



DEVARIM

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Shabbat Chazon: Do You Dare to Dream?

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DO YOU DARE TO DREAM?

ISAIAH'S VISION: THE SECRET OF IMMORTALITY

ABSTRACT

With yet another tragic murder of Jews sitting at a Shabbos table, celebrating a Shalom Zachor, and the recent unrest on the Temple Mount, our concerns only deepen about the situation in our Holy Land. Especially as we stand in the Nine Days, when we remember the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temples.

Mark Twain once asked: “What is the secret of Jewish immortality?”

An absorbing question really. And, there isn't a more appropriate time to ask it than now, as we approach the 9th of Av, *Tisha B'Av*, the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, when we fast from sundown to sundown to remember the destruction of our first and second Temple. What inspired us to rebuild our lives when our Temple was razed to the ground? What has kept us alive through the suffering and oppression of our exiles? What has been our secret?

Ironically, the mystery of Jewish immortality can be discovered in the heart of destruction. On this Shabbat before *Tisha B'Av* we find the answer, when we read one of the most poignant passages from the prophets – the Vision of Isaiah.

Isaiah lived in dark times. But while he prophesied how human sins would give birth to destruction, he also gave them a vision that would light their darkness.

I have a dream, he told them, and he urged them to dream too. He gave them hope and a promise of a brighter future to help them rise above their suffering – if only for a moment.

Isaiah's vision – which echoed the vision of generations preceding and following him – accompanied our people through our darkest hours, and allowed them to have hope even then, as well as now as we face today's challenges in Israel and around the world.

This sermon examines Jewish vision through history, beginning on a dark night some 3,700 years ago, using rich inspirational stories, and concludes by asking: “What is our vision today?”

1. Opening Prayer

With yet another tragic murder of Jews sitting at a Shabbos table, celebrating a Shalom Zachor, and the recent unrest on the Temple Mount, our concerns only deepen about the situation in our Holy Land. Especially as we stand in the Nine Days, when we remember the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temples.

With that in mind I feel it appropriate to begin my words today with a prayer and blessing:

May our brothers and sisters throughout the Land of Israel be protected and shielded from all harm that would befall them and from all who have destructive intentions.

May the soldiers of Israel, who stand and fight on the front lines for the peace and safety of the Holy Land, and who effectively fight on the front lines for the peace and safety of the entire world, accomplish their G-d-given mission.

May G-d, whose divine eyes are constantly upon the Holy Land, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, protect them all and shield them and keep them safe from all harm, from all suffering, and from all pain. Amen.

We trust that G-d, who gave us this Promised Land, will protect us from all who desire to destroy us. We trust that G-d will do His part to protect Israel. And G-d trusts that we will do our part to protect Israel, both the Holy Land of Israel and the holy people of Israel.

But what exactly is our part – those of us who live far away from the conflict, who are not on the front lines? What can we do? What attitude should we take?

This is our subject today.

And the answer lays in the name of this Shabbos – Shabbos Chazon, The Shabbos of Vision.

2. About Dreams (Quotes)

“To live is the rarest thing. Most men exist, that is all.”

- *Oscar Wilde*

“Logic will take you from A to B. Imagination will take you anywhere.”

- *Albert Einstein*

“You have to dream before your dreams can come true.”

- *Abdul Kalam*

And finally:

“I’m sick of following my dreams. I’m just going to ask them where they’re going and hook up with them later.”

- *Mitch Hedburg*

3. Mark Twain and the Secret of the Jews

In the summer of 1897, Mark Twain posed a question he couldn’t answer: “What is the secret of Jewish immortality?”

As he wrote in *Harper’s Magazine*:

“If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

“His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

“The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities, of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality¹?”

An absorbing question really. And, there isn’t a more appropriate time to ask it than now, as we approach the 9th of Av, *Tisha B’Av*, the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, when we fast from sundown to sundown to remember the destruction of our first and second Temple. What inspired us to rebuild our lives when our Temple was razed to the ground? What has kept us alive through the suffering and oppression of our exiles? What has been our secret?

