

Shira; Yizkor 5781

Mandi Katz

A shul memory from the before times: It's Yom Kippur morning. People aren't exactly rushing to add an hour or two to what will be a long day in shul. And so, as the Torah is read, shul is still quite empty and it is only as the reader is chanting haftorah that the seats start to fill. But the words of the haftorah are white noise – not many people are really listening. For people arriving, it's a moment of greeting and settling in – for those who have been at shul for a few hours, it's a chance for a little breather before the serious business of Yizkor, and the soul stripping moment of musaf – the real work of Yom Kippur.

So maybe, I tell, myself, that's why I have never paid attention to the haftorah we read on Yom Kippur morning. And it is astonishing that I haven't. Because it is an angry, radical and profoundly unsettling piece of Torah.

About half way through the reading the people complain to God, asking why their day of fasting has not had results.

Why did we fast and you did not see? they ask. We afflicted ourselves and you took no note?

God's response through Isaiah is harsh.

In your fast days you found pleasure while all your affairs you pursued?

Your fasting this day will not make your voice heard on high.

...

Is this that you call a fast and a day pleasing to the Lord?

Is not **this** the fast that I choose – to unlock the shackles of wickedness, and loosen the bonds of the yoke, to set the downtrodden free and to break every yoke? Yes, to offer your bread to the hungry, and bring the wretched poor into your house.

[Isaiah 58]

Isaiah accuses the people of going through the motions of ritual – of fasting and praying while ignoring the needs of the most vulnerable people around them. This may be a particular political moment; the events of the entire book of Isaiah take place as Judah is being devastated by Assyrian incursion, and this could be a comment on the dire state of society at that time.

But really, it's a timeless comment – every generation sees religious ritual carried out without ethical intention; practices that prioritise spirituality - the self – over the political or social welfare collective, and religious structures that focus exclusively on the parochial - my family, my community, my tribe.

That we read this text on Yom Kippur is an astonishing mark of how our tradition embraces challenge – the rabbis inserted into this day a text that questions its core ritual. Fasting on Yom Kippur if you are physically able to do so - is a strict requirement of religious life and yet here we read the prophet's words that the essence of what God wants from us is not fasting or prayer but action – to loosen the bonds of the workers, to set people free, to offer bread to the hungry, and to bring the poor into our homes.

Reading this a few weeks ago touched a nerve for me.

In the past few months, in the lead up to these yamim noraim, there has been much discussion about how hard it is that we are denied a 'normal' Yom Kippur especially right now. Thankfully, for most of us, most of the time, the imminence of death and suffering is not a daily part of our lives. We experience Yom Kippur as a moment set aside each year to live the book of life question, how quickly life can change, and to take a moment of reckoning with that. But this year these thoughts are baked into our days;

Mi yicheye u mi yamut

Mi b'kitzo u mi lo b'kitzo

Miyishalev u mi yityaser

Who will live and who will die.

Who is in his due time and who before

Who will be at ease and who will suffer

There is much longing everywhere for the tefilah of Yom Kippur that is both discomfoting and restorative – *we come to shul for a chance to wail against God's seeming indifference to human suffering, or to accept it as beyond our understanding, or for many who don't relate to God in that way or at all, to simply think about and feel the inexplicable chaos of the world.*

Many of us are nursing hurts and griefs of these last months: so much anxiety, the loneliness and forced separation from people we love and enjoy, or its opposite – too much time with a few people, which doesn't always bring out the best in us, the weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs and baby celebrations that haven't gone ahead, the strange experience of mourning and offering condolences at online Shivas and funerals, the overwhelming burden for parents of small children, the worry about educational outcomes for older children and perhaps worse of all – the corrosive effect of uncertainty, of not knowing what happens next, and which chips away at the spirit. We badly need the teshuva moment a return to practice yes, but much more than that, a return to wholeness. Erica Brown calls teshuva 'recovery', capturing the idea that the work of repentance brings much needed healing,

But it occurs to me reading this haftarah that in focussing on my need for tefilah and teshuva I may have not given enough attention to tzedakah. Have I done enough, have we done enough to respond to the prophetic call to look beyond ourselves?

