

Sermon – Yom Kippur Day

The Beloved Community

In the year 520 BCE, a man walked the streets of Jerusalem. And what he saw filled him with despair. He had been one of the exiles in Babylonia, imbued with dreams of the heavenly city of Jerusalem. And like many of the exiles, he yearned for the day when he could return and as his grandparents and parents once did, he would walk the streets and alleyways and perhaps see a temple rebuilt where the worship of the one God would resume in glory and beauty.

But on that day in 520 BCE, he saw something quite different. He saw a society bitterly divided, as returning exiles found their homes and fields occupied by others, who greeted these new immigrants with suspicion and resentment.

He saw a class of wealthy people who had become rich in the intervening years and who oppressed the poor, took advantage of their poverty, worked them for meager wages. He saw homeless people in the streets with none to care for them.

He saw people who could not afford food or clothing, even among the wealthier classes he saw division and strife, families at war with one another.

And that was why he was despairing on that day.

But then this man was struck with divine inspiration.

God spoke to this man on that day and he in turn began to speak to his fellow Israelites. God filled the man's soul and gave him the answer. And he spoke.

He said simply, "I want you to love one another".

Tafek Nafshecha he said, Turn your soul to the other. Meebsarecha Lo Titalem,

Reconcile with your flesh and blood.

Show one another compassion and mercy and seek justice for everyone.

Nefesh Tasbia — Offer compassion

Ve-Onee-Eem Meroodim Tavi Bayit – Let all participate in the bounty.

Then he said, Ve-Aroo-Cha-Te-Cha Meheyra Teetzmach – If you do this, the wounds of this society will quickly heal.

Goder Per-Etz – The breaches of this society will be mended.

This man who walked the streets of Jerusalem 2500 years ago and preached reconciliation and justice for everyone called himself Isaiah, and he is the author of the Haftarah we read just moments ago, the source of all the quotes I just cited – quotes calling on people to reconcile and offer love and compassion to one another in order to repair the breaches and divisions in society and create what he called "Shnat Ratzon L'Adonai" – a time acceptable to the Lord.

My sources are Isaiah Chapter 58 Verses 7 and 10 and 12 and Isaiah Chapter 61 Verse 2.

We jump ahead in time 2500 years to the late 1950s of our time.

And another young man is walking the streets of another city, far across the world, far away from Jerusalem. This man also despairs at what he sees.

He sees a country bitterly divided by wealth, and opportunity, and politics and most of all, by race.

And although he is a young Baptist minister, a devout Christian, indeed the son of a Baptist minister, he discovered in Seminary that some of the most inspiring words in the Bible were written 2500 years ago by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah.

And one of his favorite chapters of all is Chapter 58, the same Chapter 58 we read this morning. And it occurs to him that the message of Isaiah is not revolution and violence and enmity and hatred, but one of love and compassion.

And that the divisions of society can only be healed ultimately by reconciliation and radical caring for one another, even for one's enemies. And perhaps those principles could apply equally to the torn society of his day – the torn city of his time.

And that the compassion based methods to repair the breaches of ancient Jerusalem could repair the breaches of his city, Montgomery Alabama, and indeed, the country as a whole.

And so this young minister named Martin Luther King Jr. begins to speak of what he calls the beloved community – a community based on forgiveness, understanding, reconciliation, mutual support, and love.

He says in 1957: Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys.”

The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. He said “Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that.” Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies—is the solution.

Now I’m sure you know that Dr. King did not believe that one acquiesced to injustice – that one simply gave in to injustice and hate and violence and cruelty.

He was arrested 30 times for opposing injustice and unjust laws. His home was bombed. His life was threatened continually and he died from an assassin’s bullet.

Oh no – he believed that with all our might, we are to oppose injustice and resist the forces of oppression.

We are to oppose unjust laws.

Resist unjust people.

Denounce the cruel and the oppressive as did the prophet Isaiah.

But for King the ultimate aim must be reconciliation and a society based on mutual regard and respect. That the only society worth preserving is a society based on reconciling with those who oppose you.