¹ Twain, Mark, “Concerning the Jews,” *Harper’s Magazine* (1897).

On the 9th of Av, a little over nine hundred years ago, Pope Urban II sent out the First Crusade, which killed over one million of our people, yet we survived². How?

On the 9th of Av in 1492³, Queen Isabella unleashed the ferocious Spanish inquisition, and burned Jewish men, women, and children at the stake, yet they screamed *Shema Yisrael* with their last breath. How? How in the midst of indescribable pain, in front of a cheering, bloodthirsty crowd, did they find the faith and strength to praise G-d's name? How?

On the 9th of Av in 1942, the Nazis began mass deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto to the newly established death camp at Treblinka, yet our grandparents, our parents and our relatives sang *Ani Maamin*, "I believe." How did they sing in the face of death? How did they believe in the face of fear? How?

What has been the Jewish secret? And above all, what does Jewish immortality teach us about our own lives?

Friends, if you will join me on a journey through our history, I am certain that we will not only discover the secret that eluded Mark Twain, but we will find it inside each one of us.

4. Three Weeks

Over two weeks ago, when we fasted on the 17th of Tammuz from dawn until dusk, we began a period referred to as the "Three Weeks," commemorating the three weeks of horror between the breaching of Jerusalem's walls until the Temple was destroyed on the 9th of Av. The three weeks are a solemn time, during which we do not get haircuts, listen to music or celebrate weddings, and on Shabbat we read from the books of the prophets about the dire predictions for the Temple's destruction.

The melancholy deepens from the beginning of the month Av, for the next "Nine Days" (until *Tisha B'Av*) during which time we "diminish in joy"⁴ (and many communities have the custom not to eat meat).

On this Shabbat, which precedes *Tisha B'Av*, the solemnity reaches a climax as we read one of the most poignant passages from the prophets – the Vision of Isaiah.

5. Vision of Isaiah

In the beginning of his prophecy, Isaiah borrows the somber voice of the previous prophecies, bemoaning the people's sins that would lead to the destruction of the Temple. He calls the people a "sinful nation" with

2 Becher, Rabbi Mordechai (1995). *History of Events of Tisha B'Av*.

3 Barclay, Rabbi Elozor; Jaeger, Rabbi Yitzchok (2003). *Guidelines: Over 400 of the most commonly asked questions about the Three Weeks*. Targum Press.

4 Talmud, Taanit 29a.

“evil and corrupt children⁵.”

“Your land is desolate,” he says, “your cities [are] burnt with fire⁶.”

However, at the end of his prophecy, Isaiah speaks of redemption: “And I will restore your judges as at first and your counselors as in the beginning; afterwards you shall be called city of righteousness, faithful city ... Zion shall be redeemed through justice and her penitent through righteousness⁷.”

Isaiah lived at a time when the Jewish people strayed from G-d to serve idols and allowed their morals to take second place to their greed. And while he prophesied that their sins would give birth to destruction, he gave them a vision that would light their darkness.

I have a dream, he told them, and he allowed them to dream too. He gave them hope and a promise of a brighter future, to help them rise above their suffering – if only for a moment.

Isaiah’s vision – which echoed the vision of generations preceding and following him – accompanied our people through our darkest hours, and, in fact, began before he even lived. So let us begin at the beginning.

6. Covenant Between the Pieces

Some 3,700 years ago, on a dark night, only lit by the light of the full moon, G-d made a covenant, an eternal pact of loyalty, with our forefather Abraham. But first, G-d warned him that it would not be an easy covenant to keep⁸:

“Know that your descendants will be foreigners in a foreign land for 400 years. They will be enslaved and oppressed.”

Abraham shuddered as he was shown the future great empires that would control the world and bring terror to it, each in their own way: the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman and Ishmaelite empires⁹.

But as Abraham trembled in the face of a dark future, G-d gave him a vision to survive against all odds.

