

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
July 25, 2020 *** 4 Av, 5780
Parashat Devarim

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Devarim in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2254/jewish/Devarim-in-a-Nutshell.htm

On the first of Shevat (thirty-seven days before his passing), Moses begins his repetition of the Torah to the assembled children of Israel, reviewing the events that occurred and the laws that were given in the course of their forty-year journey from Egypt to Sinai to the Promised Land, rebuking the people for their failings and iniquities, and enjoining them to keep the Torah and observe its commandments in the land that G-d is giving them as an eternal heritage, into which they shall cross after his death.

Moses recalls his appointment of judges and magistrates to ease his burden of meting out justice to the people and teaching them the word of G-d; the journey from Sinai through the great and fearsome desert; the sending of the spies and the people's subsequent spurning of the Promised Land, so that G-d decreed that the entire generation of the Exodus would die out in the desert. "Also against me," says Moses, "was G-d angry for your sake, saying: You, too, shall not go in there."

Moses also recounts some more recent events: the refusal of the nations of Moab and Ammon to allow the Israelites to pass through their countries; the wars against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og, and the settlement of their lands by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh; and Moses' message to his successor, Joshua, who will take the people into the Land and lead them in the battles for its conquest: "Fear them not, for the L-rd your G-d, He shall fight for you."

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/707608/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah is the third of a series of three "haftarot of affliction." These three haftarot are read during the Three Weeks of mourning for Jerusalem, between the fasts of 17 Tammuz and 9 Av.

Isaiah relays to the Jews a G-dly vision he experienced, chastising the residents of Judah and Jerusalem for having rebelled against G-d, criticizing them for repeating their errors and not abandoning their sinful ways — even after having been reprimanded and punished. "Woe to a sinful nation, a people heavy with iniquity,

evildoing seed, corrupt children. They forsook G-d; they provoked the Holy One of Israel." Harsh words are employed, comparing the Jewish leaders to the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah. G-d states his distaste for their sacrifices and offerings which were flavored with pagan customs. "How has she become a harlot, a faithful city; it was once full of justice, in which righteousness would lodge, but now it is a city of murderers..."

Isaiah then speaks gentler words, encouraging the people to repent sincerely and to perform acts of justice and kindness towards the needy, orphans and widows, and promising them the best of the land in return for their obedience. "If your sins prove to be like crimson, they will become white as snow; if they prove to be as red as crimson dye, they shall become as wool." The haftorah concludes with a promise that G-d will eventually reestablish Israel's judges and leaders, when "Zion shall be redeemed through justice and her penitents through righteousness."

Note: The first word of the haftorah is "Chazon" ("The vision [of Isaiah]").

The Shabbat when this haftorah is read, the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av, is thus called "Shabbat Chazon," the "Shabbat of the Vision." According to chassidic tradition, on this Shabbat the soul of every Jew is treated to a "vision" of the third Holy Temple that will be rebuilt with the coming of Moshiach. Click here for more on this topic.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Followership (Devarim 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/devarim-5780/>

In the last month of his life, Moses gathered the people. He instructed them about the laws they were to keep and reminded them of their history since the Exodus. That is the substance of the book of Devarim. Early in this process, he recalled the episode of the spies – the reason the people's parents were denied the opportunity to enter the land. He wanted the next generation to learn the lesson of that episode and carry it with them always. They needed faith and courage. Perhaps that has always been part of what it means to be a Jew.

But the story of the spies as he tells it here is very different indeed from the version in Shelach Lecha (Num. 13-14), which describes the events as they happened at the time, almost 39 years earlier. The discrepancies between the two accounts are glaring and numerous. Here I want to focus only on two.

First: who proposed sending the spies? In Shelach, it was God who told Moses to do so. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Send men..." In our parsha, it was the people who requested it: "Then all of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men..." Who was it: God or the people? This makes a massive difference to how we understand the episode.

