

SHABBAT SERMON
D'varim – Chazon
5775

The prophet Isaiah says this:

- Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing; they are become a burden to Me; I cannot endure them. And when you lift up your hands (in prayer) I will turn My eyes from you; though you pray at length, I will not listen.

And then Isaiah continues:

- Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.

The prophet lived more than 100 years before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, but he understood that the fate of the Jewish people was not driven by political power, military might, or even punctilious religious observance. It was driven by how we acted toward each other and the outside world. It was our own commitment to justice

and our generosity of spirit that determined our destiny, not any outside power of whom we might be afraid.

- In Genesis 18, before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God decides to reveal His plan to Abraham saying this: “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is just and right..”

Our people has believed from the beginnings of our history that our destiny was in our own hands and it depended on our commitment to doing what is just and right. Jews and Judaism survived the destruction of the first and second temples, and the exile from our land, because we were able to refocus our faith on the ethical mitzvot that guide our daily lives. The tractates of the Talmud, written after the destruction of the Second Temple, are much larger than those that deal with the prayer service or matters of ritual.

I have said in the past that the Jewish community is very under-represented in the social action and social justice work of this country. I've said that the response to growing anti-Semitism was not to shout down our detractors but to be a strong presence in the soup kitchens and homeless shelters of our communities – to physically demonstrate that the image people have of us is very wrong. This vision is not mine. It goes back to Abraham and Isaiah.

The haftarah ends with the words, “Zion shall be redeemed with justice; her repentant ones with righteousness.” The opening Hebrew words of that verse, were the motivations for Mordecai Kaplan to establish the Jewish fraternity, ZBT. It was a formed as a service group, to work in the community, not just as a social club. That motivation must drive us again today. On this eve of Tishah B'Av, when we mourn the losses of our people, we must remember that the quality of Jewish life is determined more by

our acts of justice than by any external manifestations of our communal strength.