

**YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5769**  
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**Politics, Poverty, and the Prophet**

People have asked me if I am going to give the political sermon on Yom Kippur. It's a presidential election year, and here with the entire congregation gathered, is a chance to speak to the vote, and to the matters of decision before us as a nation. We are in a time of great uncertainty and fear. None of us can be sure who is vulnerable and who might be buffered, or insulated, from the turmoil in the markets.

I do want to give the political sermon. But on Yom Kippur morning, I don't start and end with the presidential election. No, my ears ring instead with the haftarah, the words of Yeshayahu, the prophet Isaiah. Every year on Yom Kippur morning, we read about his political awakening, his take on the fasting and on the politics of his own day. These are the words that Yeshayahu heard from God:

Call from the throat, don't hold back  
 Lift your voice like a shofar  
 Tell My people their transgression, the House of Jacob their wrongs  
 Each day they seem to be seeking Me  
 Desiring to know My ways  
 As if they were a nation doing justice  
 Never forsaking God's fairness  
 Is this the fasting I choose  
 A day for afflicting the soul  
 Is it drooping the head like a bulrush  
 Groveling in sackcloth and ashes?  
 Is not **this** the fasting I choose  
 Unlocking the fetters of wickedness  
 Untying the cords of no-law  
 Letting oppressed all go free  
 Breaking off every yoke  
 Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry  
 Taking the poor to your home  
 When you see someone naked, to clothe him

And not to ignore your own flesh.

How can we hear these words? This indictment? We are as a society still the same people Yeshayahu spoke to 2500 years ago. We are still a society and a world without enough food, affordable shelter, and human dignity.

We could turn away from him and talk about something else. We could say: There is too much going on now to talk about equality and justice – we're doing what we can just to tread water. We could trivialize his words, make them safer and easier, turn them into just a call for more caring.

I don't want to trivialize Yeshayahu. I don't want to run away from him. But it's true, we are at an uncertain time. It's not wrong to hunker down, to think about ourselves, our own households. After all, Hillel's famous statement starts: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? – before he says: But if I am for myself alone, what am I. Yet we read Yeshayahu every single year, in lean years and fat years alike. So how can we engage the prophet, be engaged by him? How can we respond from where we are, at the dawn of 5769? I want to explore his message, and then tell you about a few things, concretely, that we can do as members of this community to respond to Yeshayahu's words about compassion and justice in a world with too much hunger and indignity.

And the election is a part of it, one version of the decision we always face. There is always a decision to make. It faces the nation, it faces each community, each congregation, and each individual. Will this be the year we open our eyes? Will this be the year we see everyone we share this congregation with, this city with, this state and country with, this world with? And if we see, what will we do?

That's the first thing Yeshayahu asks of us – to see. To break down the boundaries between those who have and those who are struggling. It is almost impossible even to name this -- our words build the very boundaries we need to take down. The rich help the poor – it's a sentence that describes a good thing, but that reinforces a separation too.

Taking the poor into your home, says Yeshayahu – it's not just taking someone else in. It's also realizing that this home, this room, is already shared by people who have jobs and those who don't, people with good health insurance and people without, people who live with less concern and

people who worry about basics. Last year, I was unemployed, laid off from my job. It is very hard to enter a synagogue when you don't have an easy answer to the easy question, "So what do you do?" Many of us – I say us – many of us know that feeling. Some people may be staying away from here because of it.

The hard times will mean that more of us are out of work or looking for work. The attitude we need in this home is not pity, but solidarity. The prophet puts it this way: Not to ignore your own flesh. *Umibesarcha lo titalam* – you could translate more literally, don't be hidden from each other because of your flesh, what's on the outside – our financial situation, for instance. But here, we should share equally in community, we are all the image of God. There should be no up or down. The home belongs to everyone, as a place of safety, equality, and comfort regardless of our economic realities.

So too in the wider community. I hardly need to say that we live in a world still segregated between those with more and those with less. Coming to Nashua from Boston, New York, and Atlanta, I'm struck by the fact that there is a hidden part of this small city too, a place that's considered poorer and less safe. We need still to keep our eyes open, to see not a "there" and a "them", but people.

What caught my attention reading the haftarah this year is something Yeshayahu said of the Jews around him: They are *like* a nation doing justice. It's not blatant injustice going on. It's not that we are oppressors, exploiters – it's not that we set out to steal what shouldn't belong to us. No, I think he is saying that we do talk about giving, about caring, about *tzedakah* – we do it a lot. I think Yeshayahu is saying: That's good, what you're doing, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough. Caring isn't the same as justice. *Tzedakah* doesn't always help enough. Not every good deed is an act of *tikkun olam*, of actually repairing the world.

There is a story told among community organizers and social justice activists, and it goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a small village on the edge of a river. The people there were good and life in the village was good. One day a villager noticed a baby floating down the river. The villager quickly swam out to save the baby from drowning.

The next day this same villager noticed two babies in the river. Fortunately, they were close to each other, so he was able to swim out and grab one, then the other.