Second: what was their mission? In our parsha, the people said, "Let us send men to

spy out [veyachperu] the land for us” (Deut. 1:22). The twelve men “made for the hill country, came to the wadi Eshcol, and spied it out [vayeraglu]” (Deut. 1:24). In other words, our parsha uses the two Hebrew verbs, lachpor and leragel, that mean to spy. But as I pointed out in my Covenant & Conversation for Shelach Lecha, the account there conspicuously does not mention spying. Instead, thirteen times, it uses the verb latur, which means to tour, explore, travel, inspect. Even in our parsha, when Moses is talking, not about the spies but about God, he says He “goes before you on your journeys—to seek out (latur) the place where you are to encamp” (Deut. 1:33). According to Malbim, latur means to seek out what is good about a place. Lachpor and leragel mean to seek out what is weak, vulnerable, exposed, defenceless. Touring and spying are completely different activities, so why does the account in our parsha present what happened as a spying mission, which the account in Shelach emphatically does not?

These two questions combine with a third, prompted by an extraordinary statement of Moses in our parsha. Having said that the spies and the people were punished by not living to enter the promised land, he then says:

Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me also, and He said: you shall not enter it either. Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it.

Strengthen him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it. (Deut. 1:37-38)

This is very strange indeed. It is not like Moses to blame others for what seems to be his own failing. Besides which, it contradicts the testimony of the Torah itself, which tells us that Moses and Aaron were punished by not being permitted to enter the land because of what happened at Kadesh when the people complained about the lack of water. What they did wrong is debated by the commentators. Was it that Moses hit the rock? Or that he lost his temper? Or some other reason? Whichever it was, that was when God said: “Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them” (Num. 20:12). This was some 39 years after the episode of the spies.

As to the discrepancy between the two accounts of the spies, R. David Zvi Hoffman argued that the account in Shelach tells us what happened. The account in our parsha, a generation later, was meant not to inform but to warn. Shelach is a historical narrative; our parsha is a sermon. These are different literary genres with different purposes.

As to Moses’ remark, “Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me,” Ramban suggests that he was simply saying that like the spies and the people, he too was condemned to die in the wilderness. Alternatively, he was hinting that no one should be able to say that Moses avoided the fate of the generation he led.

However, Abarbanel offers a fascinating alternative. Perhaps the reason Moses and

Aaron were not permitted to enter the land was not because of the episode of water and the rock at Kadesh. That is intended to distract attention from their real sins. Aaron's real sin was the Golden Calf. Moses' real sin was the episode of the spies. The hint that this was so is in Moses' words here, "Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me also."

How though could the episode of the spies have been Moses fault? It wasn't he who proposed sending them. It was either God or the people. He did not go on the mission. He did not bring back a report. He did not demoralise the people. Where then was Moses at fault? Why was God angry with him?

The answer lies in the first two questions: who proposed sending the spies? And why is there a difference in the verbs between here and Shelach?

Following Rashi, the two accounts, here and in Shelach, are not two different versions of the same event. They are the same version of the same event, but split in two, half told there, half here. It was the people who requested spies (as stated here). Moses took their request to God. God acceded to the request, but as a concession, not a command: "You may send," not "You must send" (as stated in Shelach).

However, in granting permission, God made a specific provision. The people had asked for spies: "Let us send men ahead to spy out [veyachperu] the land for us." God did not give Moses permission to send spies. He specifically used the verb *latur*, meaning, He gave permission for the men to tour the land, come back and testify that it is a good and fertile land, flowing with milk and honey.

The people did not need spies. As Moses said, throughout the wilderness years God has been going "ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go" (Deut. 1:33). They did however need eyewitness testimony of the beauty and fruitfulness of the land to which they had been travelling and for which they would have to fight.

Moses, however, did not make this distinction clear. He told the twelve men: "See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwallled or fortified?" This sounds dangerously like instructions for a spying mission.

When ten of the men came back with a demoralising report and the people panicked, at least part of the blame lay with Moses. The people had asked for spies. He should have made it clear that the men he was sending were not to act as spies.

How did Moses come to make such a mistake? Rashi suggests an answer. Our parsha says: "Then all of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us.'" The English does not convey the sense of menace in the original. They

came, says Rashi, “in a crowd,” without respect, protocol or order. They were a mob, and they were potentially dangerous. This mirrors the people’s behaviour at the beginning of the story of the Golden Calf: “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered against Aaron and said to him...”

