

## Drash on Isaiah 57:14 – 58:14, Yom Kippur 5784

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In today's haftarah portion, Gd speaks through the prophet Isaiah. The passage directs us towards a fast that brings us closer to Gd. It is not enough, Isaiah says, to sit in our hunger, alone and removed. A fast isn't a fast if we mistreat those whom we have power over—if, for example, a boss abuses their workers or we neglect our families.

Instead, Isaiah says we must “untie the cords of the yoke, let the oppressed go free.” As Rabbi Miriam mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, reading the two haftarah portions together – Jeremiah and Isaiah – gives us a full picture of both the spiritual and the material ways we can get closer to Gd.

To clarify, since we'll be referencing it a lot, we think “closeness to Gd” doesn't have to be actually centered just around... Gd. It may mean the awe we feel in nature, towards others, or maybe the special kind of intimacy we feel when we connect with our ancestors, or to other Jewish people, in sacred spaces.

Closeness to Gd is a spiritual safety and a promise for companionship.

Isaiah says: “Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins,  
You shall restore foundations laid long ago.  
And you shall be called  
“Repairer of fallen walls,  
Restorer of lanes for habitation.”

Here, we move from the verbs “rebuild, restore” and into the nouns “repairer, restorer.” We progress from verb to noun; from action to identity.

We are our actions. And through changing our actions, so we learn in Isaiah, we can change ourselves.

And this must come from within.

In Judaism, in order to look forward, we also look back. The Mi Cha-mocha is a prayer for the past. Yom Kippur happens after Rosh Hashanah; we celebrate the New Year, only then to reckon with ourselves, and, then, evolve.

It's not about a sudden shift.

It is about knowing ourselves well enough to live in line with our values, and build a life of meaning and purpose from there. This is a life of *rebuilding*, and of constantly returning to what within ourselves and in our midst needs our transformative repair.

At one point in this passage, the text tells us that being in pursuit of *tzedek*, righteousness and justice, will bring us closer to Gd. Reading the Hebrew of this portion,

I initially thought the text was using the word *tzedek* to describe Gd. But after a conversation with Rabbi Sami, I learned that the text conjugates *tzedek* in the second person possessive – *tzidekhah*, *your* justice – which reminds us that the pursuit of *tzedek* is worldly and material, not just spiritual.

The passage offers us a fast without strife and contention, which is a fast met with action and liberation. It is through action, and not merely ritual, that we can begin to witness change, to turn towards teshuvah, to alchemize another return to self.

I think of the Days of Awe, the *y'mei noraim*, and Yom Kippur as a time of self-improvement, of turning inward to take stock of my year. This would seem strange to our ancestors, who related to time and prayer without a modern conception of the self.

They wanted to know how they could feel close to Gd from a state of exile, an experience they only felt in the collective. Fasting, atonement, prayer, and teshuvah were deeply rooted in relationships. These transformations were not taken alone.

Isaiah tells us again and again that turning to guilt to help us heal will only lead to unnecessary suffering. A truly holy fast pairs ritual with communal action, which is how our ancestors always prayed.

In the present day, when we yearn to be better, it can be easy to fall into only *self*-improvement. We retreat from our community, focus on identifying and fixing unhealed parts of ourselves, and are told that we can't build fulfilling relationships until our healing journey is complete.

But Isaiah tells us that it's not by starving ourselves and suffering that we will achieve the fast Gd desires. That fast is one where we share our bread with the hungry and don't ignore our own kin. The text reminds us that to build relationships with other people, we do not have to be perfectly healed. I can hang even though I'm in a bad mood. I can give a drash even if I'm a little hangry.

It's through the collective that we can pave a path towards atonement and become closer to Gd. We reach for teshuva by reaching for each other, even in all our flaws. It's then, Isaiah says, that "Gd will guide you always."

Instead of fixating on the "unhealed" parts of ourselves, Isaiah presents another option: in order to "heal", we must heal others. We must become close to others to become close to Gd, not the other way around.

I tend to think of the loneliness and longing that we may feel as a result of how individualistic we are now, of the ways we distance ourselves from others in order to "improve." But, if this is the case, then where is this longing for companionship coming from in a time when people were living more collectively? Might the longing to be "healed" be the same "healing" we talk about today?

Even in a more communal society—there are times when we will find ourselves *alone*. Dealing with specific, personal griefs. Even if our ancestors didn't believe in "the individual" in the way we do now, they were still struggling with how to be alone. Isaiah says a fast that does not bring us closer to Gd is one in which we don't really fast—we starve ourselves.

Isaiah tells us that, if we work to break open the bonds of material oppression, and pour our energy outwards even if we feel insufficient, we ourselves will become a watered garden.

We will be taken care of, nourished, and abundant.

Even when we are alone, we will be in divine company.