

## This is the Fast: Isaiah's Challenge

*Yom Kippur 5764*

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I want to engage with you with the text that Elaine has just read for us, the section of Isaiah that was chosen by the ancient rabbis to be read every year on Yom Kippur morning.

This portion of the Book of Isaiah was most likely written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish community to Babylonia. The prophet's words were directed to that exile community, and perhaps were spoken on Yom Kippur itself.

The community that Isaiah is speaking to is one which has gone through great trauma. They have experienced war and the destruction of their city, the end of their self-rule, and exile to a foreign land. The haftarah begins with words of comfort. The prophet speaks for God, promising that God's presence will return to the people, that they have been punished but now shall receive healing: "For thus says God...Exalted and holy I shall dwell among you! As for the downtrodden and destitute, I shall revive the spirit of the lowly, and the heart of the depressed I shall restore...My spirit shall drip like dew; I shall create the breath of life."

But then there is a shift in tone, and it becomes clear that not everyone in this community is "downtrodden and destitute"—that in fact, even here in exile social stratification persists: there are still bosses and workers, the haves and the have-nots. And so in this second section, Isaiah addresses those who have the power to oppress others, and who have material abundance that can be given to those in need.

The prophet talks about a people—perhaps a certain group of people—who seek out "knowledge of God's way." They are spiritual people, religious people, people who are trying to figure out why God isn't helping them. We have fasted, they say, we have afflicted ourselves, just as it says to do in the Torah—why have you not seen this, why do you have no knowledge of this? We have kept your *mitzvot*, we have been faithful to You—why are we still banished from our land?

Isaiah begins his response by making the point that the flow of *tzedek* in the world--the flow of justice, of righteousness--is a two-way street: "Like a nation that has done *tzedakah* and has not abandoned the *mishpat* of its God"--both *tzedakah* and *mishpat* are Biblical terms for justice--"Like a nation that has done *tzedakah* and has not abandoned the *mishpat* of its God, they ask of Me *mishpat-tzedek!*" The Israelites are asking God to act justly towards them, yet they refuse to uphold the Godly laws of *mishpat-tzedek!*

It is important here to understand the ancient Biblical understanding of *tzedek*. *Tzedek* is not an abstract idea, or a thing we do, so much as a tangible force in the universe—something similar to gravity. And like a natural force, like gravity, there are repercussions if we try to deny the laws of *tzedek*. As Isaiah tells the people--justice will be denied to them, and God will not be close by, if the demands of *tzedek* are ignored. They can't expect a change in their situation if the universal laws of *tzedek* and *mishpat* are not obeyed, and they certainly can't expect to experience a sense of God's presence and care.

What, then, does it mean to obey those laws?

Isaiah says that God calls for a great liberation—here is my translation: “to open the bonds of evil, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke.” This is the great goal, the grand dream—that all oppression ends, that no one is “yoked”—an image of a work animal, an ox, yoked to the plow. Perhaps to “break every yoke” means that no one will work in drudgery or slavery, that no one will be chained to that which degrades them, that wears them down.

And what is intriguing is that the prophet calls this a “fast”—a powerful religious act which was understood to have some kind of effect on the heavenly powers. In the ancient world, public fasts were called as acts of repentance and prayer when some kind of calamity needed to be addressed—for example, when there was a drought. And as we all can attest from our experience today—fasting is not so easy. It demands something of us. It is a purifying practice, a practice which all spiritual traditions engage in in one form or another. So this, too, is a “fast,” Isaiah teaches us: turning our attention and will and dedication toward liberating all who suffer from oppression and degradation.

The text then goes on to name specific acts of *tzedek*, painting a more detailed picture of what it means to “untie the cords of the yoke”:

“Is it not to break your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?”

I am struck at how personal, how close, each of these actions is. If the error of the people’s ways lies in “strife and quarrelling,” in the alienation of one group of people from another, then the Godly path is just the opposite. Each of the actions described here is intended to bring us closer to the other: to share our bread, our sustenance; to bring those who are cast out into our own homes; to give our clothing to the one who has none, and, finally, *mib’sarecha lo titalem*. The machzor translates this as “not hiding from your kin in their need.” This is an accurate translation, but the Hebrew is more direct and graphic: “do not hide yourself from your own flesh.”

