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ISAIAH ON SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

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Most of us, in one way or another, are “spiritual seekers,” both as individuals and as members of congregational communities.

Typically we’re looking for two things: a feeling of closeness, unity, or even intimacy with God, or whatever we think of as eternal and transcendent; and a lessening of anxiety, fear, and discontent, relief from mundane pressures and disappointed hopes, and in their place a sense of meaning, fulfillment, contentment, and joy—shalom (the peace of wholeness and completeness).

Our prophet Isaiah (57:14-58:14) has a great deal to teach us about our development as Jewish spiritual beings. He is prescient about our challenges to an unsettling degree. From his perch in the ancient world he sees with uncanny clarity the present-day delusions and diversions that keep us from our spiritual goals. He describes our moral foibles not unlike a next-door neighbor who overhears and repeats the morally questionable minutiae of our lives.

His prophetic voice rings out loud and clear in the Yom Kippur Haftarah: “And He [Adoshem] says: lead upwards, lead upwards, remove the stumbling block from the path of My people.” (57:14)

Isaiah goes on to say that while God’s management of creation is transcendent, operating on a cosmic scale, it’s also imminent, personally near to those of us who are ready to turn our lives. (57:15) But we are allowed nonetheless to go our own way, to ignore the *derekh Adoshem* (דֶּרֶךְ ה')—the way of God given to us in the Torah (57:16)—and instead to follow our own hearts. And according to the tradition, the troubles we encounter in doing so are

part of the Creator’s guidance to teach us the emptiness of our delusions and diversions.

Isaiah calls our attention to the consequences of living as if we can be solo navigators of our own life-journeys. He describes us as disgorging mire and mud like a roiled sea, even though we do all within our power to maintain a surface appearance of calm and control, certainty and success. Rejecting what the Creator has imposed as the order of creation, we achieve a kind of autonomy, but it’s more like isolation than *shalom*, the wholeness and completeness that comes from aligning ourselves with the working of creation. (57:20)

There is no *shalom* if we refuse to recognize the rules by which the creation operates. (57:21) So when all of the pressures and temptations have drawn us away from the path of the Torah, the prophet’s voice calls us on Yom Kippur to return to that *derekh Adoshem*.

Of course, as Isaiah says, the day by itself, cannot produce atonement. Taking a one-day break from our usual routines is just that—a one-day hiatus, after which we return to living as we did before. And Isaiah is sharply critical of the farce of sanctimoniously beating our breasts without genuine commitment to turn our lives. (57:21)

Isaiah has his instructions from on high: “Cry out with a loud voice, do not hold back, lift up your voice like a shofar and tell to My people their willful sins and to the House of Jacob their transgressions.” (58:1)

His prophetic mind knows the ultimate effect of abandoning Torah—our individual and collective spiritual, and then material, denouement and destruction. So it would be a mistake, a form of

treachery to the people, if he were to gloss over Israel's defection from the Torah. His task is to raise the people's consciousness of the inevitable collective consequences of our conduct.

But he also identifies the anomaly of our simultaneously seeking spirituality while remaining indifferent to Torah's claims on us. In his prophetic words: "They seek Me every day and the knowledge of My ways, feigning a desire to be a nation that acts righteously and has not forsaken the laws of its God, demanding strict justice. . . ." (58:2)

And on what basis is the people's claim for justice made?

The people say: "Why have we fasted?—You seem not to see it. . . ." (58:3) In effect, they don't understand why they don't receive God's help, why God seems mostly absent from their lives.

But the prophet pulls their covers: "On the day of your fast you seek out personal gain. . . ," and much worse, he goes on to say. The people feel that a single day of fasting earns a year's credit. But Isaiah hears the open revelations of their cynicism and indifference, so he knows there is no genuine intention among the majority to alter their lives and deeds when the Day of Atonement is over. (58:4) Too many of our people take Yom Kippur literally as a *day* of atonement—all bets are off after that one day.

And then, like an arrow loosed with unerring aim, comes one of the most poignant of all prophetic questions: "Isn't *this* the fast day I have chosen: Breaking open the shackles of wickedness, undoing the bonds of the yoke [of oppression], releasing the oppressed to freedom. . . ." (58:6)

The people mistakenly think, however, that the prophet is referring only to freeing the prisoners from their prisons. But Isaiah is taking aim at those imprisoned by their habit of placing highest priority on satisfying their sensual desires. He sees in the people a passion to find comfort and convenience, sensual satisfaction at almost any cost—including the loss of our spirituality. (58:6) Certainly, he doesn't oppose sensuality in the service of God. But he sees the particulars of the price we pay for making it the highest or only priority in our lives, which is the loss of our *moral freedom*, the thoughtless abandonment of our independence and competence to choose the *derekh Adoshem*. (58:6)

In the face of our untold material wealth and overweening preoccupation with sensual satisfaction, God's preference is that we "divide our bread with the hungry and bring into our homes the poor and homeless" throughout the year, in place of our pious self-afflictions on Yom Kippur—which is a shorthand way of saying: Our covenant with God,

which has been the source of incalculable blessings in the course of our history, requires that we dedicate ourselves unstintingly to increasing justice and loving-kindness in the world. Not for God's sake but our own (58:8), the need for which is affirmed by how the very idea shocks our sensibilities: it's not *our* responsibility, we demur; we're not *able* to respond in these situations, we dissemble—all the while unwittingly confirming the loss of our spiritual moral freedom.

