

"Why Drag In Isaiah?"
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Church)

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_Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak at Emmanuel Episcopal Church this morning. I so appreciate the invitation of Shelby and am pleased that the tradition of pulpit exchanges between our congregations continues.

Of course this gig I have at Temple House of Israel is part-time and lasts only for one year. And what a gig it is! I have found the people at THOI to be kind, compassionate and devoted to their synagogue, proud as they should be of its very long and distinguished history in the Staunton community. I'm certain the same has been said about this church.

It will be ten years since I retired and as is said I've never been busier. Well... but now I have a bit more of an opportunity to read. I enjoy detective novels but on a higher plane I've always been fascinated by the history, theology and vision of the movement with which I identify. I am a Reform Jew, ordained in the seminary that has trained Reform rabbis for well over a century, and I served a Reform congregation in Wilmington, Delaware since my ordination in 1972.

I attended the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Its founder was Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise; the New York campus, formerly called the Jewish Institute of Religion, was founded by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, no relation, just coincidence that they shared the same last name. The two campuses merged in the 1950s.

Stephen S. Wise remained in the consciousness of many of my older colleagues who held him in the highest esteem. In my readings I came across this wonderful story about this "Wise" guy. One of his students, who while delivering his student sermon in the presence of Rabbi Wise as well as the entire student body and faculty, concluded with the phrase, *"the great prophetic tradition of Judaism from Isaiah to Stephen S. Wise."*

The story goes, and I do believe it is factual, that Dr. Wise stood up and after a moment of silence, said, "*Why drag in Isaiah?*" Indeed, from what I've heard, he might have meant it.

But it raises an important question. Yes, why "drag in" Isaiah as so often we do? In fact, why drag in any of the Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures when the voices of the greats of the Torah itself should be enough to illustrate the historic mission and vision of Judaism; and the messages of the Five Books of Moses should suffice to carry that four thousand year heritage to this very day and even into the future. So why drag in Isaiah?

The Reform movement refers to itself as Prophetic Judaism in contrast to Rabbinic Judaism as defined by the more orthodox branches. Rabbinic Judaism highlights the post-biblical literature that contains the legal details of ritual and prayer. Reform Judaism, since its inception in the early 19th century, has declared that without the voice of the prophets the rituals are empty and prayer is but vapor.

I always use the example of a man in our community who was a regular worshipper in one of our synagogues, involved in its religious and administrative life. And yet outside of its four walls he was an absentee landlord who owned a great deal of property that was poorly kept, an eyesore not only visually but ethically as well inasmuch as what he charged for rent was unconscionable.

The prophets of old would have let him have it with both barrels. How can you paint yourself as righteous and moral when your deeds mirror the opposite? Twenty-four hours in the synagogue are a waste of time in God's eyes if your true spiritual self rings out loud and clear in five minutes of your business dealings. Praying with intense spirit? Conducting daily religious rituals with precision? Any one of those prophets would utter those ancient biblical words of doubt... "*Give me a break!*"

I mention this man in the context of the individual's ethical choices, but the prophets usually looked at society as a whole. We are told that with Malachi, the last of the minor prophets, the age of prophecy ended. I can't believe it, nor would it be good for either Jews or Christians or Moslems or anyone else to give up just because the ancients had little to say once Malachi hung up his megaphone. Absurd, for we have our contemporary prophets, _but we drag in Isaiah and Micah, Amos and Jeremiah and the rest because they were the original conscience of society from whom today's prophets evolved.

My favorite illustration of this comes from the Prophet Amos, known for the

powerful phrase, *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream”* (5:24). But less known is his condemnation of what he calls the cows of Bashan. Bashan was a wealthy community in a most verdant region of the country whose citizens lived as if they shopped daily on Rodeo Drive. Now I’m not trying to be sexist but Amos’ point refers to the housewives, not of Beverly Hills but those of Bashan.

“Listen to this message, you cows of Bashan...

You oppress the poor; you crush the needy.

You say to your husbands, ‘Bring us more to drink.’”

Yes, it’s politically incorrect, but with Amos there was no question as to where he stood. Amos was making the point that these wives wanted their husbands to supply them with food and drink regardless of calorie or fat content and he compared them to livestock. How they treated their servants let alone the poor in their neighborhood didn’t matter to them.

In addition to Isaiah so many of our ancient prophets can be substituted in that student’s praise, but when I drag in Isaiah there isn’t an irrelevant verse that might negate that enthusiasm for the prophet (and I suppose for Stephen S. Wise as well). How the prophet and his colleagues would comment on today’s domestic situation is anyone’s guess...no, that’s not true, for not only can we guess but we have a verse that points to it. From chapter 9 we read,

That the government may be increased, and of peace there be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it through justice and through righteousness from henceforth even for ever. God’s zeal performs this.

Dragging in Isaiah underscores a biblical foundation for understanding why so many of us are pained that justice and righteousness seem to be out of the equation in 2019. Justice and righteousness, two values of both Judaism and Christianity and surely of other faiths as well, are held up not only as a component of good government, as it were, but a component affirmed by God, even brought about because of God, because *“God’s zeal performs this.”*

What’s changed in 2019? That’s for you to answer, each for yourself. But dragging in Amos again, we can say that men and women, cows and bulls, as it were, often - all too often for that matter - can be called out for ignoring the trials of the poor, the weak, the orphan, the widow and all who are in need. The

laws of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, that have motivated social justice might have been revealed by God to Moses, but we drag in Isaiah and Amos and the others because they took the words of Torah and with them forcefully responded to the problems of their day.

And we drag in Isaiah on the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the

Day of Atonement. We Jews don't assume that our people know his name let alone what that prophet said. So when there is a message the heart and soul must absorb, especially on occasions such as Yom Kippur, we find that message which those who have written prayerbooks make an integral part of our prayerbook, indeed of the ritual that makes our Day of Atonement so unique. Why read it? To inform our people, people like the man I mentioned earlier, that the ancient message of the prophet will be read publicly... no excuses that you hadn't known it, never read it, never heard it spoken; publicly because it is the goal of prophetic preaching as relevant in these days as in ages past...perhaps more so!

And what is that message on the day we are to refrain from eating and drinking? From Isaiah chapter 58:

*Why, when we fasted, did You not see?
When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?"
Because on your fast day
You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!*

*Because you fast in strife and contention,
And you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such
As to make your voice heard on high.*

*Is such the fast I desire,
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the LORD is favorable?*

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***No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.***

***It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.***

We know there are those, especially today, who would halt and uproot all the progress made in the pursuit of justice, yet let us never despair for there are those in Staunton as there are in Wilmington, Delaware, New York and Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Austin - large and small cities and towns - who have heard the voice of the prophets and translated those words into deeds of righteousness, lovingkindness and compassion. May we be counted among them.

