Meeting us Where we ARE

A few months back some colleagues and I gathered after work and during the course of our conversation, one colleague who admitted she has no experience or knowledge of biblical texts asked an interesting question: “Do the stories of the bible ever speak to us, not in terms of aspirations or inspiration, but just meeting us where we are?” My immediate response was “yes, of course – the prophets were flawed human beings just like the other characters in the biblical stories, just like us,” but I found myself thinking a lot about this question afterwards. I stand by my answer – I believe it is correct – but I wonder if that’s how everyone else sees these texts.

When the rabbis of old were selecting the texts for the High Holy Day season, they wanted texts that would both reflect the solemnity and challenge of this season and inspire us to better, to live up to the best that is in us. For the most part, the solemnity and challenge is put forth in the Torah texts. As we saw at Rosh HaShanah, the *Akedah* is a story that has challenged and continues to challenge generations of Jews, layman and scholar alike. Some of the more inspirational verses may be found in the prophetic readings – and many of them have found their way into our liturgy – but we tend to not pay as much attention to the Prophets as we do to the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Torah. I think this may be a function of two things: firstly, our exposure to the prophetic texts, for the most part, is limited to haftarot – which are only excerpts – and, secondly, because Rabbinic Judaism has given primacy to the Torah. We learn of Abraham and Moses in pre-school, but don’t really study haftarah until we’re preparing for Bat or Bar Mitzvah. If we study any of the prophets, it’s usually Jonah – who gets swallowed by a giant fish – or Daniel in the lion’s den, and our lessons are focussed on these specific incidents, which have no connection to our reality at all. When was the last time you were swallowed by a fish… or walked into a lions’ den?

The prophets were not perfect and they did not lead perfect lives. Jeremiah dealt with an audience that was not receptive to his message – his own priestly kin turned on him, conspired to kill him and played a hand in his eventual imprisonment. Hosea dealt with an unhappy marriage and wife who wandered. Patient, forgiving and committed to making the relationship work, he sought and achieved reconciliation in his marriage. Amos also fought to be heard – facing competition on the job from false prophets. And even Jonah, who we read from this afternoon, loses sight of what matters. Caught up in concern about his own comfort, he laments the death of a shade tree, but bears scant concern for the souls facing judgement in Nineveh. These men were all prophets of great vision, capable of heart-stirring oratory, but they were men. They had their own character flaws, faced difficulties in their personal and professional live and yet their words endure. They drew upon their personal struggles to create the metaphors and allegories that spoke to the challenges of their day. Their words endure because these allegories and metaphors still speak to us and to the challenges of our day.

Isaiah beseeches us to care for the poor, to not close our hearts or our hands to their plight. One does not have to go as far as the downtown eastside to witness poverty in our midst. Many of the social struggles we face as a society – homelessness, addiction, prostitution, unequal access to education – are rooted in the seemingly unrelenting poverty that continues to challenge us as a society.

Years ago, at my first HHD pulpit, an elderly member of the congregation read this morning’s haftarah in English. Clearly moved by the prophet’s words, his voice welled up as he reached the conclusion, he closed the siddur with purpose and turned to me and said “Those are some might powerful words.” Powerful indeed. Here are some more:

“You stand this day, all of you …” Who is the “you” of this invocation? Everyone. “… it is not with you alone that I make this sworn covenant: I make it with those who are standing here with us today … and equally with all who are not here with us today…” Tradition understands this as meaning anyone who ever was or ever will be a Jew stood at Sinai.

One of my favourite stories from the Midrash is a tale of two Jews living in the same city, but in very different circumstances. Reb Dovid was a successful businessman. He held a prominent place in the local shul, rubbed elbows with the richest people in local society – Jew and non-Jew alike. One day as he was making his way home from shul, he passed Yitzik on the sidewalk. Yitzik broke into a broad smile, and said “hey, how are you doing?” Now Yitzik was not as fortunate as Reb Dovid. Down on his luck, he was dressed in rough, untailored clothes, had a straggly beard and, in short just did not look like anyone who moved in the same circles as Reb Dovid. He was affronted by this apparent stranger addressing him as if they were friends. Reb Dovid just couldn’t quite imagine knowing or being friends with anyone who looked like Yitzik. “Do I know you, sir?” Reb Dovid asked in a barely civil tone. “Of course you do,” said Yitzik. “I was there with you at Sinai.” Reb Dovid looked very closely at Yitzik, studying his face for a moment, and then his eyes lit up as he smiled. “Of course”, he said, “you know with all the smoke and the noise and the mountains shaking, I forgot for a moment. So, how have you been?”

So there we all were, standing at Sinai together and here we all stand together on this holiest of days. It is easy to be overwhelmed by it, but recall the words of the prophet, Isaiah, “Is this the fast I have chosen … Surely it is to share your bread with the hungry … and to never to remove yourself from your own kin.” The prophet reassures us that God’s basic demand of us is a simple one – to look out for each other, to take care of the less fortunate. This reassurance is also in this morning’s Torah reading. “…this commandment … is not too hard for you, nor too remote.”

It’s easy to be overwhelmed by the power of the words – and it’s good to truly good to open our hearts and let them sink in – but don’t let the power of the words deafen you to the essential message. Rabbi Hillel famously summed up the Torah while standing on one foot, “that which is hateful to you, do not do unto others.” My late father, of blessed memory, always taught us that the first order of the day for any Jew is to be a mensch. If you manage that, then the halakhah pretty much takes care of itself.

So forget the giant fish, dens filled with lions or miracles of jars overflowing with oil. They are just the medium – they are not the message. The message is, it is not too far from us … the good life; a righteous life is attainable, not by getting bogged down in the minutia of halakhah, but by remembering to be decent people. That is the message of this day and the power of this season is the renewed opportunity to realise the best that is in us.

L’shanah Tovah v’tikateivu