

Eternal Words
Yom Kippur Morning 5774
September 14, 2013

Introduction to the Haftarah Portion

To modern eyes, there is so much that is puzzling about the Hebrew Bible: blood purification and sacrifices, tribal justice and harsh enforcement of ritual laws. But then there are the parts that remind us of why this material has such power – words that challenge and inspire, words that last in our hearts and lift up our lives.

And now, on this day of fasting and ritual, of looking inward and thinking about ourselves, comes this reading – in its own way a rebuttