

**The job of a Prophet: Seeing beyond the world you are in  
An introduction to the Yom Kippur Haftarah  
dedicated to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg  
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman  
Yom Kippur 5781**

We are about to read the Yom Kippur Haftarah. The goal of reading Haftarah is not just to add an extra section of the Bible to our service, some more Hebrew, some more chanting, but rather to acknowledge and recognize the voices of people, 2000 and 3000 years ago that were our prophets. Prophets like Isaiah who raised their voices when they found injustice, who spoke for the most vulnerable, for the widow, the sojourner and the orphan. Who remind us that we are all created in the image of God.

Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt in her magnificent eulogy to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg this past week at the Supreme Court said:

“To be born into a world that does not see you, that does not believe in your potential, that does not give you a path for opportunity, or a clear path for education, and despite this to be able to see beyond the world you are in, to imagine that something can be different. That is the job of a prophet. And it is the rare prophet who not only imagines a new world, but also makes that new world a reality in her lifetime. This was the brilliance of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”

Rabbi Holtzblatt continued: “The Torah is relentless in reminding and instructing and commanding that we never forget those who live in the shadows. Those whose freedom and opportunity are not guaranteed. Thirty-six times we are taught that we must never forget the stranger. Twelve times we are told to care for the widow and the orphan. This is one of the most important commandments of the Torah.

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It is the Torah's call to action. It is also the promise written into our constitution. As Justice Ginsburg said, 'think back to 1787, who were *the people*? They certainly weren't women. They certainly weren't people held in human bondage. The genius of our constitution is that now over more than 200, sometimes turbulent, years that we have expanded and expanded.' This was Justice Ginsburg's life work, to insist that the constitution deliver on its promise, that we, the people, would include all the people"<sup>1</sup>

In the book of Isaiah, which we will soon hear chanted by Sara Smolover, the Haftarah begins with a call to rebuild the road, to remove any blocks, or obstacles that are in the way so that God's people can live in freedom. The prophet raises his voice, crying out, loud and clear, that religious ritual without moral action does not achieve the goals of a fast day.

This text is one of the most radical teachings our tradition offers regarding Yom Kippur. On a day focused on self-reflection by means of prayer and fast, we are told in no uncertain terms that we have a moral obligation to act in the world and that our fast is meaningless if we do not listen to this message.

This is the religion Isaiah teaches: feed the hungry; clothe the naked; house the homeless; heal the wounded.

Rabbi Jordan Brauing explains and imagines Isaiah in 2020 saying the following:

If we abstain from food but don't fight fascism in our midst, then we are not doing it right.

If we refrain from drinking but ignore the glaring inequities of our society, then we are not doing it right.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4909113/user-clip-rabbi-lauren-holtzblatt-ruth-bader-ginsburgs-funeral-service>

If we beat our chests in synagogue but stay silent about systemic racism, then we are not doing it right.

If we join together to break the fast with our families and don't think of the families torn apart by an unjust immigration system, then we are not doing it right.<sup>2</sup>

Before we hear the call of Isaiah, I invite you all to hear the call of a TBZ member, James Cohen, who calls and cries out loud and clear for our commitment to Racial Justice this Yom Kippur and this year.

May our fast be meaningful, may the prophet Isaiah and Justice Ginsburg continue to inspire us- we promise to carry your legacy.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jordan.braunig/posts/10102960444592104>