

The Haftarah we read this morning, like the rest of Yom Kippur,
helps us hold up a mirror
to ourselves, our lives, and our world.
We need this.
Even in the midst of tumultuous change,
we can get stuck in patterns of behavior that neither serve us nor others.
In the day to day busyness of life, we may miss
what is being asked of us in our lives, and what the world needs of us.
The Rabbis of the Talmudic era
decided that this morning
We would read the words of the Prophet Isaiah,
Whose primary role as Prophet was to hold up a mirror to the people of ancient Judah.
In our Haftarah this morning,
Isaiah decries their culture of corruption, exploitation, and indifference,
And at the same time offers them a vision of a healed world,
one of light, of prosperity, and of God's presence,
if they were to change their ways.
His indictment of Judean society
and his vision of a healed world
come to us as a mirror too.
It is here to help us see our society and our shortcomings more clearly,
And to offer us hope that another way is possible.

The world of ancient Judah was a world in moral crisis.
The poor were exploited and marginalized.
The ruling class was corrupt.
People were indifferent to the suffering of others.
The Torah's vision of a world of human dignity, compassionate care, and justice for all
was nowhere to be found.
The Prophet Isaiah condemns this moral degradation,
And urges the People of Judah to radically change their ways.
He urges them to "unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the
oppressed go free".
He urges them to share their bread with the hungry, to take the poor into their home, to clothe
the naked.
And perhaps most significantly, he urges them not to ignore the suffering of their kin (58:6-7).

As a modern day reader,
I have always appreciated having this mirror held up before us each year.
I have appreciated the opportunity to sincerely consider
What I have been ignoring, what I had been willing to tolerate for the sake of my comfort,
Where I have failed to act for a better world when I could have.
Yet at the same time,
I have never been quite clear about the action steps.

What does it look like to unlock the fetters of wickedness,
to untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free?
What does it look like to share our bread with the hungry, to take the poor into our homes,
to clothe the naked, and to be concerned about the suffering of our kin?
In other words, what precisely is Isaiah asking us to do in response to the suffering we see and
experience in our world?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are many Jewish ways to answer these questions.
One Jewish response is to do the work of *chesed*,
To do acts of loving kindness.
This could mean giving food to someone who is hungry.
This could mean volunteering at a used clothing closet.
This could also mean checking in on someone in the community who is sick.
The work of *chesed*, of acts of loving kindness
is a very important response to Isaiah's call to action.

Another Jewish response is to do the work of *tzedakah*, or to give money to those in need.
This could mean giving money to someone who asks for it.
This could also mean giving money to a food bank or a homeless shelter
so they can better serve those in need.
This is also a very important way to respond to Isaiah's call.

Yet there is a third response as well.
We are also invited to respond to Isaiah's call to action
By doing the work of *Tzedek*, of pursuing justice.
When we read the text closely, we see
that Isaiah does not only urge us to feed an individual who is hungry,
Or to give clothing to an individual in need.
Isaiah also urges us to ask why these individuals are in need in the first place,
And to change the systems, laws and institutions in our society that cause this need.

We hear this call from Isaiah when he urges us to "unlock the fetters of wickedness",
And to "untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free".
These two images of the fetters and a yoke
suggest that a societal or systemic response to the problems people face is needed.
Let's look at these images more closely.
The image of the fetters is the image of someone in chains.
As the medieval commentator Rashi puts it,
this is an image of a person in bondage, shackled by a culture of wickedness.
Or as the medieval commentator the Radak puts it,
this is an image of someone who would have to struggle mightily
to get themselves free of their chains.
The image of the yoke is similarly evocative.
A yoke is something you put around an animal so that they can pull something for you,

like a cart or a plow.

But in the Torah, it is also used to talk about the experience of oppression and servitude.

For example, the Book of Leviticus describes our enslavement in Egypt as a yoke,

And describes God freeing the People of Israel from slavery as breaking the bars of their yoke (26:13).

In different ways, both the fetters and the yoke evoke the experience of being trapped.

They evoke the experience of being held back by laws, systems, and institutions that foster oppression and inequality.

His words remind us that inequality and oppression are fetters,

are yokes around people's necks,

that stop too many of us from flourishing to our fullest human potential.

With these images, Isaiah invites us to do the work of *Tzedek*, of pursuing justice.

There are many aspects of this work.

(SLOW) The work of *Tzedek* is about working for a world

in which resources, opportunities, and privileges are equitably distributed.

For example, those who fought for the Americans with Disabilities Act were fighting for reasonable accommodations in employment and physical access to public places.

The work of *Tzedek* is also about building a world without oppression,

Which means changing the aspects of our society that allow some groups of people to be advantaged and other groups to be disadvantaged.

For example, this could mean working to eliminate the glass ceiling in the workplace for women and people of color.