“Your own flesh” may mean your own kin, your own community—but we are all flesh and blood. If I hide from the suffering of any person, I am ultimately hiding from myself. This text is calling for an encounter of the most direct and intimate kind possible—the exact opposite of our own natural tendencies when confronted with poverty, suffering, despair. It’s hard enough to read the headlines in the morning—what do we do when confronted with the reality and the enormity of the suffering in this world? Can we respond with this kind of immediacy, on this intimate a level?

Isaiah concludes this part of his teaching like any good organizer. He says to the people: this is all for your benefit. You need to do all this not to make someone else happy, but for your own sake:

Then your light will burst forth like the dawn, and your healing shall quickly flower. Your *tzedek* shall walk before you, and the Presence of Adonai will gather you in. Then you shall call, and Adonai will answer; you will cry out, and God will say *Hineni*/Here I am. If you remove from your midst the yoke, the pointing finger, and evil speech, if you offer to the hungry your *nefesh*—your soul, yourself—and the *nefesh*, the soul of the afflicted you satisfy—then your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like noonday. Then Adonai will guide you always, and will satisfy your soul in times of drought, and will strengthen your bones. And you shall be like a well-watered garden, like a well whose waters never fail. And your ancient ruins will be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called "repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in."

If you keep your part of the deal, God says, then society will be restored to a Godly state. If we do justice, our light will shine like the morning sun, and we—all of us, the haves and the have-nots—will be healed. We will become renewed, strong, and will again have streets we can live in. I like to think of this as an ecology of justice: it is a delicate system that needs tending, or the entire organism will fail.

What is both interesting and challenging about this text is that the vision it holds out is so encompassing—it speaks of ending all oppression, of rebuilding an entire society—and yet the acts it calls for are so specific, so intimate. Nowhere does the prophet say “bring down the ruling class, transform the economic system!”

I don't think this is because Isaiah didn't think there wasn't some fundamental change that needed to happen; he clearly was looking at a system that was very broken, much like our own. And it's not just because this was written in a pre-capitalist world that hadn't yet heard of labor unions or Karl Marx. In many ways this is a revolutionary text, but it is written in a modality that is much different than what we normally think of as “politics,” or even “social and economic justice.”

This model has at its foundation the notion of covenant, *brit*. For the ancient Israelites, the covenant was not just a contract that bound them to their God, but also a contract with one another. That which bound the covenantal community together, people to people, were two very specific forces: *tzedek-mishpat*—the realm of justice—and *hesed*—acts of lovingkindness. These were laws which involved God but which could only be enacted on the human level. *Tzedek* and *hesed* held the community together by ensuring that all of its members were cared for and sustained.

And as I mentioned a moment ago, there was an ecological balance to this whole system. If the laws of *hesed* and *tzedek* were blatantly denied, then there would be disastrous results for the community—the ultimate result being exile from the promised land. This was not a theology of reward and punishment but a description of a Godly system that would be completely thrown out of whack by the denial of divine covenantal laws. The consequences were felt not only in the human realm, but in the natural environment as well. Flouting the demands of *tzedek* and *hesed*, according to many of the prophets, would result in drought, famine, the poisoning of the air and the water.

Covenant is ultimately about relationship, and so to maintain the covenant, one must remain in relationship—with God, and with one another. This is made very clear in the passage I just read. When we follow in the ways of *tzedek*, we call, and the Source of Life answers; we cry out and we hear *Hineni*, here I am. Here, in this moment, I can feel God's presence, I can feel my own connection to the power and life of the universe, if I am willing to walk in its ways.

And this is why, I think, Isaiah describes the acts of *tzedek-mishpat* as acts of relationship. Feeding, bringing into our homes, clothing—all of these are powerful acts of relationship—things we do for our partners, our parents, our children, our friends.