“Fear not,” G-d said, “I am your shield. Look at the sky and count the stars. See if you can count them, for that is how numerous your descendants will be.”

G-d added: “I will bring judgment against the nation who enslaves them, and they will then leave with great

⁵ Isaiah 1:4.

⁶ Ibid 1:7.

⁷ Ibid 1:26-27.

⁸ Genesis 15:1-21.

⁹ Mechilta Yitro 9. Bereishis Rabba 44:17. Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer, ch. 28.

wealth.”

“To your seed I have given this land (the Land of Israel) from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates.”

G-d frightened Abraham but He also gave him a vision – the same vision echoed by Isaiah – so that from the start, from the very beginning of our journey, we would live with a dream, a dream of a higher reality, a deeper state of consciousness, and we would know that eventually we would prevail.

7. Rabbi Akiva

Around eight hundred years after Isaiah spoke of his dream, his vision, Rabbi Akiva and three of the greatest sages of the Talmudic era – Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah and Rabbi Yehoshua – stood at the site of the Temple ruins.

At that time, under Roman rule, religious practice was forbidden on pain of death. In fact, these four sages were later martyred by the Romans for their practice and teaching of Judaism.

While they were walking there, they saw a fox run out of the place where the Holy of Holies once stood, and his colleagues began to cry, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

“Why are you laughing?” They asked him.

He responded. “Why are you crying?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” they asked.

And continuing to laugh he responded: “For that same reason, I am laughing.”

Rabbi Akiva then explained that Isaiah linked the prophecies of Uriah who lived in the First Temple period, with the prophecy of Zechariah, who lived in the Second Temple period¹⁰. Uriah prophesied that “Zion will be plowed under like a field¹¹,” and Zechariah prophesied that Jerusalem would yet again be inhabited – with elderly men and women strolling in the streets while children played¹².

“And because I see,” said Rabbi Akiva, “that the first prophecy of destruction has been fulfilled, I know that the latter prophecy of redemption will also be fulfilled¹³.”

¹⁰ Isaiah 8:2

¹¹ Micha 3:12

¹² Zachariah 8:4

¹³ Conclusion of Talmud, *Makkot* (24b).

In one of the darkest corners of Jewish history, to which he too would tragically lose his life, Rabbi Akiva lived with a light – the light of Abraham and Isaiah’s vision.

While his colleagues cried and wept over the destruction and suffering, Rabbi Akiva laughed, for he knew that redemption would come, if not in his time then in the time of his children, and if not his children then their children.

8. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

Now, let us fast-forward 1,600 years to 18th century Ukraine, a place where the Jews lived mostly in poverty, ravaged by the harsh climate and regular pogroms. They had been herded into the Pale of Settlement, a huge ghetto that made them walking targets for drunken peasants and savage mobs.

There, in the city of Berditchev, lived a Chassidic leader named Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. One night, he huddled his followers together and revealed a secret, breathing life into their numbed existence, and reigniting the centuries-old dream of redemption among a demoralized people.

He told them that each year, on the Shabbat before *Tisha B’Av*, the Shabbat on which we read Isaiah’s vision, our souls receive its own vision – a vision of the Third Temple in all its glory.

Hence, the name of this Shabbat is *Shabbat Chazon*, Shabbat of Vision – not merely Isaiah’s ostensible vision of destruction, but also the vision of the rebuilding of the temple. This is the vision that allows us to see, if only for a moment, a future of glory and peace.

In the bitter and frozen night that was Czarist Russia, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak soothed his people’s sorrows; he healed their scars and awakened a passion within them – to dream, to hope and to pursue the vision, the engine that kept the Jewish people going throughout the ages.

9. Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld

Let us move forward in time once more, to Jerusalem in 1925, when poverty plagued the Jewish population and Arab riots were a constant threat.

Sir Arthur Balfour, the man who engineered the Balfour Declaration, arrived in Jerusalem to attend a gala ceremony for the opening of the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus.

During his trip, he met with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem to hear his people’s claims to the land, and then it was arranged for him to meet the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld.