But on the third day, as the villager walked by the river, he saw four babies floating in the stream. He called for help, and a couple of his friends were nearby, and between them they were able to rescue all four babies from the swift waters.

But it didn't stop. The following day, there were eight babies, then more, and still more!

The villagers organized themselves quickly. They erected watchtowers, and trained teams of swimmers who could resist the swift waters and rescue babies. An inventive villager developed the group's first binoculars, so the people at the towers could see babies with the earliest possible warning. A group of particularly entrepreneurial villagers invented a mesh net that they claimed could stretch across the river, and catch the babies without so much manpower. Or it could be used for handheld nets, to reach in front of rapids where swimming would be too dangerous.

Rescue squads were soon working twenty-four hours a day. And each day the number of helpless babies floating down the river increased. The villagers organized themselves efficiently. Leaders kept track of who the most skilled swimmers were, and where they could be found at different times of day if they were needed. The rescue squads were now snatching many children each day. While not all the babies, now very numerous, could be saved, the villagers felt they were doing well to save as many as they could each day. Indeed, the village priest blessed them in their good work. And life in the village continued on that basis.

One day there was a village gathering to honor those who had organized the rescue system. In the middle of the celebration, during one of the speeches, someone got up and began walking away. The speaker paused, insulted by the rude departure. "Where are you going?" asked the speaker. "I'm heading upstream", said the villager, "to see who's throwing all these babies into the river in the first place!"

The parable raises the question: Who is doing the most good? Is it the swimmers who catch the babies? Is it the leaders who organize the rescue? Is it the builders who put up the watchtowers, so the village could see early enough to act? Might it be the entrepreneurs, who develop a life-saving technology to save more children? Or, could it be the villager who stepped out of the rescue, the day to day, to see if she could head off the problem at its source?

When we think of poverty and suffering, what we know most about are the “swimmers.” The organizations that are most familiar to us are the ones that serve food or offer shelter. That’s why I try to make time to talk about that last villager, the one who heads up the river. There are so many organizations we don’t hear so much about that try to prevent hunger and unemployment through training and investment in poorer communities. If we don’t know about them, we risk being merely “like” a nation that does justice. If we don’t send someone upstream, we may be caring, but we are not repairing the world.

This is where I want to turn the corner, as Yeshayahu does. Because after he describes and criticizes, he holds out hope and blessing. One of my prophetic teachers and inspirations today is Aliza Mazor, a longtime Jewish social justice activist who has worked in this country and in Israel. She has another response to the parable about the river. Aliza taught me the idea of a *tzedakah* portfolio. When she thinks about her giving and her own activism, she considers everything from direct help for people in need, to supporting people who attack the root causes of the most important problems in our society, to the integrity of business in our society. She would say: the village and the river need everyone. It takes the swimmers and more, because some people don’t swim but have something else to contribute. It takes the swimmers and more, because on their own the swimmers couldn’t do enough.

I think of the portfolio in another way as well. Each of us has a unique gift to give, and if we each give that gift then the community’s portfolio will be diverse and strong. Let me change the language – portfolio may not be the best word at this moment. If we go back to the parable, some of us are great swimmers, some are great builders, some are inventors and some are organizers, some are entrepreneurs and some ask questions, some do research and some offer encouragement and blessing.

So let's talk about food, poverty, and justice. I want to put on the table – so to speak – a few things we do already at Temple Beth Abraham, and invite you to help them grow.

One is simply: Cook! You may not know that we have a Social Action Committee in the synagogue, led by Carol Kaplan and Sandee Goldberg. Among other things, they try to keep aware of people who may be in the hospital or just coming out. Laura Horowitz and Elaine Brody are people I call when there is a shiva in the community, and we make sure there is food at that home. They are all great at finding someone to come through for a particular need at a particular time, but sometimes it's a scramble. You may not know that you can be part of the circle of people who are involved, who the community can turn to.

We have this wonderful kitchen in the back. At many synagogues, people come regularly to bake and to cook in big batches, so they can freeze food for people who are coming home from the hospital or caring for someone in the hospital, for people sitting shiva or coming home with a new baby. I can tell you that the 7<sup>th</sup> graders and I cooked ourselves quite a lovely dinner there just this Monday night, and as we ate we talked about food and blessings. As we get ready to reintroduce all of you to the kitchen, we'll be inviting you to learn how to use it -- for your simchas, for instance. And one of the things we'll do is to make and freeze meals. If you like to cook, bake, or just mess around in a kitchen with good company, you can do great chesed, great kindness, with your hands.

The Social Action Committee also organizes our volunteer work at the Anne-Marie House here in town. It's a shelter for families in transition. We participate along with many of the churches in town; each congregation is responsible with some others for a particular week during the month. It's a chance not only to serve food, but to meet and talk with people whose circumstances may be quite different from yours. By being there, we can get beyond the divide between helper and receiver, and create the chance for a human bond.

