

Taking Responsibility for Destruction

חֲזוֹן יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ בֶן-אֲמוֹץ

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz,
who saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem
in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Achaz, and Hezekiah,
kings of Judah.

שְׁמְעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהָאֲרֶץ כִּי יְהוָה דֹּבֵר

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth,
For the Eternal has spoken:
“I reared children and brought them up –
And they have rebelled against Me!” (Isaiah 1:1-2)

These words open the book of Isaiah and this week’s *haftarah*, a passage reserved for the Shabbat before Tisha B’av, our national day of mourning. It is a reminder and a rebuke: We are responsible for our collective moral failures, and we also have the power to overcome them.

Tisha B’av marks the fall of Jerusalem, the crumbling of the Temple of Israel under the brutal hands of the Babylonians. But these words of prophecy came a century earlier and speak to our people’s greatest calamity known to that point. The Assyrian Empire invaded and destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel, leaving the southern Kingdom of Judah as the surviving witness.

Fair Zion is left
Like a booth in a vineyard,
Like a hut in a cucumber field,
Like a city beleaguered.
Had not the Eternal of Hosts
Left us some survivors,
We should be like Sodom,
Another Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:8-9).

Isaiah’s prophecy is a sign of our people’s constant struggle to do what is right. The classic sin of Sodom and Gomorrah – despite what Christian reinterpretation will tell you – is jealousy, greed, and xenophobia. These are the greatest temptations of a people in power and therefore those most urgently to be denied.

Devote yourselves to justice [the prophet declares].
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
[And] defend the widow's cause (Isaiah 1:17).

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The prophet's clarion cry is venerated in progressive Jewish communities, a reminder that Judaism thrives not on ritual stringency but a morality attendant to society's most vulnerable.

Though you pray at length,
I will not listen.
Your hands are stained with crime —
Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight.
Cease to do evil.
Learn to do good (Isaiah 1:15-17).

At the same time, though, the underlying theology of the prophet's words give us pause. Could ancient Israel's moral turpitude truly cause a foreign invasion? Do we blame the conquered for their conquest, at once berating them for immorality and telling them they got what they deserved?

According to the Sages of our Tradition, yes, absolutely! As we read in the Talmud (BT Yoma 9b).

Why was the first Sanctuary destroyed? Because of three things which prevailed there: idolatry, immorality, bloodshed. ...But why was the second Sanctuary destroyed, seeing that in its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, precepts, and the practice of charity? Because therein prevailed *sinat chinam*, hatred without cause.

In other words, the Romans were the proximate cause of the Temple's fall, but the ultimate blame lies with our own people. *Sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, turned Jew against Jew for no reason but self-promotion and distrust. The Rabbis suggest that the Creator of the Universe cares so deeply about the behavior of Jews that foreign armies are rallied to chastise wayward Israel.

From one perspective, this is a harmful way to think about Jewish history, especially if we extend the metaphor to centuries of Jewish persecution and, to the most scandalous extreme, to the Holocaust. I cannot accept a theology of victim-blaming, and

even when people really do act badly, I don't think God intervenes in history to punish them.

But there's another way to look at it: We are empowered to take charge of our fate. Our collective moral action *matters*, and our choices make a difference not only in our own lives but in the world at large. When we see something bad and we ask, "What was my role?" we conduct our lives with humility and accountability. We reject victim-blaming, yes, but we can also reject victimhood altogether. Our tradition pushes us to acknowledge our power and our responsibility.

This week's *haftarah* and a lesson of Tisha B'av in general is that: No matter how dejected or meek has been the Jewish people – and no matter how successful and strong – we see ourselves continually as on the brink of disaster. For our God demands of us not obeisance or veneration but to walk in God's ways and to bring justice to the earth. It's easy to say to the Creator of the Universe, you are our God and there is none else; and it's comforting to meditate on God's love and eternal devotion. But it's much harder to say of the castaway or pariah, you, too, are created in the image of God; and it's a heavy burden to recall with sincerity that the eyes of the downtrodden shine as brightly as our own with the spark of the divine.

But I think there's an even greater challenge in Isaiah's call and in the message of Tisha B'av. The Rabbis assigned to the entire Jewish people responsibility for their national fate, and they confront us with the challenge to do the same. A core principle of Rabbinic Judaism is כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִים זֶה בָּזֶה, all Israel are bound to one another.¹ When one of us succeeds or fails, it ripples through us all. This produces a profound communal responsibility, which can be, at times, extremely uncomfortable.

To take the most pressing and current example: As I shared in my congregational message this week, I believe Israel's government has allowed hunger and disease, not to mention displacement and violent death, to tear through the lives of innocent Gazans. And most days of the week, I'd point my finger and cast blame on those whose decisions wreck communities and tear at the moral fabric of Israeli society. But on Shabbat Chazon, and in anticipation of Tisha B'av, I am pushed to look in the mirror and recognize the part I play and the responsibility I bear. The sins of the Jewish State, our tradition contends, lie on all of our shoulders.

For some Jews, the moral culpability implied in the principle of collective responsibility is proof positive that being Jewish isn't worth it. If being Jewish means accepting responsibility for starvation in Gaza, then I might as well not be Jewish.

¹ BT Shevuot 39a. Rashi's quote of this phrase in his comment to Deut. 29:28 is עֲרֵבִים זֶה לָזֶה and his comment to Lev. 26:37 uses עֲרֵבִין זֶה לָזֶה. Rambam uses the phrase עֲרֵבִין זֶה בָּזֶה in MT Hilchot Shevu'ot 11:16. All four variations are used in rabbinic sources with עֲרֵבִין זֶה בָּזֶה the rarest and עֲרֵבִים זֶה לָזֶה the most common.

But I suggest that bearing responsibility for Jewish action in Gaza also implies bearing the power to do something about it. Jews in America have very little sway over the government of Israel, but we do not stand powerless. We can avail ourselves of the powers and freedoms afforded to us by living in the United States, appealing to our own leaders and legislators and joining and supporting groups of moral-minded individuals who stand and fight for peace. But let us not forget the Israelis to whom we are connected. Let us not forget those allies in Israel who work tirelessly to bring about change. As Reform Jews, our strongest partners are those in the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, and I have always felt that strengthening Israel's Reform movement strengthens Israel full-stop.

We cannot rely on our leaders to bring us out of this mire. As Isaiah says:

Your rulers are rogues
And cronies of thieves,
Every one avid for presents
And greedy for gifts (Isaiah 1:23).

But the *shavim*, the ones who repent with true *teshuvah*—these are the bearers of *tzedakah*, of rightness and righteousness (cf. Isaiah 1:27). We must hold our leaders accountable, to be sure, but we must also own up to the ways in which we ourselves can make a difference, to take meaningful steps to bring the world closer to peace.

Tisha B'av is hard not only because we're sad for what we've lost but also because of its ringing call to our conscience. As the first marker of the season's turn toward the High Holy Days, let us use this moment to reflect on what we can do to make our people and our world holier and more just. And may we bring ourselves closer to the day when Jerusalem shall be known as עִיר הַצֶּדֶק קְרִיָּה נֶאֱמָנָה, "City of Righteousness, Faithful Town" (Isaiah 1:26).