

Torah Table Talk

Shabbat a time of Return, Renewal and Transformation

Parshat Shoftim
Deuteronomy 16:18 – 21:9
Isaiah 51:12 – 52:12



This week's Haftorah contains a message of comfort and a promise of renewal. The anonymous prophet whose words appear in the second half of the book of Isaiah lived about a generation after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. After surveying the suffering of the Jewish people, he came to believe that Israel had endured its share of punishment. A time of renewal was at hand when God would take the cup of wrath from the hand of Israel and give it to her oppressors. The prophet in the second half of the book of Isaiah promises the people a time of national transformation as well as a return from exile. Jerusalem would be rebuilt and Zion's enemies would be punished. His national vision became a Messianic vision in the minds of Jews in later generations.

Today's Haftorah is the fourth of the seven Haftorot of consolation. One of the most noticeable things about this chapter is the repetition of key words. Each section of the Haftorah begins with such repetition: "I (*anochi*), I am the one who comforts you," "Rouse, rouse yourself!" "Awake, awake O Zion!" "Turn, turn away!" As you read today's Haftorah some of its verses may sound familiar; they became the basis and inspiration for Solomon Alkabetz's beloved poem, *L'cha dodi* which we sing every Friday night.

Isaiah 51:17, 52:1, 2

Rouse, rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem, you who from the Lord's hand have drunk the cup of His wrath, you who have drained to the dregs the bowl, the cup of his reeling!

Awake, awake, O Zion! Clothe yourself in splendor; put on your robes of majesty, Jerusalem, holy city! For the uncircumcised and the impure shall never enter you again.

Arise, shake off the dust, sit (on your throne), Jerusalem! Loose the bonds from your neck O captive one, fair Zion.

Rabbi Solomon Halevi Alkabetz, Kabbalat Shabbat (ca. 1540)

Arise, my people, and shake off the dust
Wear glorious garments reflecting your worth.
Through the son of Jesse of Bethlehem
Redemption will draw close to my soul.
Come, my beloved, to greet the bride.
We will receive the Sabbath!

Awake, awake!
For your light is coming. Rise up and shine!
Rouse, rouse yourself. Sing My song.
The glory is revealed through you.

Talmud, Shabbat 119a

R. Hanina robed himself and stood at sunset of Sabbath eve [and] exclaimed, 'Come and let us go forth to welcome the queen Sabbath.' (2) R. Jannai donned his robes, on Sabbath eve and exclaimed, 'Come, O bride, Come, O bride!'

Leviticus Rabbah 10:2

"He wakes me morning by morning, He wakes to hear what a disciple should hear" (Isaiah 50:4). Isaiah said: As I walked about in my house of study, "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' etc. [Isaiah 6:8]. When I sent Micah, they smote him on the cheek. When I sent Amos they mockingly called him 'tongue-heavy.' Now, 'whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' "[Isaiah replied], "Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8).

(Because of his willingness to go, God rewards the prophet and says to him) ... “By your life, all the other prophets who prophesied used single terms in their prophecies. But you will prophesy in double terms [revealing that you prophesy with a double portion of the Divine Power]: "Awake, awake" (Isa. 51:9); "Rouse yourself, rouse yourself" (Isa. 51:17); "Rejoicing, I will rejoice" (Isa. 61:10); "I, even I, am He comforts you" (Isa. 51:12); "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" (Isa. 40:1).”

Questions to Ponder

1. What does the prophet mean when he refers to cup of wrath and reeling? Why is it necessary to wake Jerusalem after drinking the dregs of the cup of His wrath?
2. Only the first two stanzas of *Lecha Dodi* focus on the Sabbath? What does the rest of this well known liturgical poem speak about. What is the connection between Shabbat and this particular chapter in the book of Isaiah? Why do you think the prophet chose these particular references for his poem?
3. Both Isaiah and Alkabetz use feminine imagery in their poetry? Who is Isaiah speaking about and who is the medieval poet speaking about when he says, “Awake, awake for your light is coming?”
4. How does the *Midrash* explain the repetition of the certain words in the book of Isaiah? What effect does the repetition have on you as reader (or a listener)?
5. It is customary to recite *Shir Hama'alot* (Psalm 126) before the grace after meals on the Sabbath: “When God returned the captivity of Zion we were like dreamers.” This poem speaks about the return of the Jewish people to Zion. On weekdays, on the other hand, some people recite Psalm 137; “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat and also wept when we remembered Zion.” What is the connection between Shabbat and the return to Zion?
6. In what way is the celebration of Shabbat each week a type of home coming?

A Plea for Assistance: Katrina

As I send out this week’s Torah Table Talk, our hearts go out to the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast who are homeless and forlorn. They are truly in need of our comfort. I encourage everyone to do whatever they can to assist the people of the South in this trying and difficult time. Donations can be made on-line through the United Jewish Community at:

https://secure.ujcfederations.org/ft2/form.html?_id=7500

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