



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Last Day

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Pesach

**Isaiah's Perspective On The
Information Revolution**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Is technology our blessing or our undoing?

In one of history's grandest and prescient statements, the Prophet Isaiah in today's Haftarah answers this question and guides us how to build a better world in the Age of Knowledge.

We have never been so powerful, never so free, with the unprecedented ability to access any information anytime anywhere. But are we feeling freer today? With all the information at our fingertips, are we happier people, more fulfilled, less fearful, making better decisions? Has the Information Revolution informed us or inundated us? Uplifted us or merely flooded us? Are these gushing waters destroying or refining us?

Our modern age, with all its breathtaking technologies, has its share of maladies, many not unrelated to our scientific advancements and higher standard of living. Indeed, the argument can be made that our unprecedented cascade of information and slew of options has also brought on unparalleled misery. Is our only option to escape and insulate ourselves from the flood of choices? Or is there a way to fully take advantage of our wealth of knowledge and prosperity without being annihilated by it?

The answer to these critical questions can be found in the soaring words of the Prophet Isaiah which we read in today's Haftarah – at the conclusion of Passover. There Isaiah describes the majestic Messianic Era, when “the wolf will dwell with the lamb,” and he says any destruction will disappear “because the earth will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”

Eerily, Isaiah's words echo the words of Genesis describing the prelude to the great flood that destroyed the earth, when "the earth was filled with corruption." But in Isaiah's messianic prophecy, the water-filled earth is blessed – it is a world filled with divine knowledge – while the flood waters of Genesis are agents of destruction.

This sermon examines Isaiah's prophecy and the choice facing us today: to embrace divine knowledge and its blessings or the corruption of knowledge turned to selfish ends. The choice lies in our hands.

This choice also gives us a new take on the power of the Yizkor service.

ISAIAH'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION: HOW KNOWLEDGE CAN PREVENT DESTRUCTION AND BRING PEACE

1. Isaiah and the End of Days

Opposite the United Nations Building in New York is a park featuring the famous Isaiah Wall which is inscribed with the following quotation from the Prophet Isaiah (encapsulating the UN mission statement, albeit mostly ignored):

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.¹

This is just one of the famous Isaiah prophecies describing the Messianic Era. Who has not heard of the lion lying down with the lamb ... which is a corruption of the actual quotation which reads: "the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid ..."

Or as Woody Allen once quipped: "The wolf may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

¹ Isaiah 2:4.

2. Circus Family (Humor)

On that subject ...

A story is told that, during the heyday of his prosperity and prominence, P. T. Barnum, the great circus master, had under his tents a very wonderful collection of animals. They had been assembled from all climes and all countries. There was the lion, the leopard, the tiger, the bear, the wolf, the fox and many others. This unique animal family also numbered among its members a fine, woolly lamb.

One day a group of distinguished visitors came to the circus. It was an important group and Barnum himself acted as an escort through the menagerie. Naturally, the particular animal family was exhibited with high pride. This family represented the finest of the animal kingdom and the results of the highest animal education. Here was proof of what human skill and kindness could accomplish with even the most belligerent of beasts. Concord and peace was the rule of the family.

As in every gathering of humans there was one doubter among the distinguished visitors. He inquired of Mr. Barnum how long the animals had lived together in amity. He was informed that the family had been on exhibit for nearly three years. "Do you mean to tell me that that lamb has been a member of this family all this time?" he demanded.

Mr. Barnum, hesitating for a moment, said with a smile, "Of course, you realize that we are obliged to renew the lamb from time to time."

3. Today's Haftarah

[But seriously ...]

If you study Isaiah's prophecies, it might occur to you that it is within the realm of earthly possibilities that there will be world peace ... that nation will not fight each other ... that they will learn war no more. I know, it is a very slim chance, but it is possible that the mindset of man will advance that far.

However, for the wolf to dwell with lamb is not in the realm of earthly possibilities ... for that prophecy to come true, the very fabric of nature would have to change ... not just the mindset of man.

Today's Haftarah – quoting this famous passage from the Prophet Isaiah – reveals what will cause nature to turn upside down during the Messianic Era:

The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid ... the infant will play over a cobra's den, and the child will put his hand in the serpent's nest. They will not hurt or destroy [anything] on My holy mountain, *because* the earth will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.²

All this amazing stuff will have a strange cause – the knowledge of God.

