

Introduction to Haftara, Isaiah 57-58
Yom Kippur Morning, September 30, 2017
Germantown Jewish Centre

Here's an unequivocal statement I am happy to share: readings like the Isaiah selection we are about to hear played a significant role in my decision to become a rabbi.

It all began with an eighth-grade course in the prophets at Rodeph Shalom on Broad Street. As much as I was impressed by the magnificent sanctuary and the stirring music there, I was especially inspired and challenged by the messages of the prophets like Isaiah. From that course, I took away this fundamental Jewish value: that Judaism is above all a path towards a meaningful and godlike life; rituals are but a means to that end. The goal is *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, improving the lives of all people and, we should add, the earth itself.

Many scholars believe that there were at least two Isaiahs whose words found their way into the Tanach (the Hebrew Bible). The Isaiah of today's selection, chapters 57-58, spoke to the Jews living in Babylon seventy years after the destruction of the first temple, when Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed those exiles to return to Judah.

In rereading the chapters recently, I was struck by how much their order is reminiscent of our own situation. Chapter 57, though not shying away from mentioning the sins that Isaiah believes led to the exile, goes on to depict punishment as a thing of the past:

¹⁷For their sinful greed I [God] was angry;
I struck them and turned away in My wrath....

¹⁸[Now, however] I ... will heal them:
I will guide them and mete out solace to them,
And to the mourners among them

¹⁹heartening, comforting words:
It shall be well,
Well with the far and the near

Chapter 58, however, assumes that, once back in Judah, the people will once again sin, then wonder why God ignores their fasts—their supposed repentance:

³"Why, when we fasted, did You not see?
When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?"
Because on your fast day
You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!

⁴Because you fast in strife and contention,
And you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such
As to make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?...

⁶No, 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.

⁷It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

⁸Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly...

⁹Then, when you call, the Lord will answer;
When you cry, [God] will say: "Here I am."
If you banish the yoke from your midst,
The menacing hand, and evil speech,

¹⁰And you offer your compassion to the hungry
And satisfy the famished creature—
Then shall your light shine in darkness,
And your gloom shall be like noonday.

So, what's significant about the track of Isaiah's words: after the long exile, joy and return—and then, wham, threats again? Isaiah foresaw backsliding and complacency—a pattern we might see in ourselves as well. Good times easily lead to an assumption that we've earned all our privileges and therefore have no obligation to others—that we can fulfill our obligations to God by coming to shul once in a while (or even a lot), ignoring the evil that, especially in these times, swirls all around us: endemic poverty, xenophobic fear-mongering and dog whistling at the highest levels of government (Isaiah's "evil speech"), that just last month morphed into overt racism and anti-Semitism (Isaiah's "menacing hand") that should surely give all of us pause.

Happily, with the strong encouragement of rabbis from Elias Charry to Adam Zeff, and backed by presidents like Chip Becker, hundreds of GJC members past and present have volunteered to ensure that *Tikkun Olam* is a crucial part of who we are as a congregation. Today we house the homeless and provide them with legal assistance, feed the hungry, support refugees, help students at the Henry School, combat racism, and promote fair trade goods to improve lives in developing nations. Through POWER we advocate for fair funding for public schools, living wages for all workers, and environmental justice. In sum, we show ourselves and our community that fully engaged Judaism goes beyond dining room tables and synagogue walls. Through us, the light of Judaism does indeed burst forth like the dawn.

And yet... In 2017, I think we need to embark on an additional *tikkun olam* track. Aided and abetted by so-called "leaders" in Washington, Harrisburg, and elsewhere, and perhaps

unconsciously impelled by our own fears, we seem to know one another less and less. It's time we reverse that and set about consciously to understand the person sitting next to us and those beyond our normal points of contact. We need to understand the fears and aspirations even of those with whom we disagree, so that we can bring healing to our fractured polity. Some fear that, if we open up to one another, we'll only exacerbate rifts. I still have enough faith in human nature to believe that the opposite is true.

Earlier this year, I got together with Chris Satullo to talk about how religious institutions might model respectful dialogue. The goal would be to provide short, targeted workshops to give people the tools to truly listen and understand each another's concerns. That, in turn, would help allay both the fear of speaking up lest one be criticized or ridiculed and the fear that airing disagreements will split the congregation. Ultimately, we'd hope that participants could identify common concerns and hopes—all in order to bridge what sometimes feel like chasms within congregations, between congregations, and, sadly, among Pennsylvanians across the state. The same techniques, by the way, would help individuals communicate with friends and loved ones with whom they are convinced they have profound disagreements. At the Bregman program this afternoon, joined by Rev. Sandy Strauss of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches and her intern Teman Cooke, Chris will share with you the models we've been developing. This will be the first such presentation we will have made. We hope you'll join us at 2:45 and at future workshops soon to be announced. I'm pretty sure Isaiah would approve.