Faced with an angry mob, a leader is not always in control of the situation. True leadership is impossible in the face of the madness of crowds. Moses’ mistake, if the analysis here is correct, was a very subtle one, the difference between a spying mission and a morale-boosting eyewitness account of the land. Even so, it must have been almost inevitable given the mood of the people.

That is what Moses meant when he said, “because of you the Lord was incensed with me too.” He meant that God was angry with me for not showing stronger leadership, but it was you – or rather, your parents – who made that leadership impossible.

This suggests a fundamental, counterintuitive truth. There is a fine TED talk about leadership.[1] It takes less than 3 minutes to watch, and it asks, “What makes a leader?” It answers: “The first follower.”

There is a famous saying of the Sages: “Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend.”[2] The order of the verbs seems wrong. You don’t make a teacher, you acquire one. You don’t acquire a friend, you make one. In fact, though, the statement is precisely right. You make a teacher by being willing to learn. You make a leader by being willing to follow. When people are unwilling to follow, even the greatest leader cannot lead. That is what happened to Aaron at the time of the Calf, and in a far more subtle way to Moses at the time of the spies.

That, I would argue, is one reason why Joshua was chosen to be Moses’ successor. There were other distinguished candidates, including Pinchas and Caleb. But Joshua, serving Moses throughout the wilderness years, was a role-model of what it is to be a follower. That, the Israelites needed to learn.

I believe that followership is the great neglected art. Followers and leaders form a partnership of mutual challenge and respect. To be a follower in Judaism is not to be submissive, uncritical, blindly accepting. Questioning and arguing are a part of the relationship. Too often, though, we decry a lack of leadership when we are really suffering from a lack of followership. Shabbat Shalom [1] Derek Sivers, ‘How to Start a Movement.’ [2] Mishnah, Avot 1:6.

[Retelling the Past: Devarim by Sarah Wolf](http://www.jtsa.edu/retelling-the-past)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/retelling-the-past>

Since the wave of protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, Americans have begun to reckon with the narratives many of us have taken for granted about our national past. As part of this national awakening, the legacies of some formerly

beloved past leaders are being revisited. Demonstrators in Portland, Oregon, toppled a statue of Thomas Jefferson, a “founding father” who also owned hundreds of slaves; the statue of Teddy Roosevelt in front of New York City’s American Museum of Natural History, which portrays him on horseback next to an African and a Native American man, has been removed. Although this is an unprecedented moment of introspection for the United States, we can turn to the Book of Devarim for some insight on what is at stake in telling and retelling the past.

Parashat Devarim begins with Moses preparing the Israelites to finally enter into the Land of Israel after forty years in the desert. He does so by recounting some of the significant events they have experienced thus far in their journey. One of the first events about which he chooses to remind the Israelites is the story of the twelve spies, which was also recounted in Bemidbar chapters 13 and 14, back in Parashat Shelah Lekha. Yet his telling here doesn’t reproduce the account in Bemidbar exactly. What might explain the differences between the two stories?

According to the story in Bemidbar, which is told from a third-person omniscient perspective, God tells Moses to send spies to scout out the Land of Canaan. The spies return after forty days and report that the Land is excellent—flowing with milk and honey—but the people who live there are powerful, both physically intimidating and well-positioned in fortified cities. One of the spies, Caleb, insists that the Land can nonetheless be conquered, but the other spies ignore him and continue to spread word of the inhabitants’ fearsomeness. The Israelites are devastated and demand to return to Egypt. Then Caleb and his fellow spy Joshua try to convince the Israelites that the Land is good and worth conquering, arguing that God will protect God’s people against its inhabitants. The Israelites, unconvinced, are about to stone Caleb and Joshua, who are saved by Moses stepping in to deliver a rebuke. Finally, God declares that this faithless generation must wander for forty years before their descendants can enter the Land.

