

Yom Kippur Day: Choose Life!

NOW HEAR THIS! Haftara reading: Isaiah 58: 1-14

The traditional Haftarah reading for Yom Kippur morning is from the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 58. The text is found in the slide presentation, though I invite us to listen. **Now hear this:**

1 Cry from the depth, says God – do not hold back, lift up your voice like the shofar! Tell My people their transgression, and the House of Jacob their sin.

2 Yes, they seek Me daily, as though eager to learn My ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right, and has not abandoned God’s law. They ask of Me the right way, eager for God’s nearness:

3 They say “Why did we fast, and You do not see it? We afflict ourselves, and You do not know it?” Because on your fast day You see to your business And oppress all your laborers!

4 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.

5 Is such the fast I desire, A day to afflict the body and soul? Is it bowing the head like a reed And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day worthy of the favor of YHVH?

6 Is not this the fast I desire – to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home, and never to neglect your own flesh and blood?

8 Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly heal, your Righteous One leading the way before you. The presence of Adonai guarding you from behind.

9 Then, when you call, Adonai will answer, and, when you cry, will respond “I am here.” If you remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word;

DL September 28, 2020

10 If you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the suffering – then shall your light shine through the darkness, and your night become bright as noon;

11 Adonai will guide you always, slake your thirst in parched places, give strength to your bones. You shall be like a well-watered garden, an unending spring.

12 From you they will rebuild ancient ruins, lay foundations for ages to come. And you shall be called “the one who mends the breach and brings back the streets for dwelling.”

13 If you cease to trample Shabbat, stop pursuing your affairs on My holy day; if you call Shabbat a “delight,” the holy day of Adonai “honoured”; and if you honour God by not doing business or speaking of everyday matters -

14 then shall you take pure delight in Adonai. I will lift up your journey on earth to the highest of places, and nourish you from the heritage of your father Jacob. For thus spoke YHVH!

Boom. Isaiah does not mess around.

Prayer is empty if it is not consistent with how we act in this world, with how we manifest God’s presence in this world.

Today we are reborn. Isaiah’s words pose the question of what it will take to create a world transformed. Its answer posits a society governed justly, interpersonal relationships characterized by caring, and religious life that points us toward ultimate meaning. Isaiah suggests that if we achieve all this, God will intervene to bring a society transformed. But if we achieve all this, society will have already been transformed.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks posits that Judaism, (when done right!), is a religion of sacred discontent. He writes, (in his book *To Heal the World*), “In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be... Judaism is not peace of mind.”

We have this gift of Yom Kippur to remind us to be aware, to care, to not let things slip by.

It can feel overwhelming. There is so much to do. It can feel paralyzing.

DL September 28, 2020

But here is the gift of Torah – it reminds us that we are not being asked to do the impossible, but rather to do the best we can, to give the best of ourselves, of our whole selves, what is inside us.

As we just read in the parsha:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. ([Deut. 30:11–14](#))

The path, the Divine spark, is within us. With everything going on around us, we have the vision, the agency, the capacity to do us.

During this period of self-reflection, we do not ask why we haven’t been like Moses in the past year, we don’t compare ourselves to Moses. We do ask, what has prevented us from being our best selves.

I am going to share a story that I had originally intended to talk about last week at Rosh Hashanah, before Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s passing.

It fits right here. It is about choosing blessing and light. And more.

Last summer I was lucky to travel to Israel as part of a group of 2SLGBTQ+ leaders (I was the only Jewish one). We met with many people and organizations and marched with the Canadian embassy in Tel Aviv pride.

One of the most meaningful parts of our trip was our visit to Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial.

I had visited Yad Vashem a number of times before, but this time was different. This time I learned the stories of Jews who perished and who survived the Holocaust who were Jewish, and who were also **queer**, and who in their own ways helped those around them survive, to the extent possible, a nightmare.

These stories had not been told when I first went to Yad Vashem in the 1990s, or even in the early 2000s. In fact, these stories have really only been brought to the fore in the past five or six years.

DL September 28, 2020

Last week I spoke of “who lives, who dies, who tells your story.” The increased recognition and acceptance of LGBTQ rights in societal and Jewish spaces have enabled these stories to finally be unearthed, for the betterment of all of us.