But if we recapture that freedom, choosing the *derekh Adoshem*, Isaiah says, "then our light will burst forth like the dawn. . . ." (58:8) We will be healed of our spiritual sickness; the emptiness we so often feel when we run out of delusions and diversions will vanish. And God will be a spiritually palpable presence in our lives. (58:9)

The prophet tells us what our inheritance will be if we become devoted practitioners of justice and loving-kindness:

- We will no longer strive for that which always remains just out of reach.
- We will find in God a sure and satisfying guide for our day-to-day lives.
- We shall be ". . . like a watered garden, and like a spring of water that never fails." (58:11)
- And with that, we shall build the foundations of generation after generation—not simply tending our own little lives—and we shall be called: "the restorer of paths to dwell in." (58:12)

What is the immediate practical goal of this prophecy?

The prophetic goal is to constrain and control for godly purposes those unchecked sensual desires that pull us, individually and collectively, away from the *derekh Adoshem*, that destroy our spirituality. The goal is to enable us to discover the source of refreshment of our spirit, where God is continually present, and all our darkness is permanently illuminated. It is that light that illuminates the path to God—to meaning, fulfillment, and joy in our lives—rather than our physique, position, prestige, possessions, or power. Those captivating sources of sensual satisfaction are, in effect, nothing more than constantly failing artificial lights that we desperately seek out to soothe us in the darkness.

When together as a congregational community we build the foundations of generation after generation, our contemporaries are captivated by our courage and enthusiasm. Whenever we begin the building in earnest, they want to ally themselves with us. And together we can celebrate the work of restoring the path of God, the *derekh Adoshem*.

How do we begin this great work—what does Isaiah tell us?

Rejuvenating the *derekh Adoshem* begins with making and celebrating Shabbat—every week. (58:13) If on Shabbat we refuse to stop our work, whatever our rationalizations, then certainly our day-to-day lives will not be dedicated to the *derekh Adoshem*. The only way our day-to-day lives can be devoted to the path of God is to re-educate, re-charge, and rededicate ourselves to that purpose one day every week—and that’s the purpose of Shabbat.

The prophet’s closing thought is that we have a choice: We can occupy a spiritual desert or we can live “astride the heights of the world.” (58:14)

As individuals, we might ask ourselves: If what the prophet proposes as a way of life seems unappealing or unworkable, what is it that I find more attractive and feasible for my children and myself? What legacy, if any, do I prefer to leave to all who come after me?

And as a community we might consider this: There is a sense among the members of our congregation that virtually everything possible has been done to build membership and participation, but the numbers have remained relatively static or are declining.

So what else can be done, and does Isaiah tell us what it might be? (58:11-12)

The secret of congregational development is not in our worship services, educational programs, or social life. They’re obviously necessary, but it’s equally obvious they’re not sufficient. We can singularly distinguish ourselves as a congregational community, however, by increasing those moments when we’re openly and enthusiastically dedicated to allying ourselves to God’s great work of creation. It’s at those times, when our combined spirit-

uality becomes the driving purpose of our lives, that we see others drawn to its power to transform their lives. At those moments, when we make the vision and path of Torah shine brightly, we draw to us all those who are in the dark, spiritually bereft and wanting.

Where do we begin?

- We can stop imagining that the challenge of becoming educated and actively life-affirming Jews is an insurmountable mountain to climb alone, and instead recognize it as a lifelong path shared with others in a congregational community—a path to embark on at this moment—along which are to be found the greatest rewards, both spiritual and material, that life has to offer.
- We can use Shabbat as the prophet exhorts us to—together re-educating, recharging, and re-dedicating ourselves every week to that *derekh Adoshem*—instead of isolating and punishing ourselves and those we love and care about with the bizarre fiction that we can only survive by working on the Sabbath.
- And we can begin to use those other six days, not alone taking a break from God and Torah—when we imprison them in the Temple sanctuary—but as a time when individually and communally our acts are dedicated to *tikun olam*, repairing the world, by pursuing *tzedek* (justice) and *gemilut hasadim* (loving-kindness).

When we do so, multiplying our spirituality powerfully by acting together as a congregational community, we are “. . . like a watered garden, and like a spring of water that never fails”—and who wouldn’t want to share the delights of that garden and drink from that spring?

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