

Michael Kahan
Yom Kippur 2019
Drash on Shacharit Haftarah

Shana Tova. Rabbi Booth was gracious enough to allow me to say a few words about the Haftarah today. I've been reading this haftarah here at Kol Emeth for most of the last 9 or 10 years, I think, and it's an honor that I really appreciate and don't take for granted. I usually don't feel like I can add much to Isaiah's words. I wasn't looking to do so this year, either, but then I came across a teaching that I really wanted to share.

I came across it very unexpectedly. As some of you know, in my professional life I teach in an Urban Studies program. I was looking for readings to assign in one of my Urban Studies courses, and to my great surprise I found an interpretation of today's haftarah. I had never thought of Isaiah's words in an urban studies framework. The afternoon haftarah, the book of Jonah, makes more sense: what is the book of Jonah, if not a story of interurban transportation gone horribly wrong? ... But I hadn't thought of this morning's reading in this way at all.

I found this Urban Studies interpretation of Isaiah in an essay by the late, great political scientist, philosopher and urbanist Marshall Berman, *zichrono l'vracha*, of City College. Berman passed away in 2013 and this essay was published in 2010; I think it may be one of the last things he wrote.

The essay is entitled "Falling," and its theme is the ruin of cities.¹ Berman begins by observing that, when it comes to urban ruins, he is an interested party: he grew up in the South Bronx in the 1940s and 50s. He saw his neighborhood and those around it destroyed by Robert Moses's program of highway building and urban renewal, and later by disinvestment, neglect, landlord arson, and the other culprits of what Berman calls "urbicide."

How can we make sense of this kind of destruction, Berman asks? How can we cope with the pain and dislocation that it brings? He observes that this is not a new problem, and he looks to the past for some possible answers. In ancient Greece, Berman says, ruin was seen as arbitrary, and essentially meaningless. Euripides wrote of the destruction of Troy as a random act of the gods, a manifestation of the capricious fortune that humans must endure, because we live at the whim of the residents of Olympus.

Then Berman turns to Judaism, his own tradition. In Jeremiah and Lamentations he finds that Jews, like the Greeks, believed that the destruction of cities – especially the destruction of Jerusalem – was a divine act. But the Jewish God doesn't destroy capriciously or at random; the ruin is not meaningless. Rather, the city is destroyed as a punishment for the people's sins. Heedless pursuit of wealth and conquest, exclusion of the poor, baseless hatred, neglect of the covenant: we know the list.

¹ Marshall Berman, "Falling," in *Restless Cities*, ed. Matthew Beaumont and Gregory Dart (London: Verso, 2010), 123-138.

Berman calls the Jewish view both more neurotic, and more profound, than the Greeks'. It is neurotic because, as he points out, there is "something morbid in this passion for collective guilt and blame. Haven't the people of Jerusalem suffered enough?" he asks.

But he adds that the prophetic view is also profound, because it calls us to a deeper knowledge of ourselves, and of the world. In Jewish cosmology, Berman points out, the destruction of the city was not a meaningless divine whim; it was meant to teach a larger moral lesson. The ruin of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was not the end, but one stage in a long process of national renewal and redemption. Jews can rebuild their city; but in order to do this, the prophets teach, they must change their behavior in the lands where they now find themselves. In exile, they must act with justice and compassion; they must learn, in Berman's words, "what they could not learn in their own city: how to be citizens."

Berman's prooftext is this morning's reading from Isaiah. "Unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free...share your bread with the hungry, and take the wretched poor into your home." If you can learn to do these things, God promises, "you shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called 'repairer of fallen walls, restorer of lanes for habitation.'" In other words, you shall rebuild your city from its ruins.

In looking around our cities today, it doesn't take much to see why Isaiah's words ring as true as they did 2500 years ago. We still need to learn, it seems, to free the oppressed, feed the hungry, house the homeless. But if we can learn how to be citizens, how to treat our fellow city dwellers with the kindness and justice that Isaiah demands, then, he promises, we shall rebuild ancient ruins, and the cycle of urban destruction and rebuilding will be complete.

Gmar chatima tova.