

Yom Kippur 2021 - Isaiah 58 & the Taliban - 20 Years Later

Boker tov, *g'mar hatimah tovah*, and *tzom kal* to each and every one of you. I'm delighted to be here with you on one of my favorite days of the year! A while back one of my children and I were in a Judaica shop. There we looked at various copies of *tehillim* - the Book of Psalms. As I flipped through one of the copies, Psalm 119, which I don't read regularly, popped out at me. I am not sure what caught my eye. It may have simply been its length. At 176 verses, it is the longest of all the psalms. When I got home I opened my Tanakh and read the entire psalm. It touched my soul.

It begins with the following words (Psalm 119:1-6):

הַיְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהִי דְרָגְתוֹ תְּהִלָּתוֹ וְתוֹרָתוֹ תִּהְיֶה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל
Happy are those whose way is blameless, who follow the teaching of the LORD. Happy are those who observe His decrees, who turn to Him wholeheartedly. They have done no wrong, but *bi'd'rachav halacha* - have followed His ways. You have commanded that Your precepts be kept diligently. Would that my ways were firm in keeping Your laws; then I would not be ashamed when I regard all Your commandments.

Later on, in verses 29-30 we read: הַסֵּר מִפִּי דַרְכֵי שָׁקֶר וְתוֹרָתְךָ תִּהְיֶה לִּי
Remove all false ways from me; favor me with Your teaching. אֶדְרֹג בְּאֱמוּנָה וְאֶחְרָתִי
I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set Your rules before me. And in verse 37 - אֲפַק אֶעֱיֵן מִלִּבִּי מִלִּבְרֹאשׁוֹת
Avert my eyes from seeing falsehood; בְּדַרְכֶיךָ תִּשְׁמְרֵנִי
- by Your ways preserve me.

In these nine verses the Hebrew word דְרֹג or its derivative, which means way or ways appears six times. That is, it is the firm hope of the psalmist to walk in God's ways. It is an admirable goal, but one that may seem rather difficult at times. Several weeks ago I spoke about walking in God's ways and imitating God's acts of compassion. It seems quite easy, but in reality often isn't. The author of the psalm describes the challenges of living such a life, including being persecuted for his beliefs by those who are hypocrites.

With this psalm, this hope of walking the right paths in our minds, let us turn to the haftarah we read a few minutes ago. The haftarah begins with the words: "Adonai says: build up, build up a highway! Clear a road! Remove all obstacles from the road of My people!"

It is a vision of hope. All obstacles on our path to serving God are to be removed. What a lovely wish. Our obstacles will be cleared away and God will personally revive the spirits of the lowly and the hearts of the contrite. No wonder I have always loved this day. The haftarah presents such a hopeful image!

I have to admit, I am clinging on to that hope pretty hard this Yom Kippur. Normally the feelings of hope, joy, and uplift flow out of my heart during this time of year. But having just marked the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 in an ignominious manner, that uplift hasn't been easy to find. Our country has been humiliated, our allies left in the lurch, American citizens and green card holders have been left behind, and the military equipment left behind for our enemies to take and use for themselves, (sell, or reverse

engineer) has made the world a much more dangerous place for us, our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren etc.

And yet, I cannot sit here and pretend that we are living in the most dangerous of times either. The truth is that the world has always been a dangerous and difficult place. We Jews have survived exile, crusades, expulsions, pogroms, Hitler, and more. More recently, we Jews, and our non-Jewish friends living in the United States have been incredibly blessed and somewhat insulated from many of the troubles befalling the world. This insulation has enabled us to pretend the world is NOT dangerous all while focusing instead on things that are quite often nonsense.

But along comes our haftarah to wake us up. We read (Isaiah 58:1): “Cry with full throat, without restraint; raise your voice like a ram’s horn! Declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin.” Traditionally this verse is interpreted as God exhorting the prophet to call aloud to his contemporaries, who professed to be righteous, but were, in fact, wicked. Today I stand before you and declare that it is the answer to the challenges we are facing. We cannot, will not be able to move forward properly, unless we raise our voices and speak the truth about our world and country.

