

Parashat Debarim - Tisha Be'ab

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22

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What is the real significance of our Tisha B'Av mourning?
What really caused the Temple's destruction?

The Haftarah selection for this week's portion Debarim, is the last of three Haftarahs preceding the fast day. Two of the Haftarahs are from Jeremiah, the prophet who actually lived through the cataclysmic loss. This week, the third, is from Isaiah, chosen by the sages to be read immediately before the ninth of Av, a reading which provides deep insight into why the Temple was destroyed. Indeed, this Sabbath is called Shabbat Hazon (the Sabbath of the Vision) after the first word of the Haftarah.

We read how Isaiah mercilessly berates the Jewish people:

“Hear the word of the Lord, rulers of Sodom, give ear to the Torah of our God, you people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifice to me? I'm sated with the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of sated beasts; ... Bring no more vain offerings, incense of abomination they are to me. As for the New Moons, the Sabbaths and the Festivals, I cannot bear iniquity along with your solemn convocations. Your hands are full of blood ... Wash you, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease to do evil. Learn to do well; seek justice; relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” [Isaiah 1:10-17].

I have quoted at length because these seven verses, although but a fragment of Isaiah's words, capture the essence of prophetic sensibility as well as alluding to the age-long tension between prophet and priest. Long before the checks and balances of a democratic government, Judaism had its own built-in system for maintaining a balance between the awesomely exact ritual requirements in the Holy Temple which was the domain of the priests and an ethical spirit of universalism, compassion and justice which was promoted – and insisted upon – by the prophet. The prophets stood alone as they raged against the sins of people, especially when the sins took on a veneer of religious respectability which only served to hide the rot within. The hypocrisy of the Israelite callousness towards the oppressed coupled with concern about punctilious religious performance made a mockery out of ritual and an abomination out of the Temple. If indeed the word Korban (sacrifice) is derived from Karov (to come near to G-d), then the sacrificial offerings ought to bring us closer to the G-d of “compassion and freely-given love, patience, loving-kindness and truth.” If the aftermath of the sacrifice is not a more sensitive human being, then the offering becomes a bribe and the offerer a hypocritical scoundrel attempting to manipulate G-d to serve his selfish and nefarious purposes. No wonder the Oriental (Sefardi) Prayer/books ordain the following introduction to synagogue prayer: “Behold I am now prepared and ready to perform the ritual of prayer, as it is written in the Bible, ‘you shall love your neighbor like yourself.’” The purpose of ritual is not merely to bring us closer to G-d; its purpose is rather to help us understand that our G-d is a G-d of love and compassion who wants us to act lovingly and compassionately towards every human being!

Of course, we need ritual in every aspect of our lives. The nuances of ritual are the grammatical rules of the language with which man communicates with God. Rituals give a

people its identity in the world, its colors and sounds and haunting melodies. Rituals give people an ethnic identity apart, emphasizing unique eating habits as well as unique celebrations and holy days. Indeed, without ritual, the Jews would blend into the overall landscape of humanity and disappear as an identifiable people. But the purpose of Jewish separate ethnic identity is not merely to be separate; it is rather to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers who will communicate the will of a G-d of ethics and morality, love and peace, to the entire world.

And even ritual, in the eyes of classic Judaism, does not exist in a vacuum. The Sabbath itself, rich with ritualistic tapestries, opens itself to an original ethical view of all creations made by G-d, Who endows each of His creatures with right-to-life; indeed the Bible declares the very purpose of the Sabbath to be “in order that your male and female Gentile slaves may rest like you” (Deut. 5), and it is a holy day in which even beasts of burden must rest, even a mosquito may not be killed, even a blade of grass dare not be plucked from the ground. No wonder Martin Buber declared that anyone incapable of saying Shabbat Shalom to a dog or a tree does not understand the true purpose and meaning of the Sabbath!

When the question was raised whether to continue keeping fast days that were instituted after the destruction of the first Temple or abandoning them once the Second Temple had been rebuilt, we hear God’s answer in the words of the prophet: “...When you fasted and mourned, in the fifth month and the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for Me you fasted?” After all, when you ate and when you drank, it was you who did the eating and you who did the drinking... This is what the Lord G-d of Hosts declares: True judgements shall you judge, loving-kindness and compassion shall you do to your sibling humans. Do not

oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the indigent..." (Zehariah 7: 5-10).

God doesn't need our fast days, nor does He need our sacrifices. Ritual is a means to the end of developing a more sensitive and compassionate human being. When the ritual – or Temple – didn't do its job – or, even worse, became an impediment to the goal, served as a cover-up for iniquity – then the Temple had to be destroyed.

Hence, what must be done to bring back the Holy Temple? Demonstrations, petitions, tanks? Isaiah makes no bones about it. The Haftorah ends with the verse: "Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and those that return to her with righteousness" (1:27). Yes, "The fast days ... will be turned into days of gladness and rejoicing, [but only] when you [learn] to love truth and peace." (Zechariah 7).