim. Cain’s moral compass told him murdering his brother was wrong. We see that in the evasive response he gave when God asked him where Abel was. Having a conscience, it turned out, was not enough to make human beings behave well.

God tried a second time to make humans moral beings. For the story of Noah, our sages derived seven laws known as the Seven Noachide Laws: acknowledge God, set up courts of justice, don’t murder, steal, or commit adultery or incest, don’t blaspheme, and do not cut off and eat a limb from a living animal. God hoped or thought that by revealing these laws, human beings would learn to treat each other the way any parent, even a Divine parent, wants his or her children

to treat one another. Unfortunately, this second attempt to make people good also failed, as we learn from the story of the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It has been said¹ that three lessons emerged from these first two attempts to make people good:

1. God revealing morality through a moral compass does not work; people must also teach morality to one another.

2. A single act of revelation like the Noachide laws is also insufficient. Morality must be taught on an ongoing basis.

3. Although the Torah loves the number seven, seven moral principles are not enough. A much more detailed moral code is necessary, and it must be followed not only for its own sake, but to constantly model moral behavior to humanity.

This, my friends, is why the Jewish people exist. We are to be a constant reminder that God exists, that God cares deeply about moral conduct, and that the most important thing to God is how we, His children, treat one another.

Why did God choose the Jewish people for this task? If we are to be intellectually honest, the answer is He did not. He chose one man, Abraham, because as the Torah tells us, Abraham would teach not only his own children but his descendants as well to live as God wants us to live. In that passage, the Torah defines how God wants us to live in very simple terms, “by doing what is just and right.”² It just so happened that from this Hebrew named Abraham came the people called Israel, and these are the people whom today we call Jews. Had God chosen Attila the Hun instead of Abraham, the Huns would have become the Jewish

¹ By Dennis Prager. This sermon draws heavily from his work.

² Genesis 18:19

people. There is nothing inherently better or more moral about the Jewish people; we are simply descended from the man God chose to spread the light of ethical monotheism to the world.

And so, my friends, we the Jewish people are God's third, and we believe final attempt to make sure humans live with a recognition of God's will that we do what is just and right, and God has given us a detailed moral teaching—the word Torah means teaching—so that we know exactly how to do so. That my friends, is why we are here. May we never abandon our sacred mission, and some day, be it in our lifetimes or not, may God's dream that human beings live morally, do what is just and right, and treat one another with love, compassion and justice be realized.