

## Tzedek - Yom Kippur Day 5779

I want to talk with you about the powerful Haftarah that Manny Stern has just chanted for us. The section of Isaiah that was chosen by the ancient rabbis to be read every year on Yom Kippur morning. Why?

Here is some historical background:

This portion of the Book of Isaiah was most likely written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish community to Babylonia. The prophet's words were directed to that exiled community, and perhaps they were even spoken on Yom Kippur itself.

The community that Isaiah is speaking to has gone through great trauma. They have experienced war, the destruction of their city, the end of their self-rule, and exile to a foreign land. So, fittingly, the haftarah begins with words of comfort. The prophet, speaking for God, promises that God's presence will return to the people; they have been punished but they shall now receive healing. These are Isaiah's comforting words: *"For thus says God ... Exalted and holy I shall dwell among you! As for the downtrodden and destitute, I shall revive the spirit of the lowly, and I shall restore the heart of the depressed ... My spirit shall drip like dew; I shall create the breath of life."*

But, then Isaiah shifts his tone and focuses on questions of social justice, or more precisely, He decries the gap between the haves and the have nots that existed in that time. He is particularly critical of those in the community who are punctilious about religious practice but ignore the everyday struggles of people all around them.

Let me say a few words about the ancient Biblical understanding of *tzedek/justice*. *Tzedek* is not an abstract idea, or a thing we do, so much as a tangible force in the universe—something like gravity. And like a natural force, like gravity, there are repercussions if we try to deny the laws of *tzedek*. As Isaiah tells the people—justice will be denied to them, and God will not be close by, if the demands of *justice* are ignored. They can't expect things to get better if the universal laws of *tzedek* are not obeyed, and they certainly can't expect to experience a sense of God's presence and care.

What, then, does it actually mean to obey those laws?

Isaiah says that God calls for a great liberation: *“to open the bonds of evil, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke.”* The great goal, the grand dream is that all oppression ends, that no one is “yoked” — a word that recalls an image of a work animal, an ox, shackled to the plow. Perhaps to “break every yoke” means that no one will work in drudgery or slavery, that no one will be chained to that which degrades them; to mind-numbing, back-breaking work in deplorable conditions that wears them down.

The text then goes on to name specific acts of *tzedek*, painting even a more detailed picture of what it means to “untie the cords of the yoke”: *“Is it not to break your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?”*

I am struck at how personal, how close, each of these actions is. If the error of the people's ways lies in the alienation of one group of people from another, then the Godly path is just the opposite. Each of the

actions described here is intended to bring us closer to the other: to share our bread; to bring those who are cast out **into** our own homes; to give our clothing to the one who has none, and, finally - do not hide “mi’besarecha,” from your kin in their need.” This is an accurate translation, but the literal Hebrew is even more direct and graphic: “do not hide yourself from your own flesh.” “Your own flesh,” it may mean your own kin, your own community—but we are all flesh and blood. If I hide from the suffering of any person, I am also ultimately hiding from myself.

This text is calling for an encounter of the most direct and intimate kind possible—the exact opposite of our own natural tendencies when confronted with poverty, suffering, despair. I don’t know about you, but when I drive down North Main Street and observe the people standing on corners with signs – ‘homeless,help me’; ‘veteran and I have no place to sleep’; ‘I need a job to support my family’ - it’s hard to know what to do we do when confronted with the reality and the enormity of the suffering.

Can we respond with the kind of immediacy, on such an intimate level as Isaiah describes?

Isaiah concludes this part of his teaching like any good organizer. He says to the people: this is all for *your* benefit. You need to do all this not to make someone else happy, but for your own sake:

*“Then your light will burst forth like the dawn, and your healing shall quickly flower. Your tzedek shall walk before you, and the Presence of Adonai will gather you in. Then you shall call, and Adonai will answer; you will cry out, and God will say Hineni/Here I am. If you remove from*

*your midst the yoke, the pointing finger, and evil speech, if you offer to the hungry your nefesh—your soul, yourself—and the nefesh, the soul of the afflicted you satisfy—then your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like noonday. Then Adonai will guide you always, and will satisfy your soul in times of drought, and will strengthen your bones. And you shall be like a well-watered garden, like a well whose waters never fail. And your ancient ruins will be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called “repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”*

To put it more succinctly, if you keep your part of the deal, God says, then society will be restored to a Godly state. If we do justice, our light will shine like the morning sun, and we—all of us, the haves and the have-nots—will be healed. We will become renewed, strong; we will again have streets we can live in. I like to think of this as an ecology of justice: it is a delicate system that needs tending, or the entire organism will fail.

What is both interesting and challenging about this text is that the vision it holds out is so encompassing—it speaks of ending all oppression, of rebuilding an entire society—and yet the acts it calls for are so specific, so intimate. Nowhere does the prophet say, “bring down the ruling class, tear down the walls, transform the economic system!”

