

Message from the Haftara

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Jerusalem on a Split Screen

D'VARIM-CHAZON

Shabbat Chazon, named for the opening word of this week's haftara - CHAZON, meaning "vision" - is read on the final Shabbat before Tish'a b'Av. Its opening verses present us with a puzzle.

The prophet Yeshayahu, speaking in the time of King Chizkiyahu, delivers one of the most searing indictments in all of Tanach:

"Even an ox knows its owner, a donkey its master's trough; Israel does not know, My people do not consider. Woe to the sinning nation, a people weighed down with iniquity" (Yeshayahu 1:3-4).

Yet the Book of Melachim Bet (18:3-6) describes that very same generation in radically different terms: "He did what was pleasing to GOD, just as his forefather David had done... He trusted only in the ETERNAL the God of Israel; there was none like him among all the kings of Yehuda after him, nor among those before him... kept the commandments that GOD had given to Moshe."

How can both be true? How can the

same city, the same people, at the same moment, be portrayed so differently? How do we hold this split screen - Yeshayahu's moral ruin alongside Melachim's spiritual praise?

In the past, I struggled to reconcile these competing visions. Today I no longer do. When I read this haftara and look at my own contemporary Jerusalem, I see both images clearly.

There is so much devotion: a flourishing of Torah learning, a visible commitment to God, and genuine selfless sacrifice under conditions of real hardship. And yet, on the very same screen, profound moral failures and social injustices cry out just as loudly.

Yeshayahu's message is that a life of Torah cannot rest on observance alone. Mastery of sacred texts and meticulous adherence to ritual are not sufficient. The foundation must be a deep commitment to responsibility toward one's fellow Jew - and toward society at large.

In Jerusalem today, we see individuals who observe Shabbat, and keep kashrut with great care, yet have lost sight of the Torah's most basic ethical demands. They have forgotten the prohibition against standing by idly while another's blood is spilled. They have distanced themselves from broader responsibility to protect the people and the land of Israel.

Rav Yaakov Medan, Rosh Yeshivat

Har Etzion, gave powerful voice to this failure in testimony before a Knesset committee:

A Torah from which the verse “Do not stand by while your neighbor’s life is in danger” (Vayikra 19:16) has been stricken; in which there is no concept of a commanded, defensive war; which ignores the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu himself led the armies that began the conquest of the Land of Israel; which turns a blind eye to the pain of widows, orphans, the injured in battle, children whose fathers are away over the holidays fighting – this is not the Torah that was given by God to Israel at Sinai.

Such a worldview produces a painful contradiction: acts of personal sacrifice built on an incomplete foundation. Torah study pursued in isolation from communal responsibility ultimately distorts the very values it seeks to uphold.

This is why Yeshayahu’s words are so devastating. The offerings brought by such individuals, their sacrifices and their Torah, inspiring in isolation, become almost worthless in this context: “Bring no more your empty gifts; they are foul incense to Me” (v. 13). When people damage public life – disrupting society, destroying public property, and acting with indifference to the sacrifices of others – blocking roads to prevent reservists from returning home, delaying

families trying to reach weddings or medical treatment, or keeping children from caring for elderly parents, their sacrifices cannot be called noble. They have been stripped of their moral meaning. This is precisely the reversal Yeshayahu describes: worship that becomes offensive to God, because it is severed from justice.

As such, the tragedy of this haftara does not belong to the past. This is not ancient history. It is a mirror.

The split screen is not only the age of Chizkiyahu; it is the view from our own windows. The question is no longer how we failed, but what we will do. Will we remain silent? Or will we take responsibility, in word and in deed, to shape a more just and unified society?

Yeshayahu does not end with rebuke. He concludes with a vision of renewal, grounded in leadership: “I shall set up your judges again as first they were, your counselors as long ago. And then you shall be called Righteous City, Faithful Metropolis” (v. 26).

The redemption he promises depends on leaders – and communities – who embody the values that they proclaim. Torah knowledge without living its values is hollow. A “city of righteousness” can only be built by those who feel responsible not only

for themselves, but for the entire Jewish people.

That is the call of Shabbat Chazon. The prophet who wept over Jerusalem also promised her return, and he told us exactly how it would come: “Zion will be redeemed by justice; those who return to her, by righteousness” (v. 27).

The CHAZON, the vision, is before us. The responsibility to realize it is ours.