In Devarim, however, the story is rather different. In Moses’s first-person account, the Israelites, not God, told Moses that they want to send spies to scout out Canaan. The spies returned and said, “It is a good land that Adonai our God is giving us” (Deut. 1:25)—no mention here of fearsome inhabitants, of internal disagreement among the spies as to how to proceed, or of Caleb and Joshua’s attempt to salvage the situation. Despite the seemingly positive report from the spies, the Israelites “sulked in their tents” (1:26) and refused to go, claiming—apparently falsely—that the spies have reported that the inhabitants are too strong. Moses reassures the people that God will protect them, and again, God announces that the Israelites must wander for forty years in the desert as a consequence of their disbelief.

Some classical commentators attempt to harmonize the two stories, suggesting that Moses's account of the spies' report refers only to Caleb and Joshua's statements, or pointing out that all the spies in the earlier account did admit that the Land was good, even if most thought it was unconquerable. Still, we are left wondering why Moses would have left out both the spies' "calumnies" (Num. 13:32) and Joshua and Caleb's attempts to protest against the prevailing attitude of despair, instead painting all the spies in a favorable light and the Israelites as utterly faithless for no apparent reason. In her recent novel *Trust Exercise*, winner of the 2019 National Book Award for Fiction, Susan Choi explores the complex role of memory in the narration of past trauma. The first half of the novel takes the form of a third-person narrative about teenagers at a performing arts high school. It recounts the students' internal drama and their relationship with a charismatic teacher, focusing on the romantic entanglements of two main characters, David and Sarah. Midway through the novel, the narration switches to the perspective of one of the students, Karen. "Karen"—not her real name, as we quickly learn, though she continues to call herself that—is now an adult and is very upset about the novel her friend Sarah, a successful author, has just published about their performing arts high school. She points out ways in which Sarah has left her, Karen, out of the narrative, unfairly shifted blame to some people, and unduly protected others. The narration begins to shift back and forth between a close third-person narration of Karen's thoughts and a first-person narration in Karen's voice. The reader is compelled to wonder: is Karen's account more reliable than Sarah's? What reasons might each of them have for preferring different versions of the story? Both Karen and Sarah seem to have been hurt in different ways—but do they want to remember what has happened to them? Or do they want to tell the version of the story that is most beneficial to them?

Perhaps we can understand the differences between the two spy stories as similarly exploring themes of narration, memory, and trauma. Both stories provide an account of why an already traumatized generation of former slaves had to endure a secondary trauma, wandering for the rest of their lives in the desert instead of entering a land where they could settle and make a home. Yet the two accounts provide contradictory perspectives on who contributed to this trauma and in what way. In the account narrated by Moses, there is no one to blame but the Israelites themselves, and no hero besides Moses, the ever-forbearing leader who alone tells the Israelites that God will protect them. Moses's narrative even protects God from bearing any potential blame, since it is now the Israelites, not God, who requested the scouting mission in the first place. On the other hand, the third-person account in Bemidbar is an almost too-good-to-be-true account of Joshua's loyalty, proving that he is the right person to be chosen as Moses's successor.

These two divergent stories cannot definitively tell us who played what role in this disastrous event in the Israelites' history. Yet they can nonetheless teach us an important lesson about how even our most cherished and trusted leaders might be influenced by what they want to remember, or what they want their followers to remember, in their narration of disturbing and significant events. Even beloved leaders such as Moses and Joshua can make nation-alteringly bad decisions, yet they, or their followers, may have preferred the version of history that lets them come across as heroes. As we in the US grapple with the process of taking down monuments, changing the names of buildings and institutions, and otherwise reckoning with the narratives told by and about America's own past leaders, let us remember the lesson of Devarim's retellings: no leader is without flaws, and no historical narrative is completely objective. To learn to retell, and to retell again, even while knowing that no version will ever get it quite right, is part of what it means to grow as a people and draw closer to the Promised Land. (Sarah Wolf is Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS)

[Into and Through Tisha B'av: Our Fragile Alchemy of "Why" by Rabbi David Markus](https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/)
<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

There's gotta be a reason. What's happening now must be a reaction to something that came before. Someone must be responsible: maybe me, maybe you, maybe all of us. Any God that is good and fair must have some purpose in all this – right? We sense this yearning for "why" just under the surface. After all, there's lots to explain, and mere natural explanations don't always suffice. That's why so many people, of all faiths, might seek and see divine purpose in most everything from covid to tornadoes.