In America we have been fond of moral relativism for a long time, but in fact there are truths. There is such a thing as good and evil, something called truth and something called lies. As the prophet Isaiah said thousands of years ago (5:20-21, 5:24): “Ah, those who call evil good and good evil; who present darkness as light and light as darkness; who present bitter as sweet and sweet as bitter! Ah, those who are so wise in their own opinions; so clever in their judgment...They have rejected the instruction of the Lord of Hosts, spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.”

How prophetic those words are in the face of an evil like the Taliban, who are, as we speak, once again thrusting their people backwards from modernity into a life of darkness in some twisted version of the modern Dark ages. How scary that they have fantasies of creating an entire world in their own image, have our weapons, and now the support of China and Russia.

But all is far from lost. We have the truth on our side. And most importantly we have justice, kindness, and love on our side. Our tradition tells us that even if the path is difficult, those things do always win. Thus our haftarah, which began with a promise to clear our path of obstacles, and continues by urging us to open our mouths and speak the truth, continues by telling us how to make the world a better place, how to do exactly what God wants us to do (Isaiah 58:6-8): **הֲלֹא זֶה צֹמֶם אֶבְתָּרֶהוּ** - **This** is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and do not ignore your own flesh. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly.

Isaiah calls his people to religious action and says feed the hungry, free the oppressed. Because of Isaiah's words in our Haftarah, programs like The Cupboard (the food pantry of Goodman Jewish Family Services of Broward which sponsored the Kol Nidrei food drive) and the national organization Mazon exist in the Jewish world. Among our Christian brethren there are various programs called Isaiah 58 that exist in many churches around the country, most of which are combined food banks, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters. For Isaiah, bringing God's love into the world and making the world a better place was the central tenet of his faith. For the Taliban, Haqqani Network, ISIS-K, and Al Qaeda, Allah's desire to punish and destroy anyone who doesn't adhere to sharia law is the central tenet of their faith.

I am proud and grateful to be an inheritor of Isaiah's tradition. Few things distress me more than when I hear people say that they don't go to church or synagogue because religion is the cause of all the problems in the world. That is not true religion, or at least not true Judaism. Judaism is to a large extent about us working **with** God to make the world a better place, now, not in some distant future in some distant place or some possible afterlife.

I believe with all that is in me that one of the primary ways that we make the world better is through supporting one another, and supporting our synagogue. It is our synagogue that is quite often the center or nexus of our connection to Judaism, Jewish culture, our friends, and of course Hashem. It is in our synagogues where we educate ourselves, welcome strangers, work together to do acts of loving kindness, and introduce the next generation to the beauty of our tradition. This has always been the case, but even more so recently. Over the past eighteen months it has been THIS congregation that has kept many of you, many of us, including me, from going stir crazy, from feeling disconnected from our tradition, from humanity at large, and from God. It hasn't been easy, but we have had a twice daily minyan almost every single day throughout the pandemic. Dozens of activities - classes, lectures, movies, social action projects, and social programs have taken place. The challah drive alone, got many of you out of the house at least once a week when otherwise you may have never left. Dozens more wonderful classes and programs are in the offing for this year. None of those things would be possible if this synagogue didn't exist. While they might exist somewhere in the Jewish community, they wouldn't have that special Temple Beth Am flare that we all love so much. As someone who has served in several other congregations, I can honestly tell you that this synagogue is truly special. That is why I know that you will all do your best to help preserve it not just for this year but for years to come. And it is why I offer now a prayer to each of you, a prayer that is found in our Siddur Lev Shalem but which we always skip. Not today. Not before we turn to yizkor when we promise to give tzedakah in memory of our loved ones. Today I offer you these words:

(A Prayer for Those Who Serve the Community - Siddur Lev Shalem)as

Misheberach avoteinu Avraham, Yitzchak, V'Ya'akov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, v'Leah - May the one who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, bless this entire congregation, together with all other holy congregations; they, their families, and all that is theirs; along with those who devote

themselves to establish synagogues for prayer, as well as those who enter them to pray, and those who provide for their maintenance, wine for Kiddush and Havdalah, food for guests, bread for the hungry, tzedakah for the poor, and shelter for the homeless; and all who faithfully devote themselves to the needs of this community and the Land of Israel. May the Holy One reward them, remove sickness from them, heal them, and forgive their sins. May God bless them by making all their worthy endeavors prosper, as well as those of the entire people Israel, their brothers and sisters. And let us say: *Amen*.