

A Muse: Shabbat Chazon 2008

Parshat Devarim, read the week before Tisha B'av is accompanied with the Haftarah from Isaiah (1: 1-27) which begins with the word Chazon. Thus the Shabbat before Tisha B'av is known as Shabbat Chazon.

Chazon means vision and here the vision has an ominous connotation. The link between the vision of Isaiah and Tisha B'av is powerful and provides us with a clear almost graphic understanding of what can be expected if the covenantal relationship with God isn't followed.

Most covenants' are not that difficult to comply with because the parties involved crafted a document with a clear, mutual understanding delineating what is expected from the parties. Unfortunately our covenantal relationship with God isn't as clear cut.

Understanding the purpose and intent of the covenant has, according to Isaiah become blurred, the message and intent obfuscated by layers of meaningless ritual:

"What are your many sacrifices to Me? Says the Eternal One. I am sated with the rams you bring as burnt-offerings, with the fat your fine animals; I take no delight in the blood of bulls or lambs or goats. When you come to seek My presence, who asked this of you to trample My courts...I hate your new moons, your festival days; they are a burden to Me; I can bear them no more. Wash yourselves; cleanse yourselves, put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice; relieve the oppressed. Uphold the orphan's rights; take up the widow's cause. (Isaiah 1:11-17)

Isaiah is not denouncing ritual in general. Rather he is rejecting the hypocrisy of ritual observance that is not accompanied by living virtuously. Ritual has currency when it reminds us of who we are, our purpose for being and directs us to our covenantal relationship with God. Removing ritual from this context, making it an end unto itself, contributes to its devaluation and reduces its practitioners to a banal existence.

The message of Isaiah is clear and meaningful unto itself, however linking it with Tisha B'av creates a theological quagmire. It assumes that God will cause His people harm of cataclysmic proportions if they default, even unintentionally, in the performance of the covenant.