Because the world is in need of repair. Everywhere economic conditions are worrying –in this lucky country government intervention has kept the worst pain at bay, but we worry about what happens when that ends, and we worry about the impact for our children's futures if it doesn't. And in other places, things are more dire. Bill Gates has estimated that globally 37 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty and that 25 years of vaccine progress for other illnesses has been lost in 25 weeks.

And if the solution is in part, as history has shown it must be - in the collective, in the political space, as the mishna says: the day is short and the work is plentiful - the political response to the virus in many places has been ineffective or callously indifferent, political instability is widespread and a basic element of democracy – transition of power - has been trampled on in some places and is under threat in others.

And if the way to address issues is through the public exchange of ideas – as it must be – that too is fraught. Public discourse has become unbearably fractious and talking across political divides seems harder than ever.

It has been widely observed that despite the platitudes early on that we were all in this together, the virus and the efforts to limit its spread have amplified pre-existing inequalities – on every dimension the impact is far worse for people who came into these months already facing social and economic disadvantage.

And if we thought that was less true in Australia, the second wave hit Melbourne with awful inequality. Those weeks in July when we woke each day to read about people locked into their homes in high density towers not quite 15 km from Caulfield park and then in the weeks that followed of people dying in aged care facilities, without family by their sides and in many cases without the sounds of the languages from home – were some dark days.

Since Thursday I've had a picture in my head of Lara and her young family fleeing the apocalyptic fires of last summer – this plague doesn't mean that the urgent threat of Climate crisis has disappeared; it's just that in our fatigue we have averted our gaze.

It's too much. So, after months of compulsively reading news from around the globe, late in July I cut my news consumption. It had become overwhelming. My focus shifted inwards, to myself, my family. The coming holidays.

It's a natural response – I/we have had enough, the world owes us some respite. But this haftarah in this hour comes to remind us that we also owe the world. We don't have the right to what activist Ruth Messinger has called "a retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed".

Tzedakah is as much part of the Yamim Norim as the machzor, and an essential part of Jewish practice. And of course, we aren't asked to choose between tzedakah and ritual. The haftarah itself goes on to remind the people to delight in Shabbat observance. This haftarah is not a manifesto against ritual but a reminder that ritual without intention and tzedakah is meaningless.

But what do we mean when we speak of Tzedakah? a contemporary rabbi explains that Tzedakah is rooted in justice:

Tzedek or tzedakah is a radical idea. The word tzedakah is usually translated as charity but in fact it means social or distributive justice. In biblical law it involved a series of institutions that comprised the first ever attempt at a welfare state.

Distributive justice? The welfare state? Which liberal New York rabbi am I quoting? No, I'm quoting Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. [Jonathan Sacks, A Letter in the Scroll]

Tzedakah in the Torah is not only about the obligation to give – although it is that. It's also about volunteering time and effort and taking a moment to check in on people – and I'm thinking of congregants in this community who contacted me before Yontef concerned about and wanting to get in contact with another congregant who is on their own and who wasn't answering their phone. These are kind, generous, righteous acts that matter and change lives especially when done quietly without seeking credit, without virtue signalling. Our tradition tells us that tzedakah itself without intention is also meaningless – that the reward of tzedakah depends entirely on the extent of kindness that drives it. [Sukkah 49b].

But there's more - Tzedakah in the Torah also concerns itself with how society is arranged – it requires us to be political. I don't mean that in any partisan sense - too many people when advocating for their view on the best way to improve life for the greatest number of people will look to the Torah to justify progressive or conservative policies, or for support of socialism or a free market – and that's not the thing.

The thing that we take away from the language of this haftarah and its placement in the middle of our day of spiritual reckoning is that we are required to do more than fill out our credit card details to meet this obligation - we need to be in the world - to pay attention to how power works, to form views on political, economic and environmental issues, and to think about the quality of the public exchanges that we need to have.

