

Olam Hesed Yibane - Building this world with Love
Hearing the Call of Isaiah - Introduction to the Haftarah
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
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We are about to read the Haftarah for Yom Kippur, a chapter from the Book of Isaiah. 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, and concludes by reminding us that it is through Shabbat that we can get closer to the possibility of redemption.

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.

In the words of Rabbi Arthur Waskow: "At the heart of Yom Kippur is, of all things, a critique of "Yom Kippur" — **if it is** a ritual without compassion or commitment to radical change"¹

Compassion or commitment to radical change!

What does Rabbi Waskow say? What does it mean to say that for Yom Kippur to be meaningful it has to be a ritual of compassion and a ritual of commitment to radical change?

¹ <https://theshalomcenter.org/isaiah-lives-challenge-yom-kippur>

Perhaps it is our capacity to be compassionate that opens the possibility to bring change into the world. Perhaps it is our capacity to relate with compassion and love to other human beings that allows us to act in ways that bring about meaningful change and to continue our commitment to social justice.

But I know that at TBZ I am largely preaching to the choir. We mostly share this understanding of religion, and Isaiah's words are not news to this community. We are the kind of community that has heard the call to care for the needy, the weak and the stranger, to be actively involved in the world, to stand for the values that our Prophetic tradition has taught us. We are doing this work. We are doing it, through our many social justice and tikkun olam initiatives.

We are following Isaiah's call, when we continue to support three, soon to be four asylum seeker families through NBARC (Newton-Brookline Asylum Resettlement committee).

We are following Isaiah's call, by being part of the Sanctuary Network, and by supporting a safe haven for an undocumented family in risk of being deported back into a dangerous situation.

We are following Isaiah's call, through our Climate Action Group, which led us to install solar panels at TBZ and to have a fully compostable kiddush every shabbat. The committee is now embarking on a process to think about the implications our commitment to work in response to climate change beyond our own TBZ community. All of this in a year that leaders of the Jewish community are calling a year for environmental teshuva.²

We are following Isaiah's call, when we move forward with initiatives around economic justice and racial justice in Brookline, Boston and beyond.

² <https://hazon.org/commit-to-change/environmental-teshuva/>

We are following Isaiah's call, when we teach children to read through the Greater Boston Jewish Coalition for Literacy.

We are following Isaiah's call, when we bring crackers and soup for Family table and when we go and volunteer at Jewish Family Children and Services to bring food to those in need.

What then do we have to hear from Isaiah?

First and foremost Isaiah reminds us that we are doing this work and we are committed to it because this is what it means to be Jewish. To grow Jewishly is to grow in compassion for the needy, the widow, the stranger.

To grow in compassion for the immigrant, for children separated from their parents at the border. To grow in compassion for all those who are suffering and who are in danger. We are called to do this work because this is what Judaism requires of us.

In his own time, Isaiah was concerned that people would think that fasting is enough. He was worried about a ritual practice not connected to a commitment for hesed, for compassion, for building a world with love, a commitment to heal the world and to care for the other. He was worried about people who thought that doing the right ritual was enough to make one a religious person.

That may not be exactly the challenge of most people sitting here today. But our challenge is still to understand that this is all connected, that our religious life, our prayer life, our spiritual growth are all connected to sharing our bread with the hungry, taking the poor and desperate into our homes. and not ignoring suffering.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "Prayer is either exceedingly urgent, exceedingly relevant, or inane and useless".³

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity", On Prayer page 258

Prayer can be useless, if we think of it as some sort of magic trick, if it is not profoundly and deeply connected to the teaching of Isaiah.

Heschel writes further: “...prayer as a voice of mercy, as a cry for justice, as a plea for gentleness, must not be kept apart. Let the spirit of prayer dominate the world. Let the spirit of prayer interfere in the affairs of man. Prayer is private, a service of the heart; but let concern and compassion, born out of prayer, dominate public life”.⁴

May our concern and our compassion grow from the spiritual work that we are doing today, both individually and collectively, on this Yom Kippur to strengthen our commitment for change and healing.

May our quest to build a world of Hesed be rooted in our tradition, in our Jewish practice, and may we continue hearing the call of Isaiah.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity”, On Prayer page 261..