The human psyche – that sacred alchemy of supernal light and stardust – naturally seeks explanation for life's twists and turns. For every fairness or unfairness, victory or defeat, comfort or suffering, we're wired to connect the dots of causation with some coherence. If we're deeply honest, senselessness ranks among our top fears – that what shapes our lives might lack purpose.

Spiritually speaking, our resulting human drive to make meaning of life's warp and woof is "theotropic," naturally turning us toward the transcendent we feebly call God. Yet from our faithful heights – especially at this time of year – the dropoff into senselessness, nihilism and disbelief can seem just a few perilous steps away. What if life's happenings are too big to explain? What if there's no fair explanation? What if? If the ground beneath us feels unsteady, if we feel a bit more fragile, then perhaps we're right on time. Welcome to the month of Av.

This week in Torah, a fragile Moses begins his "second telling" (Deuter-onomy) by fixing cause for his exhaustion and deprivation: it's the people's fault. They were so

restive that how – pointedly in Hebrew, Eicha, hinting at the Megillat Eicha (Lamentations) journey of Tisha b'Av now approaching – could Moses bear them? (Deut. 1:12). The people “refused” to follow, and they “defied” God (Deut. 1:26). They “sulked” (Deut. 1:27). They were “faithless” (Deut. 1:32). “Because of [them],” a bitter Moses concluded, he could not enter the Land (Deut. 1:37). In Moses’ re-telling, it was their fault – never mind God, and never mind Moses’ own responsibility.

Collective defiance similarly permeates Isaiah’s haunting prophetic vision (hazon) of calamity with divine purpose (Isaiah 1). Talmud’s rabbis followed that the Temple’s fall likewise had reason – even if the people punctiliously fulfilled mitzvot of Torah, service and acts of kindness! Thus, the rabbis famously wrote, the Temple fell due to senseless hatred (sinat hinam) among the people (B.T. Yoma 9b). Whatever we imagine to be the measure of our learning and piety, the fall’s still our fault.

Yet no earthly power in the Jerusalem of 70 C.E. could have halted the Roman Legion. Historically speaking, the Temple fell because Rome toppled it. But that’s not the point. R. Alan Lew’s *This is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared* – a book I’ve re-read so many times at this season that my copy is falling apart – reminds that the historical fact of Rome’s insurmountable power is vanishingly irrelevant compared to the spiritual truth of our own yearning to make meaning and take responsibility 2,000 years later.

What’s factual is only the start of spiritual meaning-making. That’s the point of this month of Av, when Jewish tradition harnesses what is difficult, what feels hot and dry, and what feels fragile to begin turning us. Jewish life is powerfully radical to deem this turn possible, much less by descent for the sake of ascent (yeridah tzorekh aliyah). Yes, it presents us with theological quandaries that we might never conclusively answer. We might never know for sure whether God sends life’s lemons, much less for a reason – because we deserve them? to refine our souls? as “chastisements of love” (yesurim shel ahavah)? – or if God doesn’t send lemons but primes our thirst for lemonade, or inspires us to make it. (All of these responses are very Jewish.) We might never know the full meaning of why Moses couldn’t enter the Land, or that the Temple fell, or that covid ravages the United States, or that a tornado ripped through. But meaning is more than why, and right now answers are beside the point and even counterproductive. Av’s message is that not our answers but our deepest questions – inwardly asked with integrity – can most potently aerate the soil of our lives and fertilize it for new growth. It is our not-knowing, even our fragility, that most powerfully can catalyze us for the journey ahead. And it is our daring to imagine its possibility that can help us make it so.

Yes, the walls will breach, the Temple will fall, structures and systems will fail – and only then can the Holy Presence go with us into “exile” (B.T. Megillah 29a). With courage,

integrity and time, we might just discover that beyond the walls of our answers await our greatest soul adventures of comfort and becoming anew. (Rabbi David Evan Markus (AJR Adjunct Faculty – Rabbinics) is senior rabbi of Temple Beth El of City Island (New York, NY) and Founding Builder of Bayit: Building Jewish, a spiritual innovation start-up for all ages and stages. Rabbi Markus also serves as Faculty in Spiritual Direction and past Board Co-Chair for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. By day, Rabbi Markus presides as Judicial Referee in New York Supreme Court, 9th Judicial District, as part of a parallel career in government service.)

