

Jews in a Non-Jewish World

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We live in a big world filled with conflicting cultures and philosophies. Where exactly do we fit? Isaiah's own presentation on the subject is complex. On the one hand, the nations (or at least those nations explicitly identified¹) appear beset by variations of a toxic moral confusion; forever suffering the consequences of violent and careless egotism and of arrogance. On the other hand the prophet characterizes all human beings as beloved creations of an ever-hopeful God, each able - or perhaps even destined - to rise above his weakness to achieve spiritual greatness. Jews and non-Jews are expected to cooperatively grow towards moral redemption. No one has to be excluded. Exploring both these aspects of Isaiah's teachings should help us develop a productive and balanced approach to managing our own relationships with the world beyond our neighborhoods.

The Limits

As Rabbi S. R. Hirsch² observes, Isaiah accuses...

- Assyria and Babylonia of allowing their abuse of unrestrained power to override social and human concerns
- Egypt of using their natural resources passively for the exercise of selfish control rather than for international welfare
- Tyre of wasting their commercial genius on base pleasures and of creating a society in which morality itself was bought and sold as a commodity
- Moab for allowing themselves to be defined by overbearing arrogance
- Edom of becoming a nation predicated on the use of force and violence

And these sins - especially those which victimized Israel - have been and will again be the cause of great upheavals in which once-powerful civilizations will crumble along with the vast cities they had built:

“For You have turned a great city into a pile of rubble, fortifications into collapsed ruins, a palace of strangers has replaced a metropolis that will never be rebuilt. Therefore a fierce people will honor You, a great city of powerful (people) will fear You. Because You were the strength for the poor, strength for the destitute in his troubles, protection from the strong (river) current, shade from the heat, for (You have been) a wall against mighty wind. Like (the unforgiving) dry heat of a desert You have subdued strangers, like the dry heat (through) a thick cloud the powerful will be cut down and humbled. The Lord of Hosts will prepare for all nations on this mountain (i.e., they will anticipate) a feast of fat things (but which will actually become) a feast of sediment; fat, marrow bones (will become instead) drained sediment.³ And He will destroy on this mountain the face of the covering; that which had covered all the nations, and the veil that veiled all peoples (i.e., their protection). And He will permanently eliminate death and the Lord God will wipe tears from every face and the disgrace of His people He will remove from on all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” (25:2-8)

1 It seems noteworthy that Isaiah never criticizes *all* nations or *all* non-Jews, but focuses instead on a particular group or nation and on its particular flaw.

2 Collected Writings of Rabbi S. R. Hirsch Vol. IV pp 41-43

3 This likely refers to the failed invasion of Israel which will precede the final redemption.

So there is evil in the world and that evil will one day face justice. It's certainly comforting to know that. But what is the practical purpose of this passage (and of others like it)? What reaction could Isaiah expect of us, his readers, that will be of any real use to either ourselves or to the world around us?

Perhaps it's the simple awareness that there have been nations which stood resolutely *against* the will of God, which have sought to *increase* suffering amongst those God wishes to protect and which will, through the course of history, have to answer for those actions. To side with such nations is to stand on the wrong side of history. To avoid affiliation with such nations as much as possible is the choice that is both prudent and moral.

Besides political considerations thought, it seems that we are each personally expected to actively reject the theological foundations of pagan religions:

“[If pagans want credibility, then] let them come close and relate to us that which shall occur, they should relate what happened in history, and we will turn our attention (to those accounts) and we will know their end; let us hear what will come [i.e., let them allow us to test their verifiable claims]. Predict the wonders to come in the distant future and we would (then) know that you are gods, (capable of controlling) for both good and evil and then (if such a thing were indeed possible), we would talk (and plan) together. In truth, you are all nothing and your acts are as of a serpent; abominations you have chosen for yourselves.” (41:22-24)

No matter how esthetically pleasing their rituals and philosophies might be, Isaiah insists that we recognize these religions for the frauds they are and reject them. On at least some level therefore, a loyal Jew must harbor some feeling of apartness not only from such faiths, but even from their followers.