Dr. King said in that same year of 1957:

“For most people, life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog.”

My friends, we have followed this way for too long and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. For the salvation of our nation, we must follow another way. This is the only way to create the beloved community.

So that when the battle is over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor.” There are certain things we can say about this method that seeks justice. It does not seek to humiliate the opponent but to win their friendship and understanding.

The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption;

The end is the creation of the beloved community.

It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends.

It is this type of goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the current age into the exuberant gladness of the new age.

It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of human beings.”

Dr. King quoted Isaiah often and spoke of this future time, this beloved community as the acceptable time to the Lord as did Isaiah.

Now Dr. King was widely condemned and criticized for his belief in ultimate reconciliation. He was called weak and accommodating and even cowardly.

But he said to his critics “The strong person is the person who can cast off the chain of hate, the chain of evil. Hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe.”

I am sure that 2500 years ago, the man who called himself Isaiah was also castigated for demanding justice and righteousness and calling upon all Israelites to live with one another in harmony and love and mutual respect to those who were feuding with one another – to turn their hearts to one another.

Tafek Nafshecha he said. Turn your compassion towards one another.

I am sure there were those who called him weak and cowardly for not demanding that the oppressed simply defeat the oppressors. Dislodge them, upend them and take their place. And they would have perhaps been justified in doing so.

But Isaiah, and later Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that one day we would all

have to live together. That the only society worth building is a society based on mutuality and justice and love. That society and only that society is the Shnat Ratzon L'Adonai – the acceptable time of the Lord – that was the view of Isaiah, and that was the view of Dr. King.

Now I don't need to tell you that we are living in the most divisive period of our lifetimes. We are more divided than ever by wealth and class. Divisions based on race and ethnicity are growing and political divisions are tearing friendships apart, roiling congregations and communities and turning neighbor against neighbor.

And as Yom Kippur is a time for confession, I confess to you that I am often in a rage at what is going on.

When I see white racists and anti-semites march with torches I am in a rage and I want to strike out with all my might.

When I see babies taken from the arms of their parents and placed in cages in detention centers I want to scream to the heavens.

When I see people unable to afford basic healthcare or nourishing food, I want to tear it all down.

When I see women abused and LGBTQ citizens discriminated against and innocent black Americans shot in their cars and their homes, I want to rise up in avenging rage.

When I witness corrupt judges and politicians enrich themselves as others suffer, I want to deliver punishing blows.

But then I read Isaiah, who says Tafek Nafshecha – offer your soul to one another.

And I read Dr. King who says hate destroys only the hater.

The end is reconciliation.

So it was for Isaiah.

So it was for Dr. King.

And I've concluded, so it must be for us.

Our nation is divided, our political system is divided, our families are divided, our friendships are divided. Even Temple Emanu-El has experienced some of the divisions that have plagued society.

We are not immune.

As Isaiah taught in our Haftarah:

The breeches must be mended and the foundations must be repaired.

To do that, we will continue to stand for justice, continue to advocate with all our might for righteousness.

We will support the poor, the downtrodden, the lost, the neglected.

We will clothe the naked and feed the hungry and argue every day and with all our might for policies that no longer favor one class at the expense of all others.

We will fight so that the bounties of this country be available to all and not just a select few.

We will oppose the corruption and dysfunction in our political system that has brought us to this crisis.

But we will do this with love and an outstretched hand to any who would take it.

We will persist in our love and seek to persuade and convince and never to threaten or oppress. We will continue to challenge injustice but we will also teach and inform and educate.

And we will listen to those who disagree. We will hear those who hold a different view. So that no person of good will and good intent will feel humiliated or marginalized.

Knowing that as Dr. King said:

Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community.

And that if we do this, we will all learn the final verse of My Country Tis of Thee and sing together in one great voice:

Our Father's God to Thee

Author of Liberty.

To Thee we sing.

Long may our land be bright.

With freedom's holy light.

Protect us by Thy might.

Great God, our King.