

Parashat D'varim & Shabbat Chazon: Fasting and the Secrets of "Tsimtsum"

Dear Friends,

This Shabbat is called "Shabbat Chazon" - Shabbat of Vision - after the opening words of the haftarah, which are the very first words in the book of Isaiah: **"The vision of Isaiah, son of Amotz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem..."**

The haftarah is always a chapter from the Prophets, while the parsha is from the Torah. Our Sages usually matched a haftarah to a parsha based on a common theme. But sometimes, as in this Shabbat, the haftarah relates to an event in the Jewish calendar. Indeed, the haftarah from Isaiah is less connected to Parashat D'varim (though a connection can always be found) but to Tisha B'Av that follows.

Isaiah's prophecy is harsh and shocking. There are verses that seem to be written about us and about the present day. For example: **"Your rulers are rogues And cronies of thieves, Every one avid for presents And greedy for gifts..."** (Isaiah 1:23)

Nu... so there is nothing new under the sun!

At the core of the haftarah, Isaiah denounces the hypocrisy of God's worshippers: **"What need have I of all your sacrifices?" Says the LORD. "I am satiated with burnt offerings of rams, And suet of fatlings, And blood of bulls; And I have no delight In lambs and he-goats. That you come to appear before me [when you make pilgrimage to Jerusalem]— Who asked that of you? Trample my courts no more! Bringing offerings is futile, your incense is offensive to Me. New moon and sabbath, proclaiming of solemnities, assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide. Your new moons and fixed seasons fill me with loathing; They have become a burden to me, I cannot endure them. And when you lift up your hands, I will turn my eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime— [in the Hebrew the word means both blood and financial greed] wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from my sight. Cease to do evil; learn diligently. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.** (Isaiah 1:11-17)

So let's discuss hypocrisy - our own hypocrisy. Let's not be tempted to think that the prophet is talking about someone else. God's worshippers are not "them", for example, the religious,

the black-hats, the ultra orthodox. Neither are they “those corrupt ministers” whom I referred to earlier or our very own flesh and blood ministers. No! We are talking about each and every one of us, because hypocrisy - which I will call “gaps” - is part and parcel of the human experience.

There are basic gaps and idiosyncrasies in human nature which lay at the core of human reality.

There is a gap between the inside and the outside. We will always feel that there is far more chaos inside of us than what one may see from the outside. So too, the exterior of others will always look more coherent, cool, and organized than our own inner complexities. Our eyes will always look out, whereas our deceptive imagination looks inward. We all find it easier to see the ugly stains on the forehead of the other, whereas those on our own are not really stains, they are just life’s natural hues... or are they?

Another permanent disparity exists between words and actions, and between words and reality. Even when we try to be precise in our speech, words, by definition, will always remain symbolic representations, and will never fully resonate reality.

And then there is the gap between certain ideals, our lofty expectations and our lives in actual fact. The values we were raised on and the expectations that our loved ones instilled in us will always leave us with a feeling of disappointment when they are compared to the complex reality of our lives.

What can we do?

We can only try - continuously and with great care - to close the gaps to the best of our ability. That is all, but it is very difficult! It requires a lot of humility and compassion.

Perhaps the last sentence of the quote from Isaiah provides the key to narrowing the gap. Though it refers to society, it applies just as much to our own inner selves: **“Learn diligently. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.”**

We are required to learn diligently that we are all here in this life as if wronged, because at the end of the day, our power is limited. We are all orphans, in a sense, because there is no all-powerful “adult” to hold our hand and tell us everything is alright (for it isn’t!). We are all widows, in the sense that we all face the challenges of life alone.

Indeed, learn diligently, for these are the teachings of compassion.

And regarding the teachings of humility, it would help us greatly to learn diligently how much beauty there is in human frailty; how growth happens from these very gaps in our lives; how much life there is in one small drop of blood.

Minding these gaps does not mean that we must feel ourselves small and humble. Not at all. Rather, the idea is to narrow the gap between our external image - that ideal that we were educated to be - and we are not - and our inner sense of who we really are. Narrowing this gap may unleash our genuine, authentic, and powerful human presence.

Where there is more humility and compassion, there is less need of bribery and control. Where there is more compassion, we will discover that our authentic self is far sweeter and compelling than any bribery or false power can give us.

Friends, Tisha B'Av is upon us. In Hebrew there is a linguistic relationship between fasting (tsom) and reduction or narrowing (tsimtsum). Whether or not we fast (tsom) on Tisha Be'Av or not, we can dedicate ourselves on this day to reducing (tsimtsum) the gaps. There is a chance that if we reduce (tsimtsum) the hypocrisy within ourselves even a little bit by learning the secrets of compassion and humility; if we can tend to our very own "orphan" and "widow," we will discover that the vision of a better world begins to unfold too. If we reduce (tsimtsum) the disparities within ourselves, perhaps we will discover that they have closed - even a little bit - in the world around us.

Shabbat Shalom and a meaningful Tsom and Tsimtsum on Tisha B'Av.

Elisha