



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

The choice of the first chapter of Sefer Yeshayahu as the haftarah for this Shabbat is somewhat curious. The first two selections of the three haftarot of condemnation that precede Tish'a B'av are understandable as they are the opening visions of the navi Yirmiyahu, the prophet of the churban, the destruction of the Beit Mikdash and the subsequent exile of Israel from her land. But Sefer Yishayahu, written by the navi known as the Prophet of Nechama, of comfort, would seem to be a strange source for the reading that precedes the day of mourning, marking the destruction of both Batei Mikdash.

Remarkably, as Rav Moshe Lichtenstein points out, the gemara (Megilla 31a-b) actually divides this perek and suggests that the first part is to be read when Rosh Chodesh Av coincides with Shabbat while the second part of that first chapter (starting at pasuk 21) should be read on Tish'a B'Av itself. However, the actual custom, as we know, is to read both sections of perek aleph on the Shabbat before Tish'a B'av and, over the years, has even been used to identify the Shabbat - Shabbat Chazon. What, then, did Chazal see in the words of this navi of consolation that carries such an important message for this Shabbat?

Although Yeshayahu condemns many

types of sinful behavior of which ancient Israel was guilty, practices that would teach us what angered Hashem and, therefore, what we must avoid, I am especially moved by the words of G-d Himself that the navi quotes: "...gam ki tarbu tefilla eineni shome'a," "...even if you would increase your prayer - I will not listen." Even when we daven fervently Hashem won't listen to our tefillot?? How can that be? How can we pray for forgiveness if the forgiving G-d refuses to even hear those prayers?? All is lost!??? Is there no chance of repentance, of return?? What is there for us if we cannot offer our sincere supplications and entreaties to Hashem? If hearing those words won't make us cry - what words would? It seems that G-d is telling us that we have lost our only connection to our Father in heaven.

Or is that really His message?

Yeshayahu, speaking to the people of his generation, knew their thoughts and their beliefs very well. Many in that generation accepted the view of the pagan world that the more powerful "god" would defeat the less powerful one. Wars between nations were seen as wars between their respective "gods." Unfortunately, such an approach was adopted by many in Israel as well. The Judeans felt confident that Hashem's "house" could never be destroyed since theirs was the most

powerful G-d Who could not be defeated. For that same reason, they believed that G-d Himself would never allow others to destroy His Beit Mikdash because it would prove to the enemies that He was not the most powerful of all (ch"v).

It followed, therefore, that as long as the Temple stood and the sacrificial rite remained, they could never be overrun by the enemy, as the prophets had predicted. It was this confidence that had them close their ears to the warnings and criticisms of the nevi'im over the years. But they kept on sacrificing and praying.

And so, G-d teaches them that prayers and sacrifices are not guarantees because they have brought no change in your behavior. The purpose of any worship is to draw one closer to Hashem. When prayers and sacrifices are given merely as "insurance policies" and not through a sincere desire to understand what G-d wants of us, a search to know what we can do in order to endear ourselves to the Divine, then they are useless. If you pray regularly and continue to sin regularly – G-d does not accept your prayers. Worse, He doesn't even listen to them because they are meaningless.

We are challenged to leave the Beit Knesset after our tefillot feeling changed, uplifted, closer to Hashem. As we hope for a return to Tefilla B'tzibur IN a Beit Knesset, we should also be hoping to find greater meaning to our prayers.

That is what Hashem wants.

That is what we should ALL want. ■

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