The centrality of relationship is expressed most directly near the end of the haftarah. In our *machzor*, we read "If you offer your compassion to the hungry, and satisfy the famished creature," but the Hebrew implies much more. We can more literally translate this section: "If you offer to the hungry your soul (or--"yourself"), and satisfy the soul of the afflicted." Those with power, with resources, are asked to come into true human relation with those who are oppressed, with those who are hungry. We are asked to offer of ourselves. Even more, we are called to not just to offer a temporary panacea, but to "satisfy the soul, the self, of the afflicted." Isaiah calls upon us to be witnesses with our full selves--to not hide our eyes, as he says a few lines earlier, and to create a society—indeed, a world—where everyone can live as a whole person.

This perspective, I think, both challenges and transcends the old dichotomy of “service” versus “social action” that we often get caught up in. Do we apply the band-aids, treat the immediate needs of those who are struggling, or do we address the deeper social causes of problems like poverty and hunger? Do we start a soup kitchen or an advocacy campaign?

The answer that this text suggests is that we need to do both, but only as long as one is in the service of the other. Coming into direct relation with others in our broader community, not hiding ourselves from the reality of poverty and suffering, is transformational, Isaiah suggests. In those moments we must open our hearts and our wallets and give to meet the needs of others. And yet we do so not so our conscience will be assuaged, not so we can return to our lives unchanged, but as part of a larger effort to break the bonds of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free. How we achieve that, of course, is part of a larger discussion, and must be part of the discussion, but must also be rooted in our own lives and in the lives of others.

What I also learn from this text, and from our Jewish tradition as a whole, is that the idea of covenant needs to be central to our understanding of what it means to pursue justice. The crisis which our country is facing today—the huge and widening gap between rich and poor, the dismantling of the social safety net, the disintegration of community—has its roots in an assault on the very basic notion that a society has the obligation to organize itself in such a way as to collectively care for all of its members, most especially the vulnerable and needy. This, traditionally, is the role of government—it is a mechanism of collective care and responsibility. I see the attack on government programs and the very legitimacy of government's role as an attack on the wider sense of covenantal responsibility.

What we have witnessed, over the past 20 to 30 years, is what I would call the “privatization” of the idea of covenant. We now talk about small-scale, community-based efforts to take care of needs that are national in scope. For all the talk of patriotism, there is no national, American covenant any more. Covenant is well and good as long as it goes no further than my family, my church, my social group. In its most extreme form, this ideology asserts that I owe nothing to anyone else, and in fact any attempt to engage me in a broader set of responsibilities is an attack on my person and my property. This is exactly the attitude that Isaiah is critiquing in the verses we read this morning.

So what do we do? What are the practical, actual things a little congregation like Dorshei Tzedek might do to heed Isaiah’s call?

I think this notion of covenant is an important one, and I also believe that religious communities are in the best position to affect the direction of public discourse in this country. I read recently about a governor in the South, a very conservative Christian man, in a state that has one of the most regressive tax policies in the entire country. He apparently had a complete change of political heart about tax reform after he read an article by an evangelical Christian writer, who pointed out the Biblical teachings about economic justice. I believe that we, along with other religious communities concerned with these issues, need to make ourselves part of a larger conversation about what it means to live in a covenantal society—one in which citizens of a town, a state, a region—even a whole country—have mutual responsibilities and obligations. Hyper-individualism is a very deep trend in American culture, and along with it the notion of every person looking out for him/herself, but this is also a deeply religious country, and I believe that it is possible to change how people think and talk about the role of government if we can help re-frame the conversation.

This is something we can only do in conversation with others, and that is one reason I am excited about the possibility of our joining the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. We have been in conversation with the group for about 4 years now, and in the past 6 months have taken some steps to experience the group for ourselves and to begin to think about what membership in it might mean. GBIO offers opportunities for the kind of relational social change work that Isaiah describes. GBIO members have their own kind of covenant with one another, and I think that will raise good challenges and opportunities for us. What would it mean to work together with communities that are quite different than most of us in terms of class and ethnic background, educational levels, neighborhoods that they live in? And what would it mean to do that work not from a sense of obligation or charity, but from a desire to address our own needs and concerns, to bringing healing and restoration for ourselves, not just others?

