

## Listening to Prophetic Voices

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Imagine that the threat from a foreign power is growing. It's so significant that other countries warn your leader to ally with them instead of turning to that foreign power. Instead, the leader courts the foreign power in the hopes that they will provide friendship and protection against the countries that are your natural allies. The leader of that foreign power accepts and supports your country. But, once the deals have been struck, that foreign leader demands resources and access to your country's central institutions.

Now, a few years later, everything is getting worse. Government spending has had to increase to accommodate the foreign power's resource demands. The budget deficit has to be made up by increased taxes and cuts to other areas of spending. The wealthiest, who also want the power of being close to the leader, offer considerable gifts to sway the leader's decisions. Of course, they also want the government to look the other way when they oppress their workers, putting them in dangerous situations, paying such low wages that workers need assistance to feed their families, and refusing to give time off. But frankly, as long as the leader maintains power, he is more than happy to take the money and ignore the cost down the line.

And this situation is taking its toll---poverty and hunger are rampant and people are dying in the streets. Meanwhile the leader ignores the calls of those who warn of impending destruction. Or he threatens their lives. Or he locks them up. Anyone who speaks against him is a traitor. The moral compass upon which your country was built is broken.

Instead of addressing these real issues, the leader obfuscates and makes it seem like he's trying to protect his people from outside threats. He and his cronies perform piety as a way of attracting followers. They make a big show of the rituals even though they actively flout the moral underpinnings of religious observance. And don't those rituals look grand! Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

Oh, wait a second, did I mention that I'm talking about the 730s BCE where King Ahaz of the Southern Kingdom of Judah reigns. Ahaz seeks friendship from the Assyrians, who are a military

power in the Near East. The Northern Kingdom of Israel---not to mention local prophets like Isaiah---warn Ahaz not to turn to the Assyrians, and instead to ally with them. Ahaz ignores these recommendations and asks the Assyrian king to protect the Kingdom of Judah from the Kingdom of Israel.

Maybe it could have been OK, but the price of this protection is high. The Assyrian king has no qualms about exacting heavy tribute from Judah for his continued “friendship.” He also installs Assyrian gods in the Temple in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. Ahaz kowtows to every Assyrian demand and becomes a sort of puppet leader. But even this shaky alliance doesn’t ultimately protect the Israelites---Assyria attacks the Northern Kingdom of Israel and exiles its people before turning on the Southern Kingdom of Judah. And while Jerusalem survives the Assyrian siege, Judah continues to struggle.

It’s in this context that the prophet Isaiah lived and wrote. He saw the corruption of the King and his cronies and the suffering endured by the people. He saw the wealthy engage fervently in religious rituals and practices while flouting Jewish social and moral code. He saw the king turning his back on his natural allies and seeking favor from a ruler who expressly wanted to gain control of Jewish land. Isaiah saw that this was a deadly combination that would ultimately lead to Judah’s demise and he could not stay silent. At great risk to himself, he had to speak up.

Here are some of his words from just after this morning’s Haftarah:

Your hands are defiled with crime and your fingers with iniquity. Your lips speak falsehood, your tongue utters treachery.

No one sues justly or pleads honestly; They rely on emptiness and speak falsehood, Conceiving wrong and begetting evil.

...Their deeds are deeds of mischief, their hands commit lawless acts,

Their feet run after evil, they hasten to shed the blood of the innocent. Their plans are mischief, Destructiveness and injury are on their roads.

They do not care for the way of integrity, There is no justice on their paths. They make their courses crooked, No one who walks in them cares for integrity.

...For our many sins are before You, Our guilt testifies against us. We are aware of our sins, And well we know our iniquities:

Rebellion, faithlessness to the Eternal, And turning away from God, Planning fraud and treachery, Conceiving lies and uttering them with the throat.

And so justice is turned back And righteousness stays afar, Because honesty stumbles in the public square And uprightness cannot enter.

Honesty has been lacking, Those who turn away from evil are despoiled." The Eternal saw and was displeased That there was no justice.

As one person, even among a handful of other prophets, Isaiah was not able to affect much of the necessary changes. At best, he inspired some of the younger generations who, about a hundred years later, were able to make significant reforms that, unfortunately, were also short-lived. But Isaiah's words have reverberated across the millennia and still inspire us today.

Our situation today is, in some ways, very different from what Isaiah experienced and railed against. We are less concerned about empty piety and more worried about the systemic racism that is woven into our foundational documents. We are less concerned about pleasing God and more worried about policies that deny people's basic human rights. We are less concerned about statues of foreign leaders being placed in our central institutions like the Capitol and more worried about voter suppression and election tampering. We are less concerned about being conquered by a foreign power and more worried about the erosion of our democracy.

But, if you thought I opened by talking about our America, then you know that there are also too many striking similarities. So what do we do? How do we go beyond the anger, the frustration, and the fear? How do we translate the words that inspire us from Isaiah into actions that actually lead to change?

We see a model for this in the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, may her memory be a blessing. Ginsburg knew how to bring people together for common goals, how to make major change in increments to reduce backlash, and how to stand up for what is right when others disagree.

In doing some research for this sermon, I came across a fascinating note that, that when writing dissents to the court's majority opinion, Ginsburg would often try to find basic principles that all the dissenting judges could agree with. Being unified and showing strength in that unity was more important than having multiple voices disagree with the majority opinion and each other. Coming together, finding common ground even when we disagree about certain issues, is essential when we need to oppose something we think is wrong. We have to prioritize our conflicts in order to be effective. Finding baseline commonalities also helps build and strengthen relationships by forging trust and respect. Think about it: if you know that we share goals and values, it's easier and safer to disagree about something in the future. And we can address fundamental differences without feeling like our essence is being questioned.

Ginsburg also knew that proposing major changes at the outset was not always effective for getting what you want. This method of pushing for change in smaller, more palatable ways, had two advantages---wins didn't cause huge backlash from opponents and defeats were limited in scope. As a lawyer with the ACLU, she picked very specific cases regarding gender discrimination, taking specific issues one-by-one. Individually, they only did so much---a policy issue here about military benefits, another about Social Security benefits. But taken together, she made huge strides in knocking down discriminatory laws. Had she tried to address everything in one case, a sweeping dissent would have made it virtually impossible to fight for other, related changes in the future. Additionally, when she lost one of the five gender discrimination cases that she argued before the Supreme Court, it was only a small setback, not one that reversed all of the other progress that had been made.

Justice Ginsburg's tenure these last couple decades has not been easy. She disagreed vehemently with some of the court's decisions. But rather than just suffering defeat, Ginsburg made her voice and opinions known and even called on the legislature to remedy the law when she thought the Court had ruled inappropriately. She knew that dissent was a powerful tool for addressing injustice, that being vocal about fundamental disagreements makes a difference to the people who hear it. At a minimum it lets people know that there's someone on their side, which itself is invaluable for people who already feel disenfranchised and marginalized. But sometimes it can also lead to others taking up the charge and making changes in different ways.

Isaiah, as a lone voice, inspires the best within us but doesn't give a model for working for good. And historically, the call of the prophet is lonely and sad to say, ineffective (this afternoon's prophet, Jonah, is one of the few actual effective prophets). Like the prophets, Ginsburg used her passion and her talents to call out injustice and raise up the downtrodden. But she also gives an example of how to effect change by bringing people along with us in pursuit of common goals, working in increments to reach larger goals. May she be our inspiration as well on this Yom Kippur alongside Isaiah, teaching us not only to call out injustice where we see it, but also giving us the tools to bring justice into our community, our country, and our world. May this year bring us goodness, peace, growth, and blessing. Together we say Amen.