Another part of the picture is the upcoming Crop Walk on Sunday, October 26. When I first heard the name, I had this image of tromping through orchards and cornfields. But CROP is an acronym -- Communities Responding to Overcome Poverty. It's a national interfaith initiative, and here it is organized through the Nashau Area Interfaith Council. Crop Walk

is a walk to end hunger. It's a walk through town to raise money for local and international organizations that fight hunger, and to raise awareness about hunger in our community and worldwide. Temple Beth Abraham this year is the starting and ending point for the walk. The walk will begin with a service in our sanctuary, there will be activities after the walk, and the entire experience is an opportunity to be in solidarity with people from every group in the area who share a commitment not just to feeding but to ending hunger.

Our synagogue should be represented in great numbers. We need to be here. We need to be seen and heard here. If you like to walk, hike, exercise, talk, it's a way to align yourself with the fight for justice. It's a great family event – there is a longer 10K version of the walk as well as a short miniwalk. I imagine there are people who ride in carts and wheelchairs as well. The walk raised \$45,000 last year, and aims for at least \$50,000 this year.

And of course the walk is a ritual that is meant to spark something each year – greater volunteer involvement in the soup kitchens and food pantries, greater understanding of hunger here and worldwide, greater awareness of the policy initiatives that we need to combat hunger. Hunger and food are a window to wages and to environmental matters as well. I know that here, we'll continue to use the Crop Walk as an occasion to educate ourselves more about all these dimensions of hunger in our world. If you want to participate, you can make yourself known to Becky Green or to Carol Gorelick.

There is one more thing I'm going to pilot this year, a different kind of project entirely. I want to offer through the rabbis fund a challenge grant of \$250 to any group of five people or households who want to start a giving circle to explore issues of poverty, hunger, or social justice. A giving circle or *tzedakah* collective is a group of people who agree to contribute some amount of money to a group fund – it could be small or large. They arrange to meet several times for learning, discussion, and research. I will provide a guide for discussing how we talk about wealth and money, with each other and with our kids. There will be Jewish texts that probe *tzedakah* as a teaching about relationships and our own spirituality. You'd learn about money and power, and the relationship between giving money and doing volunteer service. We'd study how being a giver is a developmental process. There are practical exercises to help the group select a focus,

uncover and research organizations, learn about them and meet their leaders and clients.

Already there is one such group leading the way – the 7<sup>th</sup> graders, again, have begun to function as the Temple Beth Abraham Seventh Grade Tzedakah Foundation – they have their own letterhead and I'm sure will come up soon with an even better sounding name. USY knows I'm heading for them next; Emma Wolper participated in such a program this summer through Camp Ramah, and Scott Carrus says the youth group wants to do a social action project big enough to get on the news.

Giving even small amounts of tzedakah with this kind of intentional, thoughtful approach is a path toward repairing the world. It draws you in; it gets you asking questions; it puts you in a relationship with the organizations you support and the people who participate in them. Any giving circle in our community could decide to continue for another round. Or to become teachers for other groups as they start. To spread these conversations about poverty, wealth, and justice – to weave them throughout the congregation -- it would transform us. If you are interested in hosting such a group or participating, please be in touch with me.

And of course, there is the election. Obviously, one of the Jewish values you bring to the election is concern for equality and the wellbeing of all people in the country. As you decide who to support, for president on down, think about which candidates and which of their teams will be helping us to tear down the barriers that separate us within our communities, whose policies you think will help people not only eat but live with dignity.

Each voter has to decide which candidate proposes a more effective approach. Each of us has to think about the team that comes with each candidate. The people behind the scenes – appointees who will run agencies and programs – these are the people who will make the biggest impact on hunger, housing, and heating aid. Because we know that no matter how much private volunteering and charity there is, the government will always be the largest provider of services to those who are poor.

Yet it's never enough. There's never a constituency for enough aid, for total equality. As I said, with bad economic times, we will no longer draw the line between rich and poor as a line between those in the synagogue and others outside. We will experience it here in our congregation. That will,

unfortunately, remind us that those in need are not “others.” Yet I listen to the candidates with their talk about “the middle class” and “working families” – and it’s easy to see how they leave out others whose poverty is even more difficult and long-term. So there is still a need for us to continue what we do in our communities, where the government does not do enough. And we have to continue to have these conversations and remind ourselves to see, to care and to act.

Cooking food for someone. Marching in the community. Gathering with others to talk about giving and justice. Voting wisely. These are just a few ways in toward creating a more just society. We already do each of them, some in our homes and some as a congregation. I ask us, as the words of Yeshayahu echo here, to walk further down that path. To be not just, as he says, “like a nation doing justice”.

As you walk in our entrance here at the synagogue, there are words from Psalms: *Pitchu li shaarei tzedek*. Open ye for me the gates of justice. I pray that when we come into this place all year long, we allow, we encourage, we help each other walk through that door toward a more compassionate congregation and a more just world. Let us step in that gateway this year, see how far we can walk that path in the coming year.

If we do, says the prophet:

When you offer your soul to the hungry  
 And satisfy the fasting soul  
 Then your light shall shine through the darkness  
 Through you the ruins of the world shall be rebuilt

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn  
 And your healing spring up so quickly  
 Your Just-God walk before you  
 The presence of Adonai guard behind you.