Holiness: An Antidote

Shabbat Re'eh 5783

August 11, 2023 Rabbi Barry H. Block

The message was meant to be comforting, even inspiring. And it worked! A prophet—we do not know his name, but his words constitute the latter part of the Book of Isaiah—came to Judeans who had been exiled to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King, had a unique theory of occupying conquered lands. He deported all the elites of the vanquished territory—members of the royal family, priests, scribes, anybody who was literate or involved in leadership. Nebuchadnezzar knew that his legions could best control the defeated land if it was left leaderless, and he also thought that these elite Judeans would be eager to become leading Babylonians. After all, what do elites treasure more than being elite? The king imagined that the displaced Judean intelligentsia would help enhance the glory of Babylon.

But along came that pesky prophet. He found himself among a disheartened people. Ancient Near Eastern theology had taught them that the gods of victorious kingdoms must be more powerful than those of the conquered. They imagined that Babylonian gods had vanquished the God of Israel. The prophet brought a radically different message. Adonai, our God, was behind the entire catastrophe. Why would Adonai do that to the Israelites, God's own chosen people? They had been sinful. Whether their idolatry was evidenced by literally worshiping other gods or by mistreatment of God's children, the poor and vulnerable of Judea, defeat and exile were punishment for their wrongdoing. Nebuchadnezzar was nothing other than God's instrument, carrying out a punishment that Adonai had decreed, though of course Nebuchadnezzar didn't know that. The prophet continued: God's punishment could be compared to that of a parent disciplining a wayward child. God would never stop loving God's own children. The Israelites must spurn the king's invitation to become elite Babylonians. They must "lay down by the waters of Babylon and weep" for their Temple, now in ruins, and repent for their sinfulness. They must return to service of the one true God, however difficult that might be, distant from their land and their Temple. Then, God would return them to Jerusalem, they would rebuild the Temple, and serve God there once again.

And that's what happened! Some eighty years after the Babylonians conquered Judea, Cyrus the Persian overran Babylon. The Judean exiles petitioned the Persian king to return to their land and rebuild their Temple, and he agreed.

We read the words of this anonymous prophet as the Haftarah on seven consecutive Shabbat mornings at this season, leading up to Rosh Hashanah. We are not exiles in Babylon, but the prophet's message may comfort us all the same. A lovely prayer in *Mishkan T'filah* acknowledges, "Some hearts ache with sorrow; disappointments weigh heavily upon them. Families have been broken. Loved ones lie on a bed of pain; death has taken a cherished loved one." Every word of this paragraph is meaningful and spot-on except the word "them." All of us suffer—if not now, at some point in our lives. Not all sorrow is the same or equivalent; still, we all need the comfort that the prophet's words provide. We, too, must know that God loves us, no matter what. We, too, need hope in order to remain steadfast long enough to reach a better day.

The prophet's theology, though, is not entirely easy to swallow. While we can accept that our ancient ancestors believed it, most contemporary Jews don't imagine that our misfortunes are imposed by God, punishing us—even lovingly, like a parent—for our wrongdoing. Yes, we all have done wrong, as we shall acknowledge fulsomely throughout the coming month of Elul and ultimately on Yom Kippur. Still, we are repulsed by religious fundamentalists who claim that a natural disaster or other misfortune was wrought by God, as they point to a real or imagined sin as the ultimate cause.

Just yesterday, Jana, Eileen, and I were meeting with Student Cantor Alexandra Dubov, whose first Shabbat with us is only three weeks away. Scotty Hulett is set to become a Bar Mitzvah on that occasion, and Jana asked, "Is his portion about blessings and curses?" Apparently, Liz's Bat Mitzvah was at this season, and she carefully selected the date to avoid such a portion. The answer is yes, Scotty is reading blessings and curses, rewards for good behavior and punishment for wrongdoing, and he will artfully share his thoughts about that theology in his *D'var Torah*. But the point remains: Most of us don't believe that theology of rewards and punishments, so prominent in Deuteronomy, which we read at this season.

My teacher, Rabbi Lauren Berkun,[i] urges us not to imagine that this theory of retributive justice is Torah's only system of explaining God's relationship to us. She points to the Book of Leviticus, not typically everyone's favorite, but one that Rabbi Berkun urges us to reconsider in a more positive light. There, Moses does not suggest that God is some kind of super Santa Claus, dispensing gifts to those who do good and lumps of coal the wicked. Instead, repeatedly, we are urged, "You shall be holy."

Rabbi Berkun asks us to consider Moses at the burning bush. He must approach the bush to encounter God; but then, God commands, "'Do not come closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground!'"[ii] Rabbi Berkun describes the paradox: When God's divine presence erupts into the world, we have an instinct to draw back in fear, but we may also have an impulse to draw close.

That's where Leviticus comes in. When ancient Israelites experienced an event that was mysterious to them—including entirely natural events such as encountering a corpse, a menstrual flow, or a nocturnal emission—they feared that had encountered a life-force that brought them too close to God. Paradoxically, they found themselves impure in a way that would distance them from God. Leviticus therefore sets up a series of protocols to be followed in order to enable the faithful to approach God once again.

We, too, encounter moments when we fear that we may be unworthy to draw near to God. I am often approached, for example, by people who cannot safely fast on Yom Kippur. They feel ashamed. Quoting Leviticus, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, our High Holy Day prayer book, offers a protocol—in this case, a prayer—that invites the worshiper to come close to God, ironically by foregoing a commandment that seems central to our Day of Atonement. It reads, in part: "Torah is not a source of punishment, but an instrument of compassion and loving-kindness, intended to enrich and improve our lives. I honor the divine gift of my life and the sacred imperative to preserve life. Therefore, I am prepared to fulfill the mitzvah of eating and drinking on this day, in keeping with what is written in [Leviticus]: 'You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which you shall live. I am Adonai.'"[iii]

That's just one example, of course. We may be grateful that Leviticus and other sources of our tradition offer us multiple ways of drawing closer to God, even and perhaps especially when we feel unworthy. Instead of fearing divine retribution, we are urged to strive to be holy—in our prayers, in the way we treat other people, in our performance of good and noble deeds.

Torah is multivocal, written over time by faithful individuals who recorded their varying experiences with God. Those who understand Torah literally to be God's word may understand it to be reflecting the variety of ways that God interacts with the world. Some will embrace the notion that blessings and curses come to us as a result of our actions. Still more of us, though, may embrace holiness as an antidote to a theology we find problematic. We can all come closer to God through holiness.

Amen.

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[i] The balance of this sermon is based on Rabbi Lauren Berkun, "'You Shall Be Holy:' Holiness and the Liberal Jew," Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 9, 2023.

[ii] Exodus 3:5.

[iii] *Mishkan T'filah*, New York: CCAR Press, 2015, Yom Kippur, p. 137. Biblical citation is Leviticus 18:5.