And in doing so it expands the story of what life was like, not just what death was like, and connects us today.

One story we learned about was that of Fredy Hirsch, z”l.

Let us listen to Fredy’s story with the words of Torah on our hearts – that the Divine isn’t beyond our reach, but is right with us, in us, in our mouths and in our hearts.

(Story of Fredy Hirsch <https://www.attitude.co.uk/article/the-untold-gay-stories-of-auschwitz-1/20107/>)

Fredy Hirsch was an athlete and PE teacher. He was Jewish and gay. He was born in [...] Germany in 1916. He moved to Czechoslovakia to escape Nazi persecution, living with his lover Jan Mautner, a slightly older medical student, between 1936 and 1939...

Fredy organised and ran youth camps and looked to help young Jews hoping to emigrate to Palestine. [...]

He was sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp, a place the Germans called the “model ghetto,” at the end of 1941. Mautner was deported there a few months later. Hirsch immediately began looking after a group of children, making sure they exercised and, more importantly in the squalid conditions, stayed clean, even holding hygiene competitions.

*All the children were forced to work and Fredy tried to ensure they had “easier” jobs such as in the vegetable fields. He, of course, spoke German and this helped to forge reasonable relations with the guards even though he was Jewish and **openly gay**. On occasion, this helped him to remove children from transports from Theresienstadt to the death camps.*

However, he pushed his luck too far and having tried to make contact with a group of young new arrivals at Theresienstadt, he was sent to Auschwitz in September 1943 in a transport with 5,000 others – 300 of whom were 15 years old or younger.

DL September 28, 2020

Fredy ended up in a “family camp” within Birkenau. It was usual for children not to be sent straight to their deaths but somehow Fredy became the children’s carer. He ensured they had lessons, organised activities and managed to get better food and warmer barracks for them. He even managed to persuade guards to hold the daily roll call inside rather than have the youngsters standing for hours in the freezing cold. But Fredy was not immune from hardship and on at least one occasion was viciously beaten when one of the children slept through the roll call.

[...]

Within the family camp, the mortality rate after the first six months was about 25 per cent – in Hirsch’s barracks there were almost no deaths at all.

Fredy soon became part of a resistance movement within the camp and learned that a large group of the children was to be gassed. Although it is not known for sure what happened next, it is thought Hirsch refused to be parted from his young charges despite his status a work-fit man meaning he would have likely been spared death. [...] What is sure is the children were murdered on the night of 8 March 1944 and their bodies burnt. Fredy’s body was cremated on the same day. He was 28.

Fredy’s life was cut short, tragically, by the Nazi regime. Yet in his short life he was able to make life better for so many children, as an out gay man.

Think about the stereotypes that permeated until recently, and perhaps even still now, about what it meant to be gay, and whether one could be Jewish and gay.

Fredy’s story is an amazing one.

Fredy chose life – he was out, he was loved, he did all he could to enable his young charges to have some semblance of life, some semblance of childhood, in otherwise hellish circumstances.

Yes, Fredy was murdered. But he did not sacrifice himself or his identity as a Jewish man, as a gay man, as a teacher, or as a role model. He died choosing life – staying with his young charges even though that meant death.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks [observes](#): “Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that *we can choose*.”

DL September 28, 2020

I don't know if Fredy Hirsch considered himself a religious man, I do not know whether he kept kosher or not. I do know that in *how* he chose to live, in the face of Nazi oppression, he embodied Isaiah's expression of the essence of Jewish faith. Isaiah affirmed, *If you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the suffering – then shall your light shine through the darkness, and your night become bright as noon* (Isaiah 58:10).

Fredy's light shone through, and I am so grateful that I and others can now learn his story.

This Yom Kippur I pray that none of us ever have to face what Fredy faced. Yet I hope and I pray that in our own ways, in our homes and in our communities, we find our inner guiding lights and channel our spiritual energy to: *remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word; to offer our compassion to the hungry and satisfy the suffering*, and in so doing be strengthened by Divine light, guided by compassion, and able to delight in each other.

This Yom Kippur, in the midst of everything, may we all choose life.

G'mar chatimah tovah.