The Choosing People by Rabbi Allison Poirer

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YrUJD79SRpH4KTO92QPyrIa9dxQBI2em4rajmNDDVZQ/edit>

After forty years of wandering, this final book of the Torah opens with the Israelites assembled on the Plains of Moav, poised to enter the Promised Land. Moshe delivers a farewell speech in which he strives to both mourn and celebrate, encourage and warn them. He delivers a humbling description of their origins, saying, “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you. Indeed, you are the smallest of peoples! But it was because the Lord loved you passionately, and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the Lord freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh, King of Egypt” (Devarim 7:7-8).

According to this description, God freed the Israelites and brought them to the Promised Land because of the strange, powerful, passionate, and dangerous love God has for them. In describing God’s love of the Israelites, Moshe uses the word “קַנְיָן” meaning that God “set God’s heart” on them, using the same word that describes the unbridled passion that Shechem felt for Dinah. This is an unreasonable and inexplicable love that leads God from jealousy to rage and back to forgiveness without very much logic or explanation at all.

Generations of Jews have struggled to understand our role as the chosen objects of this wild and powerful passion. As “The Chosen People,” what we are chosen to do? What does that mean for our relationship with God, ourselves, and others? Sarah Hurwitz suggests that “A better name for us would be ‘the choosing people’ - the people who choose to accept a particular covenant with the Divine, and who must continue choosing, in each new generation, to honor it” (Sarah Hurwitz, *Here All Along*, 25). Her point is well taken. Being chosen is only meaningful if we choose to respond to it. We learn a similar lesson from the extra-biblical text of the Harry Potter series. Those of you who have read “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince” will remember that Harry is particularly troubled by Sybill Trelawney’s prophecy identifying him as “The Chosen One.” However, Dumbledore later explains this prophecy is not binding on any of the people it mentions. Rather, “what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so....Voldemort singled you out as the person

who would be most dangerous to him – and, in doing so, he made you the person who would be most dangerous to him. It only has power if people choose to listen to it” (Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, chapter 23).

Similarly, our role as God’s Chosen People only has significance if we choose to respond to it in a meaningful way. Our chosenness is not elitist: Moshe made it clear that God didn’t choose us because we’re the biggest or the best. And our chosenness is not conditional: God’s choice does not depend on us completing a specific task or being an exceptionally good example for everyone else. God chose to love us because God loves us. But like the prophecy about Harry Potter, that choice only has power if we do something back. This is why Moshe is so emphatic about the mitzvot. Living life in accordance with the commandments is the best way Moshe believes we can respond to God’s choice. God will love us either way, but without the mitzvot God is just some poor sap running around pining after us. To borrow a metaphor from Rabbi Heschel, if we don’t do the mitzvot, God will be searching for man indefinitely! Unrequited love really isn’t that fun for anyone. Fulfilling the mitzvot is our way of reciprocating this great, inexplicable love from God. (Rabbi Allison Poirer is the Rabbi at Temple Beth Sholom in Framingham, Mass.)

[D’var Haftarah: The Sins that Lead to Destruction by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YrUJD79SRpH4KTQ92QPyrIa9dxQBI2em4rajmNDDVZQ/edit)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YrUJD79SRpH4KTQ92QPyrIa9dxQBI2em4rajmNDDVZQ/edit>

The Shabbat preceding Tisha b’Av is marked with the reading of the first chapter of Isaiah for its haftarah. This chapter offers little to no solace. It is filled almost entirely with rebuke and chastisement, a cascade of painful reflections on the illnesses which ate away at the soul and flesh of the nation’s body politic. No comparison could have been more biting than comparing the nation to the biblical paradigm of depravity – the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Hear the word of the Lord, you chieftains of Sodom; Give ear to our God’s instruction, you folk of Gomorrah!” (verse 10)

In the popular mindset, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are associated with sexual depravity and licentiousness. In contrast, Rabbi David Kimche (13th century Provence) captures the rabbinic mindset in his explanation of the verse from Isaiah: “For the chieftains of the people were similar to the chieftains of Sodom and Gomorrah, in cheating the poor and in perverting justice. And the people were similar to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in their evil deeds.” The crimes that caused God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah were economic and legal. The nation had failed to create a just and fair society. No one was concerned that people were hungry or forced to live in the street or had no work while others lived in opulence. Those who were not wanting insured that the system guaranteed the perpetuation of this norm. Kimche sensed that these were the same sins which afflicted the nation at the time of the destruction of the First Temple.

