



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Yom Kippur 5770 By Rabbi Julie Schonfeld

Yom Kippur is meant to convey a sense of urgency, to communicate to us, unambiguously, the opportunity that each of us has, during our brief lives, to carry out the terms of God's contract with humankind as laid out in the Torah. Every contract has a purpose. The central purpose of our contract with God is to create a just and caring society. The sermon on Yom Kippur must convey this crucial message. Not content to rely on the sometimes uneven abilities of leaders to communicate this message appropriately, the tradition ensures that there will be at least one powerful sermon with this message delivered to the community every Yom Kippur. It is delivered by no less than the prophet Isaiah, and it comes in the form of the Haftarah.

The Haftarah offers words that are unflinching in their insistence on separating the important from the unimportant, the true expression of religious faith from the false airs of piety. In the Haftarah, Isaiah quotes the Jewish people as asking God why their ritual behaviors have not brought them God's favor: "Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?" (Isaiah 58:3)

God's answer resonates throughout the ages:

Because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers! . . . No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the 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 him, and not to ignore your own kin. (58:3, 6-7)

Isaiah's message was directed at exiles returning from Babylon whom he felt were more interested in rebuilding the holy Temple than in their treatment of one another. According to Isaiah, ritual behaviors are only valued by God to the extent that they are consonant with a person's ethical behavior. We who are raised in a society shaped by the rational thinking of the Enlightenment identify with this message. What is the purpose of religion if not to make us good people?

Thinking that we understand the prophet to prefer the ethical over the ritual, we are surprised to find him conclude his message with the obligation to observe Shabbat, an obligation which we often associate with a complex system of ritual behaviors. "If you turn away your foot because of the Sabbath . . . If you call the Sabbath 'delight,' the Lord's holy day 'honored,' . . . Then you can seek the favor of the Lord" (58:13-14).

Why does Isaiah marginalize the importance of one ritual behavior—fasting—at the beginning of the Haftarah and then emphasize another ritual—Shabbat observance—at the end of the Haftarah? The editing of the Isaiah text is extremely deliberate—the Haftarah could have easily ended two verses earlier and not introduced an entirely new theme, Shabbat.

The answer is illuminating. The centrality of Shabbat in Judaism's vision for a just society earns it a place in this Haftarah. The obligation to observe Shabbat demands that every person and animal, merely by virtue of being alive,

be entitled to a day every week to experience rest, plenty and safety. This was a radical vision of society in the time of Isaiah, 2,600 years ago. It is an equally far-reaching concept today. The vast majority of the world's people are too poor and too oppressed to survive if they take a day off from work. Even in our own communities, there are many who can't afford a day of rest.

However, the genius of Jewish tradition is that it constantly reminds us that we must restructure our daily lives in order to achieve our ethical and moral aspirations. Shabbat is an obligation, which in order to be fulfilled, requires an entirely different social structure. Jews, as individuals, do not make Shabbat only for themselves, but rather for their entire households—their sons and daughters, their workers and the stranger passing through their gates; we are required to make Shabbat for all of them.

In Jewish thinking, a day of rest is not a human right derived from an abstract notion of that which the Creator bestows upon the individual. Rather, it is a religious obligation, emanating from a concrete notion of what we are required to do for each other and how the human community can be fashioned into a just society.

In order to practice the "ritual" of Shabbat, a panoply of ethical social systems must be put in place. That is why Shabbat is described by tradition as "*me'ein olam haba*," a taste of the world to come. Shabbat is such a powerful concept that our tradition holds that if the entire Jewish people, as small we are, were to observe Shabbat twice in a row, the world would be redeemed.

Yom Kippur is called by many names in our tradition. One of them is *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. May we each be blessed with a year in which both our rest and our labors succeed in bringing more justice into the world.



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