

The 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, our most stringent day of mourning, is bracketed by two special Shabbatot: Shabbat Chazon (Shabbat of Vision) this week and Shabbat Nachamu (Shabbat of Consolation) next week. Shabbat Chazon is named for Isaiah's vision in the last of the three Haftarot of Rebuke, which are read during the three weeks between 17. Tammuz and 9. Av, our time *min ha-meitzar*, in the narrow places. Isaiah's vision takes place during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Azaz, and Hezekiah, ca. 740-701 BCE, a dark time in our history. The prophet Isaiah was a member of the royal family of Judah. He first began to speak after Uzziah, whose reign had hitherto been exemplary, was infected with leprosy for having burnt incense in the Temple in flagrant disregard of the law separating the power of the kingship from that of the priesthood. After the Maccabean revolt the Hasmoneans, who came from a priestly family, eventually assumed the kingship with equally disastrous results. Isaiah lived in a time of great upheaval, when Assyria was rising and their king Shalmanezar had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. A few exiles settled in the southern kingdom of Judah, but most of the ten tribes who comprised the kingdom of Israel disappeared. Judah too, was succumbing to the lure of idolatry and corruption, and the path set forth by Abraham was in danger of being lost forever. Isaiah bitterly berates the people for their disloyalty and ingratitude, detailing the results of their behavior in graphic terms. Likening them to the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:10), he declares that HaShem neither wants nor needs the sacrifices of evildoers. "Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow. Come now, let us debate (or reason together), says the Lord. If your sins prove to be like crimson, they will become white as snow; if they prove to be as red as crimson dye, they shall become as wool." (1:17-18) The underlined word derives from the root כָּחַ, which forms words such as to prove, argue, adjudge, convince, convict, rebuke. Rashi sees this as HaShem's challenge to the people: "Come now, let us debate: together I [HaShem] and you, and we will know who offended whom, and if you offended Me, I still give you hope to repent." It is one of many wakeup calls, which we unfortunately continue to ignore at our peril. As we have read in the narratives of the people's 40 years in the wilderness, Moses has tried time and again to reason with, convince, and rebuke the people, with little success. Now, in his first speech to them in this week's Torah portion, Moses recapitulates, reminding them of HaShem's continued support despite their many cycles of rebellion, repentance, and renewed rebellion. Both Moses and Isaiah direct our vision back to past deeds and misdeeds, and then forward to alternative scenarios of success or failure, depending on our behavior. It is sobering reading. Like Isaiah, the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud had witnessed the best and worst of human behavior. Opening a discussion about good and evil based on Abr(ah)am's vision in Genesis 15:1, which set us on our path, Midrash Genesis Rabbah 44 offers a pithy reason for the existence of our *mitzvot* that concurs with Isaiah: "The mitzvot were given only to refine people through them. After all, why should the Holy One of Blessing care whether one slaughters an animal from the throat or from the nape?" Indeed, Abram's vision included episodes of rebellion and exile about which we have already read, and which pervade the entirety of our TaNaKh. The Midrash continues with an intriguing commentary on prophesy: "... it [Abram's vision] is referred to by ten different expressions: a prophesy (*nevu'a*), a vision (*chazon*), preaching (*hatafa*), speaking (*dibur*), saying (*amirah*), a command (*tzivui*), burden (*massa*), parable (*mashal*), metaphor (*melitza*), and an enigma (*chida*). Which is the harshest of them all? Rabbi Eliezer said: Vision, as it is stated: A harsh vision was told to me (Isaiah 21:2)." Both our Torah and our Haftarah reading are full of harsh visions and equally harsh words. Rashi notes that Moses' first discourse opens by enumerating all the places where the people angered HaShem, but refrains from naming the individual episodes in deference to the Israelites who did not rebel. However, Moses does mention the incident with the scouts and its aftermath (1:22-46) so the people will understand why HaShem has made them wander for 40 years when they could have reached the Promised Land long before that. He does not mince words and he makes sure to include himself, but not without a tiny note of recrimination: "The Lord was so angry with me because of you." (1:37). This harkens back to the events in Parashah Chukat, when Moses, tired and frustrated from all the stubbornness and complaining, lashes out at the people and strikes the rock instead of speaking to it as HaShem had commanded. Even the humblest and most patient people have a breaking point, and Moses had reached his. He is not superhuman, but simply human like all of us, and like the rest of the generation that left Egypt, except for Joshua and Caleb, he will die before they cross the Jordan. But before he does, he addresses the people with powerful, visionary words, laying out both positive and negative scenarios to make it clear how they must choose if they are to survive as a people. Like Isaiah centuries later, he foresees potential for enormous success as well as for dismal failure. Each in his own fashion uses the creative powers of oratory to preach, cajole, rebuke, and encourage, relentlessly urging the people to make good choices. Indeed, HaShem will always be willing to reason with us, but we must do our part and continue striving with all our might to uphold the prophets' vision of justice for all.

Shabbat shalom!