The rabbis used didactic stories about the events in Sodom to try to change the attitude of those who found this norm acceptable. For example: "Rabbi Judah said: They issued a proclamation in Sodom, saying, "Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor and the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt by fire!" Pelotit the daughter of Lot was wedded to one of the wealthy men of Sodom. She saw a certain very poor man in the street of the city and her soul was grieved on the account. What did she do? Every day when she went out to draw water, she put in her pitcher all kinds of provisions from her house and she sustained that poor man. The men of Sodom said: "How does this poor man live?" When they ascertained the facts they brought her forth to be burnt by fire. She said: God of the world! Maintain my right and my cause at the hands of the men of Sodom! And her cry ascended before the throne of glory. In that hour the Holy One Blessed be He said: "I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to her cry which is come unto me" and if the men of Sodom have done according to the cry of the young woman, I will turn her foundation upwards and the surface downward. (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 25)

Through this sort of prism the sages weighed the tragedies which befell the Jewish people on Tisha b'Av. They, like Isaiah, intuited that the only cure for the ills that befell the Jewish people on this tragic day were in the building of a just and fair society where a parody like this little rabbinic anecdote would no longer contain an element of truth.

I want to thank Erwin Mevorah for providing the following commentary:

Perasha - Debarim - rav Fischel Schacter shilita

The rabbi began his talk this week saying that on Rosh Hodesh was the yorsite of the previous Rebbe from Bobov . This great rabbi was once visiting a city - he arrived at night and some of his suitcases were delayed . The next morning the rebbes group wanted to go and pray Sachriet . The rebbe asked is my suitcase here - I want to wait for it - I need a special garment to wear when I pray . The suitcase was not there . The people were getting anxious - again they asked the rebbe can we go and pray - he asked them - is there anyone here that needs help financially . The people told over to the rebbe about a man that is in desperate need of money . The rebbe gave over a huge amount to help this person - and then said - ok - I'm ready to pray- now I have my garment that I needed before I pray . The garment was the Mitzva . Says the rabbi - do we realize the power of a Mitzva - how this is what we will wear - to clothe our neshama in the next world .

This rebbes father was once brought into a town . The people of the town were so excited to greet the rebbe that they wanted to unhitch the horses from the wagon that

was carrying the rebbe - and pull it themselves . The rebbe refused - he said - all my life I try to take a animal and make him into man - I don't want to take men now and turn them into animals .This story prompted the rabbi to ask his question on what his class was based on . The question is - what's the difference between man and animal . Some of the people answers that a man has free choice , a man can speak to name a few . The rabbis said a and animal responds to instincts- animals can't make decisions. Their behavior is limited . The rabbi them went on to describe a species of bird called the " Golden Clover " . This bird travels from Alaska before the winter season all the way to Hawaii . The distance is 2500 miles all over the sea. The bird must travel this non stop total flight time of 88 hours . The speed of the bird flying has to be an exact speed - if he goes to slow he will not make it - if he tries to go too fast he will run out of energy . The speed must be exactly perfect to make this voyage . This bird weight is exactly 7 oz - during flight time he looses some of his weight . The only way the birds are able to withstand all the challenges of this voyage is if the fly in groups in the shape of a "V" . This helps with the winds . Says the rabbi - this is for one species of birds - can we imagine all the others types of animals , others birds and all of the other creations of HASHEM . Its unbelievable if we stop and think - the handiwork of the master of the universe .

