

Intro to the Yom Kippur morning Haftorah 2017,
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The haftorah we are about to read is well-known throughout the Jewish social justice world as a powerful call to action. Isaiah's message is clear. God is not interested in our pious self-righteous public fast. What God wants is for us to feed the hungry – to care for people in need. Fasting isn't about our hunger, but, rather, about remembering that other people are hungry.

So why don't we listen? Why do we need to hear this every year?

The answer is that no matter how much work we do, we will never finish.

And, because we are human, we still make mistakes. We still think pain is caused by someone else. And, too often, we still think we know what is best for others instead of asking others what they need.

As a Jewish educator, I am often asked to recommend a "hesed" curriculum or a program that will teach children to be the kind of people that Isaiah is asking of us.

But a curriculum assumes that there is information that can be mastered if only we used the proper texts or experiences. And it is arrogant to think that we will ever master this subject.

So, what are we to do? If there is no curriculum, how can we better respond to Isaiah's call? This haftorah gives us some hints. First, some background.

Seven years ago I gave a Yom Kippur Yizkor dvar torah. I focused then on a text that spoke of a little-known tradition of burying a person in a coffin made from the table where that person worked, studied or fed others.

The biblical quote used to show why we might make a coffin out of a person's table is from Isaiah: v'halach l'fanecha tzidkecha. And your righteousness will go before you. I spoke then about the use of this biblical quote as a reminder that our tables are the silent, always present witnesses to our righteousness, to how we treat others throughout our lives. I understood this entire teaching as a reminder that what we do and how we behave at our tables matters profoundly.

What I didn't talk about at that time was that these words from Isaiah – and your righteousness will go before you - are from the haftorah of Yom Kippur, which we are about to read: Isaiah 58:8

But, why is the biblical proof-quote about tables as witness to our righteousness taken from Yom Kippur haftorah, since Yom Kippur is the one day in the year when we aren't at our tables?

In this case, the context of the quote is crucial.

The haftorah begins, as we know, with a description of a world in pain and a call to action. Most people stop paying attention after verse 7. But, then, the haftorah takes a turn, starting

in vs 8, our table text verse. The next verses tell us that if we care for others, then we will live in a redeemed world. Vs 11, for example, is a key verse used by Jewish mystics to describe a perfected world. This verse is also said during the tahara ritual – when the hevra kaddisha is preparing a person for burial. At the time of our greatest vulnerability – that moment between this world and the next– those caring for us will say these words in verse 11 – wishing for us an eternity of divine abundance, of olam haba, the world to come.

But for Jewish mystics, olam haba isn't a time that happens only after we die. Olam haba is always available. The mystics translate olam haba as “the world that is coming” – present tense, available to us now, a world flowing with the capacity for human kindness.

And how do we access that ever-present flow of the capacity for compassion? This haftorah suggests that access is possible, but it doesn't talk about a curriculum or a community service program. Isaiah rejects our fast because it is a one-time-a-year public event that makes us think we are righteous. He asks us for something far more difficult - for proper and caring behavior – every day and in all of our actions, public and private.

As I wrote recently in a [blog piece](#) for Jewish Family Service, I was blessed to be raised in a Jewish community where I regularly witnessed adults quietly making and delivering meals, visiting people at the hospital, and gathering to celebrate or to mourn. We didn't have classes in Hebrew school about caring for others. Nobody in Spokane knew about Jewish mysticism or the text about coffins made from tables. These texts and others I teach now are just commentary to the daily adult actions I was fortunate to witness as a child. Today, the next generation is watching how we behave - at our tables - and elsewhere. What do they learn from our daily actions? And what do we learn from each other?

Perhaps Isaiah – and the commentators who responded to this text – are reminding us that we shouldn't underestimate the power of what happens one person at a time at our tables or even in acts as intimate as preparing a person for burial. This haftorah reminds us that the world will be redeemed slowly, by reaching out to others, every day. And - by allowing others to reach out to us.

Isaiah and the commentators understood that truly caring for one person at a time is, in fact the experience described in vs 11. It is in those moments of unhurried human connection that “the Lord guides us...and gives strength to our bones.” We become “like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail.” May we have the strength to return again and again to that watered garden of presence, and may we patiently and lovingly strengthen each other along the way.

Gmar hatimah tovah