

Sermon: Star Trek and Tisha B'av
Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

Tonight is the 4th day of Av and is called Shabbat Chazon after the Haftarah from Isaiah that starts by saying,

חֲזוֹן יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ

The vision/prophecy of Isaiah son of Amoz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

And since, Captain Sisko, from DS9, would say, *“I can't. I can't go against the Prophets.”* Let me share with you a bit more from this week's Haftarah reading.

שְׁמַעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהָאֲרֶזֶן כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, For the LORD has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up— And they have rebelled against Me!”

This prophetic reading is recited to admonish our people to as verse 17 states

“לִמְדוּ הַיָּטֵב דַּרְשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁרוֹ חָמְוִץ שִׁפְטוּ יְתוֹם רִיבוֹ אֶלְמָנָה:

Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; Defend the cause of the widow.”

As we are days away from Tisha B'av, the ninth of Av, we are cautioned by the vision of Isaiah to do and be better. The rabbis tried to contextualize the destructions of our Temples as a lesson of morality for us. If only our people in the past were loyal to God and looked out for those in need, well, then we could've averted disaster. This is why the book of Lamentations is read on Tisha B'av and traditional Jews fast for the day.

As Reform Jews, our relationship with Tisha B'av is more complicated especially with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the reunification of Jerusalem as a result of the six day war in 1967. Furthermore, we don't pray to restore the Temple nor the animal sacrifices. And so instead, we look to the morals and teachings that come out of this day such as reinvigorating our connections with God and Torah as well as striving to be kinder and more tolerant of those around us. Our teaching out of the Talmud, Gittin, warns us not to engage in baseless hatred and to strive to be kind even to our enemies.

Tisha b'av teaches us the importance of holding on to our values and doing what is right. This is also one of the critical messages that came out of Star Trek. The star fleet crew throughout all the series had to wrestle with dilemmas, hostile forces, while maintaining their core identity. Jews have had experience with that for thousands of years dealing with Babylonia, Greece, Rome, crusaders, inquisitors, pogroms, and Nazis.

In Star trek, there were many rules and guidelines and then there was the Prime directive that prohibited any interference with the internal and natural development of alien civilizations. You might think that would be easy but it's not when you believe there is a better way for others to live and negative consequences if you don't. Even though it was violated on some episodes, there were constant struggles with what was ethical to do when encountering other people on far away planets.

Life was certainly an important value on Star Trek. Great effort was made to save lives and promote harmony wherever possible. However, as Spock famously stated in *The Wrath of Khan* (1982) "Logic clearly dictates that needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." As a way of saying that he should be left to die so that others may live was heart wrenching but so, so logical. It was a way of saying there is a greater good that must always be reached for even when it is hard.

Values of sacrifice, hard work, and willingness to deal with issues were part of our series. Even when Voyager had opportunities to get back to earth early, if it was at the expense of life, they didn't. Who you are, what you do, are more important than achieving your goals quickly. And no matter how difficult or insurmountable the challenge, no one ever gave up.

The values of Star trek and Tisha B'av can help give us hope and guide us as we are living through the fifth month of Covid 19. James T Kirk said in the "The Corbomite Maneuver" *"You know the greatest danger facing us is ourselves, and irrational fear of the unknown. There is no such thing as the unknown. Only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood."* Captain Jean-Luc Picard said, *"Things are only impossible until they're not."* And *"There is a way out of every box, a solution to every puzzle; it's just a matter of finding it."*

There are still plenty of unknowns with this virus but we are confident that a vaccine will come to fruition, even if we don't know when. As the crew of Voyager traversed the Delta quadrant, they had to persevere knowing that they were decades away from seeing their family. Fortunately, we are not decades away from a vaccine and likely in less than a year, we will have some relief but in the meantime, we have to, as good star fleet crews have done, hold even stronger to our core values. For Star Trek, it was the Prime directive, taking great effort not to

distort the time line, and preserving life. We, as Jews, have our own timeless values that center on Torah, learning and wisdom over the thousands of years. We have our ritual and religious acts as a way of sanctifying time and making ordinary moments meaningful. And we have acts of lovingkindness where we are impelled to reach out to others in times of sickness, sadness, and joy as well as to help out the least fortunate.

Tisha B'av is a sad day but it doesn't end history. Michael Strassfield in Jewish holidays writes, "There is a tradition that the Messiah will be born on Tisha be-Av-an image akin to the phoenix rising from its ashes. Thus out of destruction is born the ultimate redemption. This change of mood from despair to hope is reflected in a number of customs. One old custom is to sweep your house out in the afternoon as a preparation for the Messiah if he or she should come. For the same reason, in some communities women adorn themselves in the afternoon." (pg. 89)

It is a beautiful teaching that on a day of despair can come the ultimate hope for humanity. We know that we are living in a time of hardship and trial, but we also know that this time will pass. Star Trek always offered optimism on the human condition and ingenuity and we have every reason to be hopeful that we will progress beyond this trying time. We may not have the technology yet to traverse the universe but there is no doubt that a vaccine and therapeutics will be in our future. And we can also be confident that there are better times to come. The ultimate blessing was uttered by our Jewish Leonard Nimoy as Spock, "Live long and prosper." May we all live long and prosper.