

THE SECOND DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH

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On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, many of us are still trying to discover who we are, what we're to do in the services during High Holy Days, and what we really expect to get from these days—even if we've been through this cycle many times before. Our theory is that the people who don't come back for a second day weren't able to find answers to those questions.

Hopefully, by the second day those of us who have returned are ready to use the day to achieve its fundamental purposes: We come back to sum up our stocktaking, both as individuals and as members of a congregational community. We come back to decide finally how we need to change ourselves if we're to fully use the educative power of this second day. And we come back to commit ourselves to doing that, and to actually begin doing it.

We suggest that the problem Jews in modernity have with these purposes revolves around the word “suffering.” To be sufficiently motivated to take such purposes seriously, one has to be suffering in some sense.

We can all understand, at least intellectually, the suffering that Holocaust victims experienced. We can understand the suffering of the victims of institutional anti-Semitism as they experienced it 75 or 100 years ago. And we can understand the suffering of living in poverty as our grandparents and great grandparents experienced it in European villages. But we find it difficult or impossible to acknowledge or admit that *we're* suffering—here and now, as Jews in the United States.

The suffering that follows from *spiritual* poverty is much more subtle than its physical counterpart, whether in Jerusalem a few thousand years ago or in America today. But the impoverishment of our souls is revealed in several distinctly dehumanizing symptoms:

- We lose touch with that part of ourselves that is uniquely created in the image of God, which can potentially uplift our everyday lives with inspired purpose.
- We abandon our capacity to produce our own unique brand of goodness in the world as the driving purpose of our existence, allowing it to become an infrequent and incidental activity.
- And to all who are willing to examine this impoverishment close up, it's apparent that it is both caused and camouflaged by acquisitive materialism that has replaced spirituality as the focal point of our lives.

In fact, most of us are so far estranged from our moral spiritual inheritance that we're almost universally ignorant of it and alienated from its practice. Not surprisingly, the majority of American Jews are convinced of its irrelevance to the hopes and pressures of our day-to-day lives.

Consider, for example, the *raison d'être* of our existence as a people—the covenant made at Sinai: We are to do God's will as revealed to us in the Torah. God, in turn, is to love and care for us eternally. It doesn't suggest that we're to do what the Torah teaches if we happen to learn something of it in passing, or if it's convenient, or if it doesn't conflict with something else we want to do, or if it doesn't make us uncomfortable. And it doesn't say that God will love us some of the time and care for us some of the time.

But in our heart of hearts, many of us simply don't believe it. We think: “that was then, this is now.” Maybe God loved and protected Israel once upon a time, but today we're mostly on our own—whether as individuals or even acting together as a congregational community. We tell ourselves over and over again, I don't have time for a day-to-day spiritual life, a continuously uplifting connection with God: first, because it's an illusion, and thus largely a waste of time; and second, because I need to focus on surviving and succeeding in the world I'm actually living in.

The Haftarah (prophetic reading) for the second day of Rosh Hashanah channels the “voice of God” to us through our prophetic tradition in a way that may help us deal with this conundrum. But let's cursorily try first to understand the life of Jeremiah, the prophet, and then to consider the relevance of what he had to say.

Jeremiah spent virtually all of his life responding to his calling. More often than not, he was preaching to people who were convinced of their own social and material success and self-ascribed high moral virtue. His mission included restoring the sanctity of the Temple. This task was resisted not only by the priesthood, which had become corrupt morally and spiritually, but the people in general. The people had come to treat the Temple—its furnishings, functionaries, and services—as if they possessed inherent magical powers capable of redeeming them from their materialism and moral indifference. Thus, not surprisingly, in their private lives they continued unabashed to practice all forms of idolatry.

So Jeremiah was opposed and attacked by the priests, the people, and the King (Zedekiah). Of course, in time his prophecy came to pass, even as he languished in prison. Jerusalem was destroyed. Withal, as the survivors were dispersed into exile, Jeremiah spoke words of encouragement to them.

How did the people feel when they were going into exile? What did they think?

By this time the ancient world had shown itself to be full of peoples and states that rose and fell, never to rise again. In their struggle for survival, why should the Jews believe their fate would be any different? But Jeremiah told them that in exile they would lay the foundation to restore their nation. And 70 years after the destruction, his prophecy was realized. Jeremiah didn't live to see the people return, or to see the physical and spiritual rebuilding work of Nehemiah and Ezra, but he was a significant prophetic influence in the redemption of the nation.

But what is "prophecy" and how does it affect the outcomes of our individual and collective lives.

The prophetic message, transmitting the word of God through a human voice, is not the result of the prophet's scholarship or *sechel* (intelligence). The prophet was not the cause of the national restoration, nor was his prophecy a prediction of the inevitable. The prophet is neither magician nor fortuneteller, neither dreamer nor dabbler in ecstatic practices; his character is marked by clarity of mind. The prophecy specifies conditions under which the people will experience blessings or curses. It all depends on what use the people make of the educative experiences they have.

What are the first words of God that we encounter in this second-day Rosh Hashanah prophetic reading?

V'ahavat olam ahavtikh. . . (With an everlasting love I have loved you—ואהבת עולם אהבתוך). And then, *od evneikh v'nivneit* (I shall yet rebuild you and you shall be rebuilt. . . — עוד אבנך ונבנית). (Jeremiah 31:2-3) And *ki-fadah Adonai et-Yaakov* (For Adonai will have redeemed Jacob. . . —כי-פדה ה' את-יעקב—). (Jeremiah 31:10)—that is, redeemed the people Israel. Not only are they to be redeemed, it goes further to say: *U'vau v'rinenu vimrom tzion*. . . (They will come and sing joyously on the height of Zion—וּבָאוּ וְרִנְנוּ בְּמְרוֹם-צִיּוֹן). (Jeremiah 31:11). The people and the nation will be restored not in sackcloth and

ashes, but in joyous celebration with singing and dancing.

But how are we to understand *why* the restoration took place against all odds and historical precedents? Did the Almighty simply tire of being angry at Israel?

Near the end of this reading we find two illuminating phrases: In verse 31:16 we read: *V'yeish-tikvah l'achariteich n'um Adonai v'shavu vanim ligvulam* (There is hope for your future, says Adonai, and your children will return to their border—ויש-תקוה לאחרייתך נאם ה' ושובו בנים לגבולם—). And in the next verse we read: *yisartani va-ivaseir* (יִסְרַתְנִי וְאִסַּר). The usual English translation, however, is misleading. The Hebrew root of these two words is י-ס-ר, which essentially means to impose educative discipline that reflects and sets values. So we might liberally translate these two words as: "You have disciplined me with moral education, and I have become morally educated." This is the key to understanding God's love and why the prophetic vision of the restoration was realized.

God's love and caring come to us, as ours does to our children, not only as tender kindness, but also as educative discipline for the sake of our survival. When we make use of that education, both individually and as a people, we align our lives with Divine Providence.

But none of us should be glib or sanguine about the future prospects of the Jewish people in America. The dramatic loss of moral spirituality has had devastating consequences not only on the quality of our day-to-day existence, but also on our generational demography. Too many of our fellow Jews, including members of our congregations, know the pain and disappointment of seeing their children intermarry and their grandchildren raised other than as Jews.

This Haftarah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah is calling us back. It's calling us back to put our trust in God, that our God will love and care for us if we fulfill our part of the covenant and make the Torah the center-point and driving force of our lives, the priority which dominates all other priorities. It's calling us to a reunion with our fellow Jews and with the spiritual legacy that has enabled us to be here today. It's a legacy that, if we reclaim it, will ensure a spiritually relevant Jewish way of life and future for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

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