When it comes to man - the rabbi explains that we are the most limited - but we have the ability to make decisions , we have a free choice , we make mistakes and we learn from them . A person can fall and get up and be on a much higher level then before . We can sin and make teshuba - and then we can become so close to HASHEM . The first bet hamikdash they committed the three cardinal sins - murder , idol worship and illicit relations . The second bet hamikdash they had baseless hatred for one another . Both were destroyed . However says the rabbi - the second bet ha mikdash - the people had the power to keep it going - it was in their hands if it was to be destroyed or not . Had they acted properly - it would have lasted . Says the rabbi - our lives are the " voyage of the Golden Clover " . From the minute we are born - we are on a mission . Our path is all set for us . But we must make the correct decisions on this voyage . Because if we fail - we have to start this voyage all over again from the staring point . We each have our flight - but we have to be able to connect with others - we have to form our own " V" that we fly with . Our job is to believe that we each have our specific flight path . When we are able to connect with HASHEM - we will see him not as a restriction on what we can't do - but rather an opportunity to serve him as our guiding light .

The rabbi spoke about the holy Chazon Eish . How he was at a simcha ready to get into a car that was going to dive him home . Before he reached the car - a few people lined up and poured it their hearts to him . He spoke to each one and then was ready to get

into the car . He told the driver to please drive very slow - until we are at a distance away from the people . The driver did as was told but then asked - what was the reason why I had to drive slow . The Chazon Eish told him - I didn't want them to think I was running away from them and their problems - I wanted them to think that I was still with them - that's why I wanted you to go slow .

Says the rabbi we have to take our lives and try our best to fix what we did in the past . We can't be the ones that are causing mashiach to be delayed. We have to cause others around us to become better . We must have a positive effect on all those that we come into contact with . Finally the rabbi said - if we live according to the way we are suppose to live - it's impossible not to have a positive influence on others .

Shabbat shalom

Shabbat Hazon by Rabbi Michael Katz

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The Saturday before Tisha B'Av (which commemorates the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem) is called Shabbat Hazon (The Sabbath of the "Vision")- referring to the vision of the prophet Isaiah warning of terrible punishments ahead, unless the people change their ways.

On one level, this is an historical document trying to explain the events of 722 bce, when the Assyrians defeated Northern Israel, and carried away the Ten ("Lost") Tribes. Isaiah spoke to the Tribe of Judah in the south- the only survivors. "Our land is under attack; our cities are on fire; the harvest has been taken away by our enemies. Why? Because of our sins. We survivors need to repent before God comes calling for us!" The Jews didn't listen, and the Babylonians came in 586 bce and destroyed Judea, and the Temple in Jerusalem.

Eight hundred years later, Rabbis met after the destruction of the second Temple, by the Romans in the year 70 ce. They decided that the message of Isaiah should be read every year at this time as a reminder: "We are to blame for much of what has befallen us, but if we turn back to God and do what He commanded us, we can be saved." So we know what Isaiah was thinking in 722 bce when he made this speech; we understand what the Rabbis had in mind when, sometime after 70 ce, they chose this oration to be chanted each year as a Haftara; but what does reading this portion mean to us, today, in the year 2020?

What Isaiah said 2700 years ago is not just some historical document from the past; the Prophet is here in our synagogues this Shabbat, addressing us and what is happening in our world: "Disease is killing us. There is unrest in the streets!" He would say: "You are to blame! You don't wear masks? People will continue to die. You ignore poverty and racism and injustice? Then no one will be safe."

Isaiah just doesn't point a finger and yell; he also tells us what it is that we need to do to save our country and our world: "Cease to do evil; learn to do good; devote yourselves to justice, aid the wronged."

People didn't listen to Isaiah back then, so Tisha B'Av happened. The question on this Shabbat Hazon is: Will we listen to him, today? (Rabbi Katz is the Rabbi at Temple Beth Torah in Westbury Ny)

Yahrtzeits

Lisa Paley remembers her father Leon Lindenbaum on Monday July 27th (Av 6)

Shari Mevorah remembers her mother Helen Kirstein on Tuesday July 28th (Av 7)

Ilisia Kissner remembers her mother Etta M. Strassfeld (Ita bat Hayyim v'Rachel) on Friday July 31st (Av 10)

Mike Hessdorf remembers his father Ralph Hessdorf on Friday July 31st (Av 10)