In appropriate circumstances, a Jew is even expected to stand in public opposition to pagan culture:

“If all the nations would gather together and assemble by their peoples, who among them could relate this or relate (even) past events; send their witnesses to be authenticated and hear and say 'it is true'? *You* (Israel, on the other hand) *are my witnesses* who I chose so they should know and believe in Me and understand that I am Him [i.e., I am God], before Me no power was created and after me there will be none.” (43:9-10)

Even while enjoying respectful or warm relations, a Jew should take great care to find the appropriate balance in his social contacts. The Judean king Chizkiya, himself one of the very greatest of our leaders⁴, seems to have overreacted to the Babylonian king's gifts and good wishes by showing his emissary exaggerated deference. After hearing Chizkiya's admission that he had been excessively generous and open during the visit, Isaiah responded:

“And Isaiah said to Chizkiya, 'hear the word of the Lord of Hosts. Behold days are coming (in which) all that is in your house and (all) that your fathers amassed until this day will be carried to Babylon, says the Lord. And from among your sons who will come from you that you will father, (foreigners) will take and (your sons will) become servants in the palace of the king of Babylon.’” (39:5-7)

Allowing for the fact that great people like Chizkiya are held by God to a higher standard of behavior,⁵ this criticism certainly suggests that our relationships must sometimes include an element of restraint. Without forgetting the respect and consideration we should show all human beings, there must be

⁴ See II Kings 18:3-6

⁵ בבא קמא נ. הקדוש ברוך הוא מדקדק עם סביביו אפילו כחוט השערה

limitations in the face of spiritual corruption.

The Opportunities

Human beings - all human beings - were created by God in His image⁶. And that was no accident: we were all created for a purpose.

“For thus says the Lord the Creator of the heavens, He is God, He formed the earth and made it; He established it. Not for nothing did He create it, but *so it should be inhabited* did He form it, I am the Lord, there is no other.” (45:18)

One particular of God's creations seemed to have risen to great heights of Divine favor and was held up by Isaiah as a role model for all to emulate - and he wasn't Jewish: God is the one...

“Who says to Koresh⁷ you are My shepherd, all my desire you perform to perfection, you will say to Jerusalem 'be built' and to the temple, 'be founded.’” (44:28)

“Gather all of you and listen: who among you has declared these things? He [according to Rashi this is Koresh] who is loved by the Lord will exercise His will with Babylon and His power with the Chaldeans.” (48:14)

God has ambitious plans for all that He has created. His world should be filled with people. Every continent should boast busy cities and towns and should teem with families striving to fashion comfortable, nurturing and productive communities. Communities for which God's will is a paramount concern and the subject of ever-deepening insight. People who excel at such projects are recognized Above - regardless of their ethnic origins:

“Rabbi Yirmiya would explain 'even a gentile who fulfills the Torah is as great as a (Jewish) high priest as it is written (Lev. 18:5) A man [i.e., any man - even a non-Jew] who will perform these (commandments) and live by them' ...Similarly, does it say 'Open O gates, and permit *priests, levites and (regular) Jews* to enter'? Rather, (it is written thus:) '...Permit a *righteous nation* [i.e., any righteous nation] that guards its faith to enter.' (Isaiah 26:2) ...From which we learn that even a gentile who fulfills the Torah is as great as a high priest.” (Sifra, *Parshas Acharei Mos* 13)⁸

Or, in the words of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch:⁹

“God's messages are certainly not sent solely to Israel, nor meant for Israel alone. They are not intended, in any way, to bring only to Israel an understanding of God's plans and His ways of implementing them, or to prepare in this manner only Israel for a better knowledge of God and a greater readiness to serve Him.”

Rather, we are all expected to persistently struggle upwards towards the happy, moral existence intended for us from the very beginning. Unfortunately many nations, just as Israel, have slipped and

6 Not that God has any image, of course (see Deut. 4:16), but that the human form - both inside and out - is precisely as God willed it to be (see Rashi to Gen. 1:26).

7 The Persian king Cyrus who, incidentally, was to be born more than a century *after* these words were written by Isaiah.

8 ע' נמי סנהדרין נט. ועבודה זרה ג

9 Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, Collected Writings Vol. IV page 23

stumbled while struggling to find their footing on this steep slope. Isaiah mourned each setback and its tragic consequences:

“Therefore my stomach, like a harp, moans for Moab (in their destruction) and my innards for Kir Chares.” (16:11)

“Therefore, my loins are filled with trembling, pains as of birth take hold of me...” (21:3)

“The prophet compassionately groans over the destruction of nations” (Rashi quoting a midrash)

Noting this, Rabbi Hirsch¹⁰ invited us to

"see how a 'Jewish prophet' shared in the agony of the nations, felt in himself their pain and woe, writhing in their historical convulsions. It was not a cold, impersonal pen which recorded the thousands of dead bodies and broken hearts among the nations, but in describing the sufferings of mankind, he was touched to the soul with a broken heart."

If we are to take Isaiah's vivid example to heart, none of us will remain indifferent to the lives and struggles of all men. None of us will fail to look to all our neighbors as potential partners in fulfilling God's great plans.

