

Devarim 5781
Shabbat Hazon

דברים תשפ"א
שבת חזון

Rebuilding the Temple Within

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With this parashah, we begin the book of Deuteronomy, the opening of a book of memory—a recalling of the forty years of desert wandering while simultaneously anticipating the entrance of the people into the Land of Israel.

Eleh hadevarim, “these are the words”; the words that recount the life and journey of a people, their entrance into covenant at Sinai. But as the Hasidic teachers frequently remind us, the Torah is eternal, reverberating anew for each individual Jew in every generation. And so, the guiding theme of remembering also takes place in the mind and heart of each person.

We are part of a people and a community, and we are also individual selves, bound up in our personal relationships and in self-examination. This is how we may understand the strong themes of justice and love that are expressed in Deuteronomy—wise discernment and compassionate care for the other, the urgency of love in devotion. These ethical and theological imperatives flow directly from the exclamations of Parashat Devarim—the introspection, self-examination, and turn to memory.

Indeed, if Deuteronomy as a whole may be understood as an exhortation to justice and care of the vulnerable as a precondition for proper love of God, then so are we to understand the rabbinic choice to make Parashat Devarim also Shabbat Hazon—the latter name deriving from the opening word of the haftarah linked to this occasion, Isaiah 1:1–27. This is a haftarah of harsh admonition and rebuke, an attempt by the prophet to awaken the urgency of repentance, the imperative of social justice in the form of care for the wronged and the vulnerable:

“Cease to do evil;

Learn to do good (*limdu heitev*).

Devote yourselves to justice (*dirshu mishpat*);

Aid the wronged.

Uphold the rights of the orphan;

Defend the cause of the widow . . .

Be your sins like crimson,

They can turn snow-white . . .”

Isa. 1:16–18

This is the essence of piety: not the external formalities of ritual performance alone, but animated by interpersonal acts of justice and compassion. “What need have I of all your sacrifices,” the prophet Isaiah says in the name of God.

“Who asked that of you?

Trample my courts no more;

Bringing oblations is futile,

Incense is offensive to Me . . .

Though you pray at length,

I will not listen.

Your hands are stained with crime—

Wash yourselves clean;

Put your evil doings

Away from My sight.”

Isa. 1:12–16

Religious ritual and prayer without *teshuvah* (repentance) for moral transgressions, for evildoing and lack of care for the vulnerable, is useless and unwanted by God. Spiritual practice must be grounded in the moral imperative of compassion and care to achieve depth and authenticity.

Let it be in this spirit that we view the trajectory of time progressing toward the *yamim noraim* (High Holy Days), toward the *aseret yemei teshuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance). This time in which we find ourselves—the three weeks of collective mourning during the second half of the Hebrew month of Tammuz and the first part of Av—this is our reenactment of the brokenness that culminates in Tishah Be'Av (Ninth Day of Av), which commemorates the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and has also come to symbolize the many catastrophes that have befallen the Jewish people over more than two millennia.

I suggest that we understand the ruined House of God not just in its literal sense as the historical *Beit Hamikdash*, but as the sacred space of peace, balance, and kindness within each of us. Perhaps this is a figurative way to read the classical idea that the Temple was destroyed because of *sin'at hinam*—baseless hatred between people—a lack of compassion, kindness, and peace.

Read this way, the haftarah of Shabbat Hazon may remind us of the inner brokenness and the pain in others that is caused by our callousness and indifference to suffering. That is the deep wail of Eikhah (Lamentations) that we recite in reenacted despair on Tishah Be'Av; a howl over the brokenness and ruin that has come about as a result of our actively destructive behavior *and* our apathy toward those in a state of vulnerability who need our intervention, our work of justice, compassion, and love.

The wail of lament and despair includes an introspective awareness of the ruined interior Temple of our hearts. Only through the *breaking open* of our hearts can we rediscover the compassion that is needed to work for the betterment of the wronged and the alleviation of suffering.

Interpersonal justice *is itself* a prayer come to life. It prepares our hearts—once hardened, judgmental, and indifferent,

arrogant and angry—to be softened into compassion and care, to lift up the broken remnants of the Temple, transforming them into moral piety. Only then will our hearts be truly opened to sincere prayer, only then will we even have the right to speak our prayers before *the One who spoke and the world came into being*.

Professor Fishbane's recent books include The Art of Mystical Narrative (Oxford, 2018) and Embers of Pilgrimage: Poems (Panui, forthcoming this fall).