

## ISAIAH AND RADICAL EMPATHY

Rabbi Marc J. Margolius

West End Synagogue, Yom Kippur, 5772

Picture, if you will, a cranky old man walking up right now to this *bimah*, pushing me aside, grabbing the mic and bluntly asking us: "Where the hell do you get the *chutzpah* to recite ancient prayers most of you no longer even understand, and to act like you're so righteous for choosing to fast for one day? Don't you know you're living in a sea of suffering -- adults and children without a roof over their heads, without health care, without enough food to eat? How dare you enjoy your privilege here in comfort, while so many others are suffering?"

It would be quite unpleasant. We'd have to call security to stop him from interrupting the service and take him away. Poor guy, we might think; he needs a psychiatric workup. We might be furious at his self-righteousness, his presumption to speak for God. We might be a little bit defensive, a little bit embarrassed, and a little bit angry. We might be uncomfortable. And Isaiah would smile as he was evaluated by the therapist, knowing that once again, he had done his job well. He had provoked us and disturbed us.

These days we've got plenty of pundits, plenty of would-be priests and kings. But we lack the kind of leader critical to any society, particularly one in crisis – a *navi*, someone in the mold of the classic Hebrew prophets. The *navi's* job is to express difficult truths, to break through denial and speak directly to the unprotected core of the human soul. A prophet speaks in terms too disturbing, too utopian to be assimilated. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described it: "We and the prophet have no language in common. The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments which defy our understanding....Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends."

The words of the *navi* Isaiah in today's *haftarah*, despite their familiarity, still scorch our ears. "*K'ra v'garon, al tachsoch*, cry with a full throat, do not hold back," God tells Isaiah. "*Ka-shofar harem kolecha*, lift your voice like a shofar, declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin." God isn't disturbed by the people's lack of religiosity. "To be sure, they seek Me daily, eager to learn My ways," says God. "They ask Me for the right way, they are eager for the nearness of God." The problem is not a lack of ritual observance; the problem is that their observance doesn't impact their behavior. Even while the people fast, they countenance injustice and oppress their workers. A fast like that, says Isaiah, is worthless, even offensive:

This is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of the bound, 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.

Isaiah doesn't want to abolish prayer or fasting. He doesn't demand that we drop our *machzors* and run out to lobby right now to set up shelters and soup kitchens. Instead, Isaiah calls for a fundamental shift in human consciousness. He demands the kind of deep internal spiritual transformation which leads to radically different action. It all starts with recognizing the reality of socio-economic inequality and how our awareness of it impacts each of us internally.

"How dare you enjoy your privilege while others are suffering?" Isaiah asks us. And we know he's right. Most of us here are far better off than the vast majority of Americans, even more so relative to the rest of the world. And when our privilege is highlighted, when it is out there for all to see, we may become deeply uncomfortable, or ambivalent, or even angry. For me and maybe for many of you, Isaiah's focus on privilege hits a tender nerve, and highlights our ambivalence about our standing.

The Hebrew word for privilege, z'chut, reflects twin poles of a dialectic. Z'chut means right or entitlement – but it also can connote favor or advantage. Z'chut can mean enjoying that which is yours by right, that which you have fully earned and which you fully deserve. And at the same time, z'chut can mean benefiting from something which you yourself did not earn. That is the meaning of z'chut avot, the Jewish concept by which we inherit the merit earned by our ancestors.

People cope with privilege in different ways. **Some people embrace their privilege**, naively believing they deserve everything they've got, and that those with less just aren't as talented or hard-working. They wear their privilege as a badge of merit. We may believe we have no obligation to help others because we live in a meritocracy, where everyone gets what they earn and deserve. If we feel entitled to our privilege, to the extent we help others, we do so out of a sense of *noblesse oblige* and social duty. It is a responsibility that comes with being higher on the ladder – but also a way of honoring one's own status.

**Some of us cope with privilege through denial**, by keeping our gaze fixed on those who have more than we do. Instead of focusing on those who have *less* than we do, we concentrate on those who have *more*. Certainly our economic system and our popular culture excel at directing our attention to what we lack or need to have, rather than what we already possess. We spend more energy thinking more about what more we want, than on those who have far less than us.

**Some of us feel guilty about our privilege.** Some of us know in our hearts that many, if not most of the advantages we enjoy result not from our own merit, but equally or more so from arbitrary factors: where and to whom we were born,

the schools we attended, connections we made, even just lucky timing. And often, this guilt motivates our acts of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*; we reach out to help others in part because we may feel unentitled to or embarrassed by what we have.

**Some of us are angered by how arbitrarily privilege is distributed in society.** Social and economic injustice triggers in some of us a sense of indignation which fuels our passion and our actions to equalize opportunity and more fairly distribute privilege among the haves and have-nots. Isaiah, for one, is plenty ticked off. You know *he'd* be spending Yom Kippur in Zuccotti Park.

Anger plays an essential role in motivating us to action. Many of us usually feel paralyzed by the overwhelming scale of the world's social problems, and a surge of anger can free us from the grip of paralysis and get us off our sofa, out of Starbucks, and take to the streets. Anger certainly was critical in catalyzing the amazing and inspiring energy we witnessed this summer in the tent city protests that sprung up in Israel calling for more affordable housing and a more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity in Israel.

Anger is critical as well in galvanizing the protests downtown right now, expressing outrage over the inequities and lack of responsibility and accountability in our current political and economic system. I know my own growing anger over the status quo motivated me to join the union members and others who marched to support those protestors this past Wednesday in Foley Square.