And in fact Isaiah leaves no doubt that the nations of the world will certainly one day become our partners. Let us visualize for ourselves the fulfillment of these words, addressed by Isaiah to Jerusalem, which depict the nations of the world standing side by side with the Jews to serve Jerusalem (by which we mean the idealized Godly lifestyle that is symbolized by the Torah-infused qualities of Jerusalem and its Temple):

“And nations will travel by your light and kings by your shining brightness. Raise your eyes around you and see them all gathering; your sons are coming from afar and your daughters who have been raised by kings. Then you will see and shine and thrill as your heart opens wide, for the great sea will have turned towards you, and an army of nations will come to you. Many (gift-bearing) camels shall cover you, young camels of Midyan and Eifa, all will come from Sh'va; gold and incense they will carry and praises of the Lord they will impart...For the islands shall anticipate Me and the ships of Tarshish shall come first to bring your sons from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the sake of the Lord your God and for the holiness of Israel that is your glory. And the children of foreigners shall build your walls and their kings shall serve you, for in my fury I afflicted you (but) out of My goodness will I show you compassion...” (60:3-6, 9-10)

And perhaps more than just partners, the nations seem destined to become Israel's inspiration:

“And it will be at the end of days, the Mountain of the House of God will be settled as the head of (all) mountains and shall be lifted above all hills and all nations will flow (as a river) towards it. And many nations will travel and they will say 'let us go up to the Mountain of God, to the House of the God of Jacob and He will teach us His ways and we will go in His paths, for from Zion will come Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem.' And he will judge between the nations and rebuke many peoples and they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning knives, no nation will raise sword to another and they will no longer learn warfare. *House of Jacob! Come let us walk in the light of God!*” (2:2-5)

10 Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, Collected Writings Vol. IV page 24

Rashi explains that those last words “Come let us walk in the light of God” will come from the nations of the world as *they urge us* to join them in their historic spiritual ascent. Even Radak, according to whose reading it is Isaiah himself speaking, understands it as urging the Jews to follow the example of the nations' previous commitment. Either way, through word or deed, the Jewish people are to be goaded to growth through their neighbors' good example.

There is no reason for us to assume that this transformation of all or some of the world's nations to a full and willing acceptance of God's rule will necessarily follow Israel's redemption - if anything, as we've noted, it might well precede it. One thing the previous passage makes quite clear however is that the opportunity exists for non-Jews to share in the bounty of this renaissance.

The Way Ahead

Without question, alongside the glowing hopes for all the people of God's world, Isaiah also shows us some very sharp criticism of both practice and belief in the non-Jewish world. How are we to respond to this in our personal lives - which, after all, should be our primary goal in this study?

Let's ask a more fundamental question. What did Isaiah himself expect to accomplish with these rebukes in the first place? Presumably they were ultimately intended for Gentile ears so as to effect universal moral change. However we cannot remain blind to the fact that the prophet (and the sages who later arranged his prophecies¹¹) chose a specifically Jewish medium (*Tanach*) for his universal message. It can't be that we are to read about our neighbors' spiritual setbacks just in order to smugly and self-righteously pat ourselves on the back. Do the nations' errors illustrated by Isaiah seem so much worse than ours that their description should leave us unmoved? Or could it be that we are ourselves prone to similar weakness and stand to gain by their study?

Here, in broad, general terms, is how Rabbi Hirsch characterizes Isaiah's charge to the non-Jewish world:

"In the description of the...coming fate which each nation would have to bear, the factors which bring about their destiny are the same for each nation. The acquisition of material possessions and the pursuit of power were their goal; luxury, affluence and violence were the accompanying consequences, as is clearly shown in Chapters 24-26 and 33." (Collected Writings vol IV 44)

"This purely materialistic outlook on the values and aims of individuals and nations excluded truth and honesty from social, national and political life. Cunning and slyness came to be considered the highest art in politics and statecraft." (ibid 45)

"This lack of morality and the politics of pure self-interest corroded all human conditions, all social relationships. Only when God would expose this self-interest and ruin this policy of selfishness, would the people realize what they had done and begin to work on their self-improvement." (ibid)

Now, besides the care that we must take to ensure that our own loyalty to God and His Torah isn't compromised by absorbing these corrupting attitudes, should we not turn at least some of our attention to ensuring that we're not already guilty? Is it not likely that Isaiah wants us to peer over his shoulder as he addresses the nations and take note along with them?

So by all means, let's take this personally.

But we also see the loving words of a Father anticipating His children's greatness...evidence of

11 TB Bava Basra 15a

potential value in every part of humanity. We should prepare to learn true wisdom from wherever it might be found - any wisdom, at least, whose adoption stands to further God's will for humankind:

“Everyone with whom I converse could become my teacher by reason of the skills of his calling and his experiences. And they became my teachers because Thy testimonies which ennoble all our lives were the theme of my speech and thought. Viewed in the light of Thy testimonies, nothing human is base or vulgar. Every aspect of human life is lofty and ennobled.” (Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, commentary to Psalms 119:99)