Isaiah clearly says ... "*because* the earth will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea." It is the flood of divine knowledge that will make such a peaceful co-existence – of wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, infant and serpent – possible.

So it gets down to knowledge.

4. The Age of Knowledge

We live in the Age of Knowledge ... we are witnesses to the Information Revolution.

We have never been so powerful, never so free. We have the unprecedented ability to access any information anytime anywhere. But are you feeling freer today? With all the information at our fingertips, are we happier people, more fulfilled, less fearful, making better decisions? Has the Information Revolution informed us or inundated us? Uplifted us or merely flooded us? Are these gushing waters destroying or refining us?

²Isaiah 11:6-9

Our modern age, with all its breathtaking technologies, has its share of maladies, many not unrelated to our scientific advancements and higher standard of living. Indeed, the argument can be made that our unprecedented cascade of information and slew of options has also brought on unparalleled misery. Is our only option to escape and insulate ourselves from the flood of choices? Or is there a way to fully take advantage of our wealth of knowledge and prosperity without being annihilated by it?

5. The Great Flood

The answer to these critical questions can be found in comparing the words of Isaiah ("the earth will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea") with the words of Genesis, describing the prelude to the great flood that destroyed the earth: "The earth was filled with corruption."³

The association of these two verses is not just in the fact that both refer to an earth filled with something (*moloh ha'aretz*) but also in their context. The corrupt earth was destroyed by the great flood waters. This is eerily similar to Isaiah's statement "as the waters cover the sea."

But in Isaiah's messianic prophecy, the water-filled earth is blessed – it is a world filled with divine knowledge – while the flood waters of Genesis are agents of destruction.

Another interesting correlation is the statement in Isaiah: "They will not hurt or destroy." In Genesis, the people were corrupt and were hurting and destroying each other, and this is why they were annihilated by the floodwaters – the very waters which in Isaiah manifest a higher state of consciousness.

³ Genesis 6:13.

6. Contrary Scenarios

We thus end up with two contrary scenarios, two types of floods. Isaiah declares that a world submerged in the waters of divine knowledge will eliminate destruction. But in Noah's flood, the waters cause destruction.

So which one is it? Does a flood of knowledge obliterate or refine us? The answer lies in one word that Isaiah uses – *divine*. It is not just a flood of knowledge, it is a flood of *divine* knowledge.

7. Knowledge and Water

Knowledge is compared to water. Like water, knowledge makes us and everything around us grow. It is nurturing, moisturizing, empowering. In short, a great blessing.

Yet, knowledge can be used for selfish and destructive purposes, to take advantage of and hurt others. Or it can be used to build and improve life and the world around us.

The choice lies in our hands:

When knowledge is seen as divine – not merely as a product of the great human mind, but a gift from above, sent to us to refine life – then its deluge is a great blessing. However, if we see our lives and our blessings – and the knowledge we gain – as self-made ... if we direct these gifts only toward selfish/corrupt ends ... then even the knowledge and prosperity we gain turns into a torrential flood. And that flood, due to our conflicting interests, is bound to overwhelm and destroy us.

8. The Importance of Integration

If we humbly recognize that the knowledge is divine, and its purpose is to be integrated into our life, then it prevents destruction. When it is just ordinary water/knowledge, it can become a curse lacking focus and integration.

Imagine a lawyer who is a *Juris Doctor* – an expert in the law – who breaks the law. Imagine a doctor who uses his life-saving knowledge to kill. Imagine a rabbi who leaves his Torah knowledge behind yeshiva doors and behaves unethically in his day-to-day life.

That is the curse of knowledge without integration. And it can afflict the most highly educated of men. When asked how he, as a professor of ethics, could behave unethically, Bertrand Russell once said, “I am also a teacher of mathematics but I am not a triangle.” Like Russell, academics often take pride in their detachment: “I can be completely knowledgeable of a given topic, and it does not affect my behavior.” According to this mindset, science is seen as morally neutral.

Contrast this attitude with Maimonides' words,⁴ that a true scholar is recognized in his actions: how he talks, walks, sleeps and does business. A true scholar (*chacham*) embodies a seamless flow between knowledge and behavior.

To have knowledge affect you this way requires a total immersion in the pure waters of knowledge. True knowledge is not about you, it's about *divine truth* and your humble recognition that you are a transparent channel for this knowledge.