This afternoon, during our Mincha discussion, we will focus on questions of how we as a community might engage in tikkun olam wor. As part of that discussion, we’ll have the chance to hear about one specific GBIO initiative that provides, I think, a very interesting model for coming together with other communities around an issue of shared concern.

Another practical course of action that Isaiah discusses is what we now call *tzedakah*. In the Bible, *tzedek* and *tzedakah* were interchangeable terms for the notion of justice that I discussed

earlier. But by the period of the early rabbis, *tzedakah* had come to have a narrower definition: the obligation to give a significant portion of one's income to people in need.

There is a lot for us to learn from the traditional Jewish approach to *tzedakah*. I have always appreciated the obligatory nature of *tzedakah*. As a component of God's justice, it is not left up to the whim of the giver. It is structured, like a tax system, into a community's functioning, so that all who need will receive some form of support. And in turn, everyone—even those who are in need themselves—are expected to give, because that is a fundamental sign of belonging to the community and sharing in its obligations.

Recently I have come also to appreciate the significance of the traditional understanding of the spiritual power, you might call it, of acts of *tzedakah*. Rabbinic stories and teachings about *tzedakah* from the midrash and the Talmud focus on the transformative power of giving, for the giver. In this understanding, acts of *tzedakah* provide a person with a kind of access to heaven. For example, it's common to put some money in the *pushke*, the donation can, after praying, in the hope that it will help one's prayers get wherever they need to go. And acts of *tzedakah* are thought to aid in the process of *teshuvah*, repentance, and to help secure one's place in *olam ha'bah*, the world to come, the next life.

How do we translate those traditional understandings into something meaningful for us? Here are two thoughts:

#1: We give of what we have—and the average amount to give is 10% of one's income, for those who can afford it—we give because it has a potentially transformative psychological, spiritual effect on us. This kind of mindful giving re-orient us to that which we own, that which we have, in a radical way. This is not all mine, and I owe a significant portion of it to others. It cultivates in us the qualities of generosity and compassion for others.

#2: I actually owe a debt to those to whom I give, because they are helping me in this transformative work. In the Talmud, we read that in ancient times a Jewish beggar said to one whom he or she asked for money—"merit through me"! Meaning—I'm giving you a chance to do this important mitzvah, you'll gain life in the world to come because of me! What a wonderful approach—this person is doing me a favor by asking for help. This understanding helps reformulate our whole approach to how individuals, and especially communities, with certain privileges relate to those without those privileges. How do we need one another? In what ways do we help each other out? How can acts of giving and receiving build relationships?

Tzedakah as a Jewish spiritual practice is a big topic, and one I would love to study in more depth with those who might be interested. I see two ways in which we might explore this issue more deeply within our community. One would be to consider whether there are any mechanisms we might want to create to give support to those of our own members who are experiencing financial difficulty. It is traditional for Jewish communities, for example, to establish interest-free loan funds. The whole question of how we fulfill our *tzedakah* obligations within our community, while preserving the dignity of all involved, is an important one to consider.

This might also be the year we seriously pursue the idea of creating a *tzedakah* collective among those members who are interested—a group that would together pool resources and decide to whom to donate those resources. Not only are pooled resources more effective than individual donations, it would also allow those who are interested to wrestle together with important questions about how much of one's income to dedicate in this way, and what types of issues and causes should receive support. There are Jewish teachings to guide all of these discussions, and I think the process could be an important one.

These are just a couple of ideas, and I look forward to exploring more with you in the months to come. As I said earlier, we'll look at one aspect of this whole question of how we as a community do tikkun olam work as part of our discussion of the Book of Jonah this afternoon, so I hope many of you will be able to rejoin us at 5:15.

And in closing, I just want to say that I hope we can take to heart the promise and the challenge that the prophet Isaiah lays out for us: to dedicate ourselves in the new year to helping break open those bonds of oppression and degradation, wherever we encounter them, and that we experience the blessing (soon and in our time!) of a Godly light of healing that will bring peace and wholeness to our streets, our lives, our world.