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"Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the orphan, plead for the widow. Come let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah, chapter 1, verses 16-18)

This Shabbat is known as "Shabbat Hazon". The haftarah (which begins with the word Hazon) is taken from the first chapter of Isaiah. It serves as a prelude to the fast of the Ninth of Ab. The prophet Isaiah chastises the people of Israel, and scorns their false religiosity and their rebelliousness from the word of God. Their sinfulness will be punished. (Indeed, Isaiah warned of the downfall of the Jewish commonwealth, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple.) But Isaiah also offers hope. If the people will repent, God will forgive them.

When Isaiah calls on the people to return to God, he stresses the need for justice and compassion. He does not dwell on ritual commandments, though these are certainly important. If the Jews would devote themselves to creating an honest, fair and righteous society--this would be the key to their salvation. The nation's goodness is measured in terms of its concern for widows and orphans, the poor and oppressed.

My wife and I have just returned from a stay in Jerusalem. It was wonderful and spiritually uplifting to dwell--even if only temporarily--in this holiest of holy cities. But the visit was marred by a series of demonstrations--including violence--launched by extreme Orthodox Jews to protest the opening of a public parking lot in Jerusalem on Shabbat. New demonstrations erupted when a Hareidi woman was arrested for having starved her young child nearly to death. The hareidim did not express outrage on behalf of the victimized child, but demonstrated angrily against the police for having arrested the abusive mother. They felt that the police and the secular State of Israel should not interfere in their communal affairs.

In the name of religion, fanatical individuals threw rocks at police, lit fires in the streets, issued harsh statements against the State of Israel. Their leaders encouraged this behavior--and few voices from the leaders of the hareidi community were raised in criticism of the riots.

As we approach the solemn fast day of Tisha B'Av, it is vital that all Jews--of all religious leanings--reread the words of Isaiah chapter one. We need to internalize

the message: God wants us to live moral, righteous, compassionate lives. Religion lacking these ingredients is false. Jerusalem was destroyed in ancient times due to the internal divisions and acrimony within the Jewish people. Jerusalem of our times will be as strong--or as weak--as our religious fiber will allow. We need to rally around the forces for good, and isolate those who threaten the spritual and physical wellbeing of our people.

We are fortunate to be living at a time when we have a sovereign Jewish State, and when Jerusalem is a thriving city. For nearly 2000 years, our people did not enjoy these privileges. We thank God for restoring the people of Israel to the land of Israel; and we pray that the people of Israel will ever prove worthy of this blessing. We must work to foster righteousness, not self-righteousness.

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Angel for Shabbat