It is also about addressing the root causes of injustice,

Which means identifying the underlying issues, and making change on that level.

For example, this could mean addressing the problem of homelessness

By creating more affordable housing or more services for those with substance abuse disorders.

To use the language of Isaiah, pursuing justice

is about identifying the fetters and yokes that hold so many people back in our society,

And is about doing the work of breaking them.

This is the Jewish response of *Tzedek*, of pursuing justice.

Now, if Isaiah were to look at our society today under this pandemic,

he would see fetters and yokes on the necks of so many people.

He would see that People of Color have been getting sick and dying at much higher rates than white people.

He would see that this is because communities of color

have less access to health care and public health information,

and lack trust in the medical system because of a long history of mistreatment.

He would see that this is also because People of Color

are more likely to experience housing insecurity, overcrowded housing, and a lack of paid sick leave.

Isaiah would also see the ways that women have suffered disproportionately during this pandemic.

He would see that women still assume a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, And that only some workplaces are flexible when it comes to balancing parenting and work. He would see that because of this, women tended to be the ones to leave their jobs or reduce their working hours when daycares and schools closed. He would see the long term projections which say that women will be even farther behind men in career gains because of this.

Isaiah would also see the ways that people with disabilities have been left behind and deemed expendable during this pandemic.

He would see that disabled adults who were dependents on their relative's taxes did not receive economic stimulus checks in the first two rounds.

He would see that neither of the pandemic aid bills provided help to struggling home care providers, which many people with disabilities rely on.

He would see that high risk disabled people were not consistently deemed a high priority for early vaccination.

In the face of what the pandemic has revealed to us, Isaiah's call rings loudly in our ears.

It is a call to unlock the fetters of racism, sexism, and ableism.

It is a call to untie the cords of the yoke of all forms of oppression.

It is a call to us, as Jews, to be involved in the important work of Tzedek, of pursuing social justice.

I am happy to say that we at Temple Beth Torah have already begun to heed this call.

This past year, the Social Justice Subcommittee of the Tikkun Olam Committee Has emerged, and has taken on three important projects.

One, this group engaged our community in a Holliston-based campaign to support the hiring of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director in the Holliston school system.

You may recall an email from the group asking for your support on this.

Two, this group invited me to teach an adult education series, where we got to examine three Jewish approaches to repairing the world, Including chesed, acts of lovingkindness; tzedakah, giving money; and tzedek, pursuing social justice.

Third, this group has begun a dialogue with the TBT Board of Directors so that we can chart the path of social justice together.

But the next step that this group is about to take is incredibly exciting, and I want to take a few minutes to talk about it this morning.

Heeding Isaiah's call, this group will be inviting the community to participate in what is called a House Meetings Campaign.

These house meetings will be an opportunity for all of us to come together and talk about the social issues that most affect our lives and weigh most heavily on our hearts.

They will be an opportunity for sharing personal stories and connections to these issues. The reason this group is doing a House Meetings Campaign is that they understand that any social justice work we do as a community must be an expression of our deepest personal concerns, values, and experiences. This means that if we do work on immigration, it will be because you share stories of your immigrant grandparents and what it was like for them to come to this country, Or because you share stories about what it is like to work with immigrants today. If we do work on climate change, it will be because you share stories of your kids and grandkids' fears about whether they will have a livable future, or about how you are struggling to keep up with the damage that all of our summer storms have done to your basement. If we do work on racism, it will be because you share stories about the ways in which you or friends or relatives have faced discrimination because of race. These house meetings are an opportunity for us to come together around the issues that we care about most, around the issues that affect us and the people we love most. This is what will give rise to our social justice work here at TBT.

Now at this point, I wonder how many of us are uncomfortable with what I have said. Perhaps you would describe the issues facing our society differently. Perhaps you are concerned that what I am saying has challenging implications for a politically diverse community like ours. These are important concerns. They come from honest differences in perspectives, And they come out of a deep care for our community. So in this time of moral crisis, when the world needs us, I want to invite us to make a commitment to each other: That where we go, we go together. This is precisely why we are doing a house meeting campaign: So that our social justice work can be an expression of shared values and aspirations. This does not mean that as we do this work there will not be disagreements or differences of opinion. This is natural. We are Jews after all. But this commitment means that everyone will be heard, and differences will be validated and appreciated. Where we go, we go together.

In the coming weeks, we will receive more information about these house meetings, And will have the opportunity to sign up to attend one either in person or on Zoom. In the meantime, I would like to invite us to begin looking inward, And to begin considering the social issues that are most on our heart these High Holidays. **(SLOW)** I want to invite us to reflect for a quiet moment on the following question:

*What is one issue facing our local community or our society
that impacts you or someone you care about on a personal level?*

[PAUSE]

In this season of reflection and renewal,
May we come together and heed the call of the Prophet Isaiah
And commit to doing the important work of social justice.
The world needs us.