However, unlike the Mufti who lived in a beautiful villa overlooking the hills of Jerusalem, Rav Sonnenfeld

lived in a cramped one-room apartment in a narrow alley in the Old City. Sir Balfour was puzzled when he entered the small, dingy room.

Rav Sonnenfeld turned to him: “I am sure you are wondering why I was so adamant that we should meet here in my home as opposed to a more comfortable place. The reason is because I wanted to show you the view.”

Rav Sonnenfeld pulled over his bench to a small window and invited Sir Balfour to join him. He pointed towards the Temple Mount and said: “Do you see that? That is G-d’s home. G-d’s home is in ruins. But every day I look out this window, and I dream that perhaps today will be the day that G-d’s home will be rebuilt. And that, Sir, is our connection to the Land.”

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld lived in abject poverty; he lived in view of the destruction of the Temple, in the Holy Land where every day enemies threatened him and his people. But despite the risks, the Jews of Israel survived the Arab riots and massacres, they prevailed against all odds in one unwanted war after another, and when the enemy attacked them on busses and terrorized them in cafes, they never lost hope – they always had Abraham, Isaiah and Rabbi Akiva’s vision.

10. Answer to Mark Twain

If Mark Twain had known these stories, he would have had the answer to his question: “What is the secret of Jewish immortality?”

The secret is – and always has been – our vision, our dream. This is the vision which has given us hope when all was bleak ... which has helped us live in light when all was dark ... which has enabled us to see the future when we could only close our eyes to the present.

11. Ludwig Guttman and the Paralympic Games

Recently, I read a short biography of a man who closed his eyes to the present and looked towards the future, a future that he made brighter for so many.

This man was Ludwig Guttman, the eldest of four children born to a Jewish German family in 1899. When he was 18, Guttman volunteered as an attendant at an Accident Hospital for Coalminers, where he had an experience that changed his life.

One day, a young coalminer was admitted to the clinic with a broken back and paralysis below the waist. When Guttman began to write up notes, he was told: “Don’t bother, he’ll be dead in a few weeks.”

Indeed, within five weeks, the patient passed away.

Guttmann later said: “Although I saw many more victims suffer the same fate, it was the picture of that young man that remained in my memory.”

Seven years later, Guttmann graduated from medical school and within a few years he became a recognized neurosurgeon and lecturer at various universities.

In 1939, as Hitler began spreading his web of terror, Guttmann was invited by the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning to settle in England, and he moved there with his wife and two young children. At that time, as Europe was gearing itself for another war, the mortality rate of paralyzed servicemen in the British and American armies from the First World War was at a disturbing 80%. And the few that did survive lived as useless and hopeless cripples, unemployable and unwanted, condemned to living out their days in institutions for incurable patients with no encouragement to return to a useful life.

Ludwig Guttmann remembered the young coalminer that had been left to die and was determined to make a difference. He had a dream where paraplegic patients could live lives with value and meaning.

In 1941, he presented a proposal to the Medical Research Council of England regarding the treatment and rehabilitation of paraplegic patients. The proposal was accepted, and it led to the establishment of a special center for paraplegic patients at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in South East London, of which Ludwig Guttmann would become director.

Guttmann accepted the position on the condition that he would be totally independent, so that he could apply his rehabilitation philosophy without question. He had a vision of reintegrating his patients into society through sporting activities. Sports, he believed, counteracted a disabled person’s antisocial attitude – usually characterized by the loss of confidence and self-worth – and helped develop self-respect and comradeship.

His clinic, called Ward X, had begun with only 26 patients, but he dedicated all his time and effort to them. During the first two years of his work there, he heard visitors question, “Is it really worth the while?” Centuries-old perceptions and prejudice against paraplegics plagued his endeavor, but he never lost sight of his vision.

The sporting activities that Guttmann incorporated in the rehabilitation program soon developed into team games in which men, women and children could participate even after their discharge from the center. Soon, more patients from other clinics all over England were joining in as well. This grew into a sports movement that became known as the Stoke Mandeville Games.