I don’t think this is because Isaiah didn’t think there wasn’t some fundamental change that needed to happen; he clearly was looking at a

system that, much like our own, was very broken. And it's not just because this was written in a pre-capitalist world that hadn't yet heard of labor unions or Karl Marx. In many ways, this is a revolutionary text, but it is written from a perspective that is much different than what we normally think of as "politics," or even social and economic justice.

Isaiah's model has at its foundation the notion of covenant, *brit*. For the ancient Israelites, the covenant was not just a contract that bound them to their God, but also a contract with one another. That which bound the covenantal community together, people to people, were two very specific forces: *tzedek*—the realm of justice—and *hesed*—acts of lovingkindness.

These were laws that could only be enacted on the human level. *Tzedek* and *hesed* held the community together by ensuring that **all** its members were cared for and sustained.

And as I mentioned a moment ago, there was an ecological balance to this whole system. If the laws of *hesed* and *tzedek* were blatantly denied, then there would be disastrous results for the community—the ultimate result being exile from the promised land. This was not a theology of reward and punishment but a description of a Godly system that would be completely thrown out of whack by the denial of this covenant of justice. The consequences were felt not only in the human realm, but in the natural environment as well. Flouting the demands of *tzedek* and *hesed*, according to many of the prophets, would result in drought, famine, the poisoning of the air and the water.

Covenant is ultimately about relationship, and so to maintain the covenant, one must remain in relationship—with the Source of Life, **and** with one another. When we follow in the ways of *tzedek*, we call, and the Source of Life answers; we cry out and we hear *Hineni*, here I am. In this moment, I can feel the Divine presence, I can feel my own connection to the power and life of the universe, **if** I am willing to walk in its ways.

This is why Isaiah describes the acts of *tzedek* as acts of relationship. Feeding, bringing into our homes, clothing—all are powerful acts of relationship—things we do for our partners, our parents, our children, our friends.

The centrality of relationship is expressed most directly near the end of the haftarah. We read “If you offer your compassion to the hungry, and satisfy the famished creature,” but the Hebrew implies much more. We can more literally translate this section: “If you offer to the hungry your soul (or—“yourself”), and satisfy the soul of the afflicted.” Those with power, with resources, are asked to come into true human relation with those who are oppressed, with those who are hungry. We are asked to offer of ourselves. Even more, we are called to not just to offer a temporary panacea, but to “satisfy the soul, the self, of the afflicted.” Isaiah calls upon us to be witnesses with our full selves—to not hide our eyes and to create a society—indeed, a world—where **everyone** can live as a whole person.

Isaiah teaches that coming into direct relation with others in our broader community, not hiding ourselves from the reality of poverty

and suffering, is transformational. In those moments, we must open our hearts and our wallets and give to meet the needs of others. And yet we do so not so our conscience will be assuaged, not so we can return to our lives unchanged, but as part of a larger effort to break the bonds of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free. How we achieve *that*, of course, is part of a larger discussion, but however we choose to go about that task, it must be rooted in our own lives and in the lives of others.

What I also learn from this text, and from our Jewish tradition, is that the idea of covenant needs to be central to our understanding of what it means to pursue justice. The crisis which our country is facing today—the huge and widening gap between rich and poor, the dismantling of the social safety net, the disintegration of community—has its roots in an assault on the very basic notion that a society has the obligation to organize itself in such a way as to collectively care for all of its members, most especially the vulnerable and needy. This, traditionally, is the role of government—it is a mechanism of collective care and responsibility. I see the attack on government programs and the very legitimacy of government's role as an attack on the wider sense of covenantal responsibility.

So, what do we do? What are the practical, actual things a little Soulful community or congregation like Temple Emanu-El might do to heed Isaiah's call? What can you do?

The Social Action Committee of this Temple has done a great job of building partnerships and creating opportunities to learn about and to

participate in concrete actions on issues like – immigration and economic justice. The Community Relations Council of the Jewish Alliance is doing work on issues facing beleaguered communities, here in RI and throughout the world. Jewish Family Service and Jewish Senior Agency (now called the Jewish Collaborative) are working with vulnerable people in our own community. In all these efforts there are many opportunities where your skills and resources can be used. The Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty advocates for sound policy and legislation to balance the wealth and opportunity gaps that exist in RI. There are so many ways to get involved. You might have to do some work to find where you can invest your time and talent, but you are bright and resourceful people so that should not be too hard. It is up to us to translate these opportunities into something meaningful.

In closing, I just want to say that I hope we can take to heart the promise and the challenge that the prophet Isaiah lays out for us: to dedicate ourselves in the new year to helping break open those bonds of oppression, wherever we encounter them, and that we experience the blessing (soon and in our time!) of a Godly light of healing that will bring peace and wholeness to our streets, our lives, our world.

Amen