I'm not any kind of role model on this stuff. I don't have all or indeed any of the answers to how to do that work. I come to trouble you not to teach you. But I do know that that our tradition has much to teach us – I recently learnt a piece of Gemora that I found very comforting – it offers a process for communities on how to reach agreement to distribute funds when need is great and resources are being pulled in many directions – we have wisdom and tools in our tradition to overcome the paralysis of being overwhelmed.

[Bava Batra 8a]

We also have so many role models and frameworks. People who do the hard, often hidden and always essential work of practical care and support through institutions which could do with our support. And political leaders, activists and thinkers who draw on Jewish values or their Jewish heritage to provide fresh perspectives on ancient wisdom - but as with giving, the Torah does not necessarily offer a way to determine whose path is right – what the Torah asks of us is that we each do the work for ourselves and find the path of Tzedakah that is authentic for us. And doing this work also gives us hope and a reminder of our own capability and strength.

I want to share a beautiful textual tradition. These verses in Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs have often been read as being about teshuva:

Hevi'anu hamelech chadarav, nagilah ve nismacha bach

The king has brought me to his chambers

Let me be glad and rejoice in you

[Shir Ha Shirim 1:4]

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz shares the interpretation that the verse is describing the search for God, for transcendence. In the word chambers is the idea of multiple rooms, an endless series of worlds – and a person seeking teshuva goes from room to room, from hall to hall in that pursuit.

It is a continuous going, a going after God, A going to God day after day, year after year.

[Steinsaltz, The Thirteen petalled rose]

The work of teshuva is ongoing. There are times when we feel confident in our practice, resolute and firm within it, there are times when we need to work hard to meet what we

believe to be our obligation. And so it is with tefilah. There are times that prayer is meaningful and moving, and times when it's not but we still show up in shul – once a week, once a year but we come back. And so it is with tzedakah - these weeks and months have depleted us and we may not feel like we have much to give – but this haftorah reminds us to keep at the work of Tzedakah.

The idea of multiple rooms, what Steinsaltz called the endless series of worlds, brings an image of these rooms being interconnected – to reach one you need to go through another.

Yizkor hour: Three Jewish exemplar of blessed memory whose work in the pursuit of tzedakah crossed partisan boundaries.

The memory of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has been called on many times in the last months as American Jews have recalled his work for racial justice. There is a story that Heschel was asked on his return from the civil rights march in Selma whether he had had time to pray. In Selma I prayed with my feet, he answered. But in truth Heschel's deep thinking over many years gave us some of the most beautiful teaching on prayer of the last century - his deep immersion in tefilah led him to tzedakah.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg achieved much justice for women through her intelligent and resolute work. I love these words: Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead people to follow you. This approach – that brings to mind the notion of *darchei noam* – of pleasant ways, gave her voice so much influence – even, especially, in dissent, when she was a lone voice speaking up for the rights of the most vulnerable people. Tefilah is also about how we use our voices, and RBG provides a model of how the pursuit of tzedakah can shape our tefilah.

The late Ron Castan led important and creative work to secure Aboriginal land rights. It was work that changed the national perspective on the relationship between indigenous people and their traditional lands. A piece written by his grandson Sam Blashki speaks of Castan's teshuva moment – of how he began to question the integrity of his commitment to prevent further Jewish suffering if he took no action to rectify the terrible damage sustained by Indigenous people. His teshuva informed his tzedakah,

[Samuel Blashki, My grandfather Ron Castan, Safe Places and Culture 2013]

Because here's the thing: when we're doing it with all our hearts we can't tell where teshuvah ends, and tefilah starts and where tefilla ends and where tzedakah starts and where tzedakah starts and teshuva ends. And that's why when we sing these words at Shira in rounds with words overlapping until we can barely tell which word is which, we are singing a profound truth.

Wising you all a gut gebensht yor – a blessed year. May your tfila uplift you; teshuva restore you; and may your tzedakah make even just a small part of the world, a little bit better.

May we soon sing together in better days.