The first Games, with 14 ex-servicemen and 2 ex-servicewomen competing in Archery on the grass outside the hospital ward, were held on the 28th of July 1948, the same day as the beginning of the London Olympics. The date was not by accident, Guttmann wanted the Games to have a larger forum. And so it did.

Today, the games are known as the Paralympic Games and are held by the country hosting the Olympics as an important adjunct to the main event. Ludwig Guttmann’s vision, to help just a small group of men, came true

for thousands of athletes, from hundreds of countries – for them, their families, and the millions of people who tune in to see the Games.

12. A Vision for Everyone

When I read his story I knew I had to share it with you – because it shows that visions and dreams are not reserved for sages only.

Yes, the people I mentioned earlier – Abraham, Isaiah, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld – were all great rabbis and leaders. They had hundreds if not thousands of followers, and in a sense, it is too easy for us to put them up on a pedestal and say, “Well, of course ... they were great sages, and they were expected to live with Isaiah’s vision and impart it to their people. But me? How can I do what they did? How can I be like them? How can I live with a vision when my job is so stressful, when my studies are so overbearing, or when I am forever running after my children and don’t have a minute to breathe?”

You can make that argument about the great sages perhaps, but what about Ludwig Guttman?

We never met Ludwig Guttman, as he lived many years before us, but I am sure he had the same question: “How could I, just a single man, be like the great rabbis and leaders of our past and dare to live my dream?”

When his colleagues at the Accident Hospital for Coalminers told him to leave the young coalminer alone, that he would die in a few weeks, I am sure he had doubts. When visitors to his Ward X questioned whether his work was worthwhile, I am sure he had doubts. When his patients struggled to sit up in bed, when they struggled with basic functions of life most of us take for granted, I am sure he had doubts.

Doubt was his enemy – and worse for the fact that it was not an external one, but an internal one. But his vision gave him the strength to vanquish this foe as well.

13. The Enemy Within

As Mark Twain said, our enemies have all faded; they’re all in the past. But today’s enemy lives inside us – today’s enemy is the little voice in our heads that tells us that we can’t do it or that we will fail.

Think about something you had once dreamed about, something idealistic, something that you may have given up on, and ask yourself if it was impossible only because you told yourself so. How many of your dreams have never been fulfilled because of your lack of confidence or courage? How many times have you lost your resolve because of that little voice?

Friends, the secret to Jewish immortality is that our vision has empowered us to not only survive but to thrive.

Isaiah's vision has emboldened our people throughout our history; it has given them confidence in the face of doubt and courage in the face of adversity.

Today too, the Jewish response to tragedy and adversity, is to dream – to be empowered by the vision of Isaiah of the future. We grieve over the recent horrible losses; but we don't stop there. We dream and envision G-d's promises of a world saturated with peace and harmony, the Messianic age. And we do our part to speed Moshiach's coming through our increased Torah and Mitzvot and acts of goodness and kindness.

In Ward X, Ludwig Guttmann's vision inspired his patients to play sports despite their disabilities, and, most importantly, to see the value of their own lives.

Finding your passion and pursuing your dreams is a ticket to anywhere. Living with a vision allows you to look outside the box and see the bigger picture. Whatever it is you are looking for – in your financial life, in your academic life, in your family life and in your spiritual life – it all begins with a little dream, with passion, and with vision.

When we were children we never stopped dreaming. As we become adults we often never allow ourselves to dream. What happened to our free abandon and desire to soar?

On this Shabbat of Vision, when your soul is treated to a vision of a glorious future, there is no better time to rekindle your passion, because before you can make your dreams come true, you first have to dream.

This Shabbat empowers us to dare to dream. To connect to a vision that each of us carries within – a fire waiting to be unleashed.

And when you allow yourself to dream, you can indeed achieve the impossible. And help bring peace to Israel and the world.

So many years ago Isaiah had his vision. Today, ask yourself, what is yours?

Good Shabbos.