

The Most Important Jew Who Ever Lived

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The greatest man in Jewish history is anonymous. I do not know his name. I do know what he did. He wrote the latter half of the book of Isaiah. His writings constitute our Haftarah readings at this season, stretching from Tisha B'Av, when we recall the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, to Rosh Hashanah. These haftarot were designated by the ancient rabbis to provide comfort after the somber remembrance, not only of the Temple destructions, but of so many tragedies of our history.

But comfort, or even remembrance, isn't what makes this prophet so great.

Let me offer some historical context.

In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonians conquered the Kingdom of Judea and burned down the Temple. Conquest and destruction were rather common in the ancient world. One after another, peoples were vanquished; their Temples, overthrown. Time and again, the results were predictable: The conquered people assimilated into those who had defeated them. They began to worship the gods of those who had overrun them. The worship of their previous gods would cease.

Where are the ancient Egyptians today? Who worships the gods of Greek mythology? All have disappeared. And yet all were significant kingdoms, with gods of their own, in the days of the Bible and later.

Make no mistake: Ancient Israel and the Kingdom of Judea paled in comparison to these other empires of old. Israel was truly independent and dominant for less than two generations, the reigns of David and Solomon, at the most. Egypt and Babylon were dominant for centuries, if not a millennium, as were Greece and Rome later. And yet, our God is today worshiped by billions of Jews and Christians and Muslims, while their gods are gods are served no more.

By all rights, when the Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E., the people of Israel should have ceased to exist. If history's trends held true, our God ought to have been dethroned. The Children of Israel, exiled to Babylon, would have begun worshipping the gods of the Babylonians, forgetting their earlier ways. That's what the Babylonians planned. Their king, Nebuchadnezzar, chose to bring all the leaders and intelligentsia of Judea to Babylon. There, they could assimilate, become Babylonians, and contribute to the greater glory of Babylon. Surely, being at the top of Israelite society, they would want to become leading citizens of Babylonia. What do elites value more than being elite? Certainly, they would worship Babylonian gods.

Enter the most important Jew who ever lived, that anonymous prophet. Among his fellow Israelites, banished to Babylon, he spoke God's message.

He told them: Our God is greater than the false gods of Babylon.

He interpreted history differently from what was commonly believed. In that ancient world, the assumption was that conquerors were victorious because their gods had defeated the lesser gods of the vanquished. Isaiah would not accept that the Babylonian gods were greater than the one true God. Instead, he told his people: We have been conquered because God is angry at us. We have been unfaithful. We have worshiped other gods. Even when we have carried out our worship with precision,

we have committed grave errors of ethics. Immorality is not overridden by piety. God has sent Nebuchadnezzar to conquer us. Only God is God.

He urged: Repent! Resume faithful service to God, in ethics and morals and in ritual practice.

He prophesied: Though God has punished us, as a parent rebukes a child, God will take us back in love. Babylon will not rule forever. God, on the other hand, is sovereign for all eternity. God's love is limitless. To use the language of parents to children, the prophet basically said: God may not like us very much right now, but God will always love us very much.

He promised: We will return to Jerusalem in glory. We shall rebuild the Temple. God will be worshiped when the Babylonian idols are long-since forgotten.

So what did these elite Israelites do? They did not conform to the wishes and intentions of Nebuchadnezzar. They did not convert. Our ancestors valued something else above being elite. The prophet gave them the faith and the hope that they needed to remain loyal to the one, true God. Almost single-handedly, the prophet turned history on its head. The Children of Israel lay down by the waters of Babylon, we are told, and they wept for Jerusalem. They never gave up hope of rebuilding the Temple. The worship of the one God never ceased.

To be clear: Without this anonymous prophet, the religion we call Judaism would have died aborning. There would be no Christianity, and no Islam to follow. Our God would have gone the way of Zeus and Ishtar and Ba'al.

Perhaps a lesson is to be learned from our not knowing this great prophet's name. We are taught humility and purpose. What we do is so much more important than who we are. The prophet changed the world; he saved a people and rescued the worship of God. His work, his teaching, makes a tremendous difference here on Earth, some two and half millennia after his death, unaffected by his anonymity.

More explicitly, we are offered a message of repentance, and that's doubtless another reason we read these selections leading up to the High Holy Days. Even if we are sinful, even if we are as immoral as our ancestors whose Temple was destroyed, we can find redemption. If we return to God, and to righteousness, like those who came before us in Babylon, we can be restored to our former glory.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we are offered a message of hope. Even at our darkest hours, even when we feel exiled from those we love, lonely and alone as the expelled Israelites, we are taught to embrace faith in a better future.

So let me interject a plug: Just yesterday, our Thursday Torah Lunch and Learn group began studying the Book of Isaiah. Admittedly, some time will pass before we reach chapter 40 and the words of this anonymous prophet. Already, though, we have encountered the beauty and meaning of the prophetic message, and you are invited to join us next week or any Thursday.

The prophet taught: "Though the mountains be laid low, and the valleys raised high, my love will never depart from the children of Israel."

Let us live with faith: God is always by our side.

Let us live with hope: Even when times are very bad, as they were for our ancestors in exile, God is with us.

Let us live with purpose: Learning from the prophet's example, we may affirm that what we do is so much more important than who we are. Each of us, in our own small way, can make the world a better place. Even when everybody who knew us has died, thousands of years have passed, and our names are known no more, our hearts and our souls will be known to the one God, living for all eternity.

Amen.