But as an *exclusive* motivation for pursuing justice, anger can be problematic. Anger begins by latching onto a legitimate grievance. It collects around a single cell of injustice. But unchecked, anger grows and metastasizes. The author Mary Gordon writes that "anger rolls down a hill, gathering mass and speed until any thought of cessation is so far beside the point as to seem hopeless. [Its] causes are lost in the momentum of the anger itself." We know well how seductive anger can be, how anger can obscure the image of God in the subject of one's anger, as well in ourselves.

Isaiah is angry today, but that's not the only thing that brought him here today. **Isaiah offers us another, different way of responding to privilege, an spiritual framework which integrates and transcends the role played by entitlement, guilt, and anger.** His teaching requires us to recognize how our emotional response to privilege can erect a powerful barrier between us and others. Whether because of entitlement or guilt or anger, a sense of privilege can lead us to objectify and unconsciously distance ourselves from those we consider

"underprivileged." They become "the homeless," the "underclass," the "other." Especially in economic times as scary as these, recognizing our commonalities would remind us how uncomfortably close we are to standing in the shoes of the "disadvantaged."

Earlier in my life, for six months, I experienced unemployment. I recovered from my shock and shame at being laid off and filed to receive unemployment benefits for the first and, I hope, only time. Those were six terrifying months that changed my life. Despite diligently looking for work, despite at times imagining being willing to do whatever I needed to earn a living and support myself and my kids, there were times when I wondered if that would happen. My savings account shrank steadily. During those six months, whenever I passed homeless people on the street, I saw him or her in a different light. It became a lot easier to imagine how a human being could come to such a turn. Ever since then, when I see someone on the street, I remember, that could be me; that could be anyone.

We all might be more mindful of the emotions stirred in us by our face-to-face encounters with the so-called "underprivileged" or "disadvantaged:" in meeting the eyes of a homeless person as we give them change or share a friendly word, in serving meals at a soup, in visiting a sick friend or relative or a fellow congregant we'd never met, in teaching an illiterate adult to read, in treating domestic workers as equal human beings, in slowing down to allow those with physical challenges to pass us on the sidewalk, in making eye contact with the cashier or the sanitation worker.

By noticing the uncomfortable emotional reactions triggered in us by these encounters, we actually can see more clearly how they can distance us from others, even estrange us from our better selves. We can remember the painful truth we'd rather avoid or repress: *I* could be unemployed, or foreclosed, even homeless. *I* could be physically disabled. *I* could be a cabdriver with a bad back working a 12 hour shift, or delivering take-out meals in the pouring rain on a bike, or a bus boy, or a building superintendent sorting bags of recycling and trash. I can identify and empathize with him or her as if he or she was myself. I might even find it possible to love him or her as myself.

In these moments of encounter, we might recall the essential humanity we share with those we consider less advantaged, less privileged, less than us. And then our motivation to help them or to support socio-economic change may shift from entitlement or guilt or anger to something I'd consider a lot more holy and

long-lasting: a deep sense of connection with those who previously may have seemed “other,” a sense of identification I would call *radical empathy*.

I believe that sense of empathy is precisely Isaiah's message to us today. The actions he prescribes -- feeding the hungry and clothing the naked -- are only the necessary *consequences* of the internal spiritual change he seeks today. The spiritual essence of Yom Kippur, the Day of At-Onement, is cultivating our capacity to understand ourselves as part of a single unity which embraces all of humankind. This is a day for remembering the invisible but undeniable ties which link us to every human being.

I know there is a debate today about whether empathy is sufficient as a basis for moral action. From a Jewish perspective, empathy in and of itself is not sufficient. Our system of *mitzvot* – call them what you will, commandments, obligations, responsibilities, or suggestions – give structure and coherence to our moral framework. But our tradition, our *etz hayim* or Tree of Life, is fundamentally rooted, theologically and philosophically, in the soil of empathy. Our collective moral code, represented by Torah and all its interpretations since then, grounds Jewish ethics in the experience of the Exodus, a defining chapter in our collective history which *required us to experience what it means to be oppressed*. Forever after, we have been expected to know what it is like to be the most vulnerable and oppressed members of any society in which we live, having been vulnerable ourselves in the land of Egypt.

So what is the fast God desires? A fast which leads us to draw on our wells of empathy, our innate capacity to see ourselves reflected in every other human being. A fast that reminds us that what we feel today is the *daily* experience of untold millions. Today, we must transcend those internal forces of guilt, entitlement, and anger which cripple our capacity to empathize and to be at one with our fellow human beings. There is no fundamental divide between one soul and another. We are all inextricably part of the whole.

*Im tasir mitocha mota*, says Isaiah, if you remove from within yourself the yoke of oppression ... then shall your light shine in the darkness, and your gloom shall be as noonday." We can't remove the yoke of oppression from others until we do so within ourselves.

Today, on Yom Kippur, we are not supposed to go out and fix this world. Our assignment today is *internal*: to remove from ourselves our blinding sense of entitlement, loosen our estranging sense of guilt, and temper our anger. The *tekiah gedolah* which begins our year tonight is a starting bell, a call to act in the

world, to apply Yom Kippur consciousness in everyday actions of caring, to work in both large and small ways towards a world which reflects the common connection of all humankind.

This year, may our motivation for helping others and healing the world not be guilt or a sense of responsibility born from the illusion of our superiority to others. May we act this year out of a renewed and deepened awareness of the fundamental equality and unity of all human life, and our identifying with the victims of oppression everywhere. May this be the fast we choose today.