9. Tree of Knowledge

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge – the knowledge of good and evil – they began to see themselves as separate entities, detached from their divine mission. They unleashed knowledge that is divorced from its higher purpose. Ten generations later in the time of Noah this dichotomy evolved into total corruption, with one person turning on another, everyone hurting and destroying each other.

⁴ *Yad, Hilchot De'eot* 5:1.

The waters of the great flood came to purify it with a total immersion, reminiscent of the world as it was at the beginning of creation, completely submerged in water, the source of life. This was a foretaste of the Messianic Era when “the earth will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea” ... a divine knowledge which will transform us into a divine vehicle, preventing human hurt and destruction.

10. A Warning

And mind you, the flood began as regular rainfall, as a warning and reminder to the people to wake up and correct their ways.⁵ First came several symptoms, a taste of what's ahead

Just like today.

Today, we see the symptoms, the raindrops are falling ... corrupt executives, unsound selfish financial decisions, an economic breakdown, information overload, and so forth ... But these are all reminders us that we need to act. And when we do, the water does not need to turn into a flood, it can become a rain that waters the fields.

Our current flood of knowledge, with its assault on our psyche, is in many ways worse than any physical flood. Yet, within the curse lies the cure. This flood of information alerts us to the dangers of knowledge without focus – information without integration.

And it reminds us that we must embrace divine knowledge – knowledge that lifts and empowers us to be proactive and take control of circumstances, instead of knowledge and information that turns us into robotic observers as it demoralizes and makes us anxious.

⁵Rashi Genesis 7:12.

11. What Can We Do?

What can we do to find refuge from the flood around us – the flood of greed, fear and information?

We must build an ark. In Hebrew an ark is called a *teivah*, which also means “word.” We must build an ark of God’s word. We must surround and immerse ourselves in the sacred words of Torah, to create a shelter of divine knowledge that will protect us from the raging flood outside. We must designate time each day for Torah study, to thus build a *teivah* that will serve as a ship floating above the swelling floodwaters that surround us.

Yet, a defensive response is not sufficient. True, we need to protect ourselves, but the ultimate goal is to transform the world into a place where we need not fear a destructive flood. Just as Noah was commanded after the flood to “leave the ark” and build a new world,⁶ we too must build a new world.

The only thing that will guarantee that there will be no more hurt and destruction is torrential goodness and kindness in a world flooded with divine knowledge “as the waters cover the sea.”

12. The Yizkor Connection

The Yizkor service, which we hold today, is one of the most powerful ways to build an “ark” of refuge protecting us from the raging floodwaters of our daily challenges, especially of today’s information overload, that threatens to drown us anytime.

Remembering the soul of our parents and loved ones lifts us up above the din and reconnects us to our own soul, and reminds us of the divine force behind all knowledge and all our blessings. When we see knowledge as a divine tool meant to help us refine our lives, we then have the ability to float above the waters and harness their power for higher purposes, instead of being submerged by them.

⁶Genesis 8:16.

Indeed, the soul is compared to a fish in water, which is always connected to its source. The body is compared to a creature on dry land, disconnected from its source. Yizkor is a way of immersing in the tender “waters” – and loving embrace – of the souls of our parents. It is an opportunity to remember and envision how our parents cradled and nurtured us from the moment we were born. It is a time to rise above all our immediate distractions and investments – all the forces that often inundate and drown our lives -- and revisit the love and the efforts that shaped us from the moment we were born. Yizkor connects us to the eternal – it gives us a taste of an earth “filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”

13. Conclusion

In our lives today – in the midst of the Information Revolution – we have two options: 1) a deluge of waters that will overwhelm and destroy us 2) or a deluge of divine knowledge that submerges us in its watery embrace.

Both result in an earth covered in water. The difference is which one do we choose? Will we allow ourselves to be defined by self-interest and then, when the floodwaters come, get consumed by them? Or will we surround ourselves with sacred words, allowing ourselves to be lifted above the raging floodwaters?

In either case there is a deluge. But with very different results.

I suggest that we all read closely Isaiah's description of our future in today's Haftarah. It will help us envision a world that we all aspire to and all can help build. His powerful vision places the information revolution in perspective and allows us to see the options before us as we face the challenges ahead.

Knowledge is power. Like water it can nurture or overwhelm. Which it will be depends on us. The choice is ours. Amen.