

*Reclaiming Judaism:  
Isaiah's Urgent Call to Moral Responsibility  
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman  
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There is no more radical teaching than the *Haftarah* of Yom Kippur. On the most central day of our year, when we fill our sanctuaries, fast, and beat our chests in recognition of our wrongs, Isaiah interrupts with a direct and uncompromising message: This fast means nothing to God if you do not care for the most needy.

Isaiah tells us that fasting alone is meaningless without a moral and ethical foundation. Religious ritual without moral action is hollow. He asks why people fast yet oppress others, why they bow in ritual yet strike with a wicked fist. And he answers with clarity: the fast God desires is one that frees the oppressed, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and cares for the vulnerable.

This *Haftarah* is a sharp exhortation: do not divorce ritual from responsibility. Unlike the Torah reading, which focuses on ritual observance in the Temple, Isaiah insists that prayer and fasting are not enough. If we spend Yom Kippur absorbed in ritual yet return to our lives unchanged — as if spiritual reflection has no bearing on our actions in the world — we have missed the point entirely. True observance demands justice, compassion, and ethical action.

Almost two years since October 7th, that day continues to mark a cataclysm and a profound rupture — a day of unimaginable atrocities and loss. The trauma of that attack is real, the grief deep, and the urgency to bring the remaining hostages home remains undeniable. But that horrific day has sparked nearly two years of horror. As the war has continued, it has become clear that this is no longer a war of self-defense or hostage rescue. It has evolved into a war increasingly shaped by cruel revenge and visions of enduring occupation, explicitly driven by Israel's extremist, messianic government.

Some leaders and followers driving this vision speak as religious Jews, drawing on texts and tradition. They pray three times a day, keep kosher, and display outward religious devotion. But as Isaiah reminds us, religious fervor alone does not satisfy

God. How do we reconcile apparent piety with acts of terror, oppression, and violence?

Rachel Goldberg-Polin, mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who was abducted during the Nova music festival massacre and killed in the tunnels in Gaza, has become a powerful moral voice, speaking with moral clarity and urgency. She said last week:

“You can fast for two years, pray continuously for five years, blow the shofar, and wave chickens for atonement. If you do not return the hostages (those who are still alive), you will never be forgiven — neither in this world nor in the next.”<sup>1</sup>

Her words echo Isaiah: spiritual practice and ritual observance are meaningless if they are not matched by action to protect life and restore dignity. Prayer without justice, fasting without mercy, devotion without compassion — none of it suffices.

This summer, I had the opportunity to volunteer in the southern Jordan Valley, in the village of Ras al-Ayn. We accompanied a water delivery — to bear witness, show solidarity, and help ensure it happened peacefully. Palestinian villages like Ras al-Ayn lack access to water while nearby Israeli settlements and military outposts have full access to water and other infrastructure. We met women and children, hearing their stories of violence by nearby settlers, many of whom are Orthodox Religious Jews. Moments like these bring Isaiah’s words vividly to life: moral responsibility cannot be separated from ritual devotion.

Not long after, a dear peace activist, Awdah Hathaleen, a father of three and beloved English teacher, was shot and killed by an Israeli settler near the village of Umm al-Kheir. Awdah was committed to nonviolent resistance, yet his life was taken in an act of settler violence — part of a broader pattern against Palestinians in the West Bank.

I want to go and chant—or even scream—the verses of Isaiah to these people. I want to read the words of our prophetic tradition to all those—not only Jews—who, in the name of God and religion, treat others with hatred and violence.

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<sup>1</sup> אתם יכולים לצום גם שנתיים, להתפלל ברצף 5 שנים, לתקוע בשופרות ולנפנף בתרנגולות כפרות — אם לא תחזירו את החטופים (מי שנותר מהם) בחיים — לא תהיה לכם מחילה לעולם. לא בעולם הזה — ולא בעולם הבא

Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, a French rabbi, writes that what is happening in Israel today is not only a political crisis, but a spiritual one: Judaism itself is being kidnapped in the name of messianic-nationalist values. These leaders claim to speak in the name of “authentic” Judaism while amputating the tradition of its richness, diversity, and moral depth.

She reminds us that Judaism has always spoken in many voices. There has never been one “authentic” Judaism. From the Book of Joshua to the Book of Esther, from conquest to survival, from utopian dreams to sober realism, our strength has been the ability to hold contradiction and complexity. To reduce Judaism to a single, narrow, extremist voice is not fidelity—it is betrayal. Horvilleur ends with Isaiah’s words: “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent.”<sup>2</sup> We must raise our voices from within the tradition itself—to insist that Judaism be a source of justice, compassion, and hope, not of violence and revenge.

Because let us be clear: one cannot claim to be religious while trampling on the most sacred principles of faith—honoring the divine image in every human being, walking with compassion and love, building a society rooted in justice and equity. I imagine the Holy One weeping over the devastation we have created: the degradation, the violence, the enormous suffering we have inflicted on one another. And God weeps not only for the suffering itself, but also for the fact that so much of it has been carried out in God’s own name.

That is why people of faith must lift up another vision of what it means to live religiously today — a vision rooted not in domination and exclusion, but in love, justice, and the sanctity of every life.

And reclaiming Judaism is urgent. We cannot allow our tradition to be defined only by its most extreme voices. If we fall silent, we risk alienating a generation of Jews who look at violence justified in the name of Judaism and say, “If this is Judaism, I want no part of it.” But if we lift up a Judaism of compassion, justice, and dignity for all, we keep alive the prophetic heart of our people.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://tenoua.org/2023/01/16/dh-israel-jan2023-en/>

We are living in times when the relationship between Zionism and Judaism is complex. Our TBZ community holds many different voices and understandings of what Zionism is. For me personally, my engagement and commitment with Israel and the Israeli people right now is shaped by grief, outrage, and moral urgency, reflecting my dedication to justice, democracy, and core Jewish values—freedom, dignity, and peace for all. Criticizing the occupation, and this government's actions in Gaza and the West Bank, is not a rejection of Israel—it is a reflection of my deepest ethical responsibility. Refusing to stay silent in the face of injustice is, I believe, a profoundly Zionist act. I condemn the actions of the Netanyahu regime because I am committed to a vision of Israel where all who call the land home can live in safety and dignity. Because there is another way.

For many months, Israelis have filled the streets of Israel in despair, fury, and desperate hope – protesting the cruel and cynical actions of their government, calling for an end to the war, and demanding the return of the hostages. In the midst of continued bombings, sirens, and dashing to safe rooms, the majority of Israelis – the equivalent of millions at a time here in the States – refuse to stay silent. As an American Jewish community, we must also speak up. We must join the majority of Israelis who want this war to end immediately. We cannot leave this work only to those on the ground; our voices, our advocacy, and our moral clarity matter.

Yes, there are reports of a possible deal to end the war — to stop the killing in Gaza and bring hostages home. This is encouraging, and we should welcome any path toward ending bloodshed. But it is not enough. Ending the current war must be paired with a vision of and a plan for long-term peace: an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, freedom and dignity for all, Jewish and Palestinian alike. Without this, the road to another October 7, to more annihilation, and to the continued destruction of Gaza, is frighteningly short.

This Yom Kippur, let us reclaim the Judaism we believe in: rooted in the prophetic vision of Isaiah, a Judaism that refuses to separate prayer from justice, ritual from ethical action, and devotion from compassion. Let us speak and act boldly, for Zion's sake, for humanity's sake, for God's sake. Let our prayer spark protest. Let our ritual inspire acts of justice. And let the study of our ancient texts open our minds and hearts to imagine the world as it should be, for all of us, and for generations to come.

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