

# *“The Parsha Discussion”* by Rabbi Alex Israel

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## Devarim. “Low and High Alike”



This Shabbat, in advance of Tisha B'Av, we read a powerful Haftarah from Isaiah ch.1. It doesn't, as we might expect, talk about the Temple's destruction. It depicts a Jerusalem that has become corrupt, like Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9-10):

How the faithful city has become a whore,  
she who was full of justice!  
Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.  
... Your ministers are rebels and companions of thieves.  
Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.  
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,  
and the widow's cause does not come to them (1:21-23)

Jerusalem has become "a whore" because it is filled with corruption and bribery – its leaders sell themselves for money. Ministers attend to the wealthy instead of looking out for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. As a result, Jerusalem has replaced justice with exploitation and even murder (1:15,21).

In this snapshot of Jerusalem, the people sacrifice and pray (v.11-15), but they are unscrupulous, inconsiderate, cruel and immoral. God threatens to destroy Jerusalem, "smelting" the city, purging the dross of society, in order to purify the city of its negative elements and restore justice and honesty to its leaders, returning Jerusalem to itself:

I will turn My hand against you,  
And smelt out your dross...,  
And remove all your impurities:  
I will restore your magistrates as of old,  
And your counselors as before.  
After that you shall be called  
City of Righteousness, Faithful City.  
Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness”

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This Haftarah offers one explanation for our national exile. God destroyed His city, just like Sedom, because it failed in its moral calling, it lacked compassion, kindness and justice.

This theme resonates deeply with the opening segment of our Parashat Hashavua. There, Moses finds his judicial workload too much and he delegates responsibility, appointing a system of judges. He instructs his magistrates:

"Hear out your fellow men, and perform justice between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger. Do not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike. Fear no man, for judgment is God's." (1:16-17)

I find it interesting that of all things, the first moral statements of the book of Devarim/Deuteronomy concern themselves with the notion of non-partiality in law, of honesty and integrity in the legal system. It is precisely this flaw, this violation, which was the source of Jerusalem's undoing according to Isaiah.

So please think about this theme, and discuss:

- Why, in your view, does Devarim open with the appointment of honest and upstanding judges? Why is this the first agenda in Moses' great speech, his final message?
- Why is corruption and injustice seen as the key sin facing Jerusalem. Is it worse than, say, idolatry? If yes, then why?
- Why is corruption so bad? We can understand that wealthy people get their way. Is corruption not simply a normal feature of society?
- Does financial and judicial corruption necessarily go hand in hand?

It seems to me that as Moshe is looking towards the prospect of Israel establishing their nation-state in the land of Israel, he wants to impress upon them that it is their leaders' integrity that will determine their national success. Moses will die, but the national leadership which replace him must "hear out low and high alike."

Likewise, Isaiah warns that the kowtowing to money and influence, the corruption and greed that extort and take advantage of the poor and the weak, this behavior will eventually create the undoing of society. And it is the inverse action – honesty, social justice, integrity – will rebuild Jerusalem.

ציון במשפט תפדה ושביה בצדקה

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those who return, by righteousness.

Shabbat Shalom!