Why We Read from Isaiah on Yom Kippur

01.10.2015 | Ron Kronish

In synagogues all over the world, we Jews will read a very important chapter from Isaiah in a few days, on the morning of Yom Kippur, on the purpose of fasting, which reminds us quite clearly that the goal of fasting is not just the ritual itself but "to lock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break off every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the poor into your home, when you see the naked, to clothe him and not to ignore your own kin." (Isaiah 58; 6-7).

Why do we read these verses every year in our synagogues on Yom Kippur?

We do so to remind us that the ritual of fasting should not be practiced rotely, without instilling meaning into this important religious act. We do so to help us be mindful of those who are suffering and in need of our assistance at this time of year, and throughout the year. We do so to elevate this religious practice to a lofty act, which should motivate us to become activists for social justice.

The stirring messages of Isaiah concerning the kind of personal and national ethics that should guide us as we seek to rebuild a Jewish state in the land of Israel ought to be seared deeply into our consciousness on this Yom Kippur. Yet, it seems to me that Isaiah is all too often ignored! I have the feeling all too often we simply listen to the chanting of Isaiah's magnificent poetry and prose in a routine fashion, without paying much attention to the words. The sermon is more often on the Torah portion and Isaiah's message is too often forgotten or sublimated.

In addition to being the prophet of world peace -- "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they practice war anymore!" -- Isaiah is without doubt the greatest prophet of Nechama -- Comfort or Consolation -- in the Bible! According to Rabbi Beni Lau, who has co-authored a magnificent book (in Hebrew) on Isaiah with Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, Isaiah is the great national comforter: "He is the one who succeeds in instilling hope in the soul of this depressed and dispersed people who have suffered so many exiles and crises, hope for return and reinvigoration of their national life."

This is not the only time during the Jewish year that we read from the prophet Isaiah. During the summer, we read a chapter from the prophet Isaiah each week for 7 weeks. Beginning on the Sabbath after the Jewish commemorative day known as Tisha B'Av , the day that we remember the destruction of the First and Second Temples of ancient times, as well as other national tragedies in Jewish history. These readings are called the readings of Nechemta, from the Hebrew root nacham, which usually is translated as "to comfort" or to "console", but really have the meaning of "hope and restoration.

We also read from Isaiah (chapter one) on the Sabbath before the 7 weeks of consolation, on what is known as Shabbat Hazon, the Sabbath of Vision, named after the first sentence in chapter one of the book of Isaiah. This was the third in a series of three prophetic readings -- one from Isaiah and two from Jeremiah -- which warned the Jewish people of their wayward ethical behavior and predicted that this would lead to their destruction and doom.

Why does Jewish Tradition have us read so much of the book of Isaiah all summer long (when so many of us are on vacation!) and once again on Yom Kippur? What is the message of Isaiah that

the molders of our tradition wanted to place high in our consciousness and high on our personal, communal and national agenda?

The message was stated clearly and succinctly in Isaiah chapter one:

Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from my sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow. (Isaiah 1:16-17)

Isaiah is just as relevant today as he was in his own time, in the 8th century BCE. His words of com fort and hope -- and his reminder that we need to put social justice at the heart of our Jewish lives-- are as vital and meaningful for contemporary Israeli society as they were in the past. They remind us of the ideals and values we ought to cherish as a society and of the kind of just and ethical Jewish state we seek to preserve in our own time.

First published in Huffington Post, 21.09.2015. Here re-published with kind permission by the author. More about the author, please see: Rabbi Ron Kronish.