



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Yom Kippur 5773 Making a Difference Inside Out

By Dr. Erica Brown

On the Days of Awe we often turn inward: immersing ourselves in prayer, fasting, working on spiritual growth and confronting expectations of change. In so many ways, these days are a time when we focus on internal matters. Although our prayer confessions are written in the plural, we usually dwell on our own singular faults. And despite the special commandment to welcome guests, many have the custom not to invite anyone outside the family to the holiday table to keep the days somber, reflective and intimate.

Yet, if we turn back to our oldest Jewish texts, our prophets often regarded our inwardness as a fault and a deficiency, particularly on holidays. Our mandate in the world as a covenantal people is to bring light to other nations and not only persevere on our own needs and ills. We cannot only look inward and focus on our own spiritual growth through fasting and prayer alone; we must look outwards to the needs of others.

In the lyrical language of the ancients, Isaiah offered his exhortations on fasting and changing. He marveled at those who fasted but could not see oppression before their eyes, the injustice that their own hands committed: "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 business and oppress all your laborers!" (Isaiah 58:3) Isaiah is unambiguous. Those who pray while their workers suffer are not praying at all. God is not interested in this sort of fast.

The prophet condemned those who donned sackcloth and ashes and bowed low to the ground in prostration but did not live lives of compassion: "Do you call that a fast?" he asked rhetorically. No. And then Isaiah proceeded to tell us the fast that God desires:

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, clothe him,
And do not ignore your own brother. (Isaiah 58:6-7)

It is more in keeping with Jewish values to share bread with the hungry than to eat nothing while hurting others. In the world of social justice we face the conundrum of universalism versus particularism all the time. We are a small people, and if we do not take care of each other, no one else will take care of us. And yet, Isaiah

reminds us that if we are truly a compassionate people, our mercy has no geographic or communal bounds. Any act of oppression, anywhere, hurts us—as it must if we are citizens of the world.

Isaiah demanded that prayer be coupled with action, that our inner struggles manifest themselves in outer mercies. Without Isaiah to issue this reminder today, we must demand it of ourselves now. And when we act in his spirit, Isaiah says, “you shall be called ‘repairer of fallen walls’...” (Isaiah 58:12) We will be known as healers.

It is perhaps natural that the prophet Isaiah was especially attuned to injustice and urged the Jewish people to confront it. In his book, *The Prophets*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes prophets as individuals whose eyes see what others close their eyes to and who hear what others refuse to hear. With these myopic eyes and sensitive ears, the prophet is constantly taking in news of injustice and cannot avoid acting once this news is offered and digested. Today we do not have prophets, but we can still embody prophetic leadership by ensuring that our own eyes are willing to look at oppression, our ears are open to the cries of others and our heart and hands are willing to act on what we know is right.

When we enter the High Holidays with this openness to recognizing injustice and committed to rectifying it, our prayer takes on new resonance. We can pray and fast only if we have learned from these rituals to break bread with those who do not have it on the day after Yom Kippur. When we take personal responsibility for the world’s ills, then we can merit Isaiah’s praise in the same chapter: “Then shall your light burst forth through like the dawn...” (Isaiah 58:8)

With a spirit of contrition and renewal, we approach these Days of Awe, humbled by our failings and awed by our own capacity to bring light into the world. We ask for forgiveness for what we have done wrong and have not yet done and then—like the dawn—we break forth on a new day to repair Isaiah’s fallen walls.



Dr. Erica Brown is the Scholar-in-Residence at The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Her latest book is *Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe* (OU/Koren), and she writes a weekly internet essay called “Weekly Jewish Wisdom.” Subscribe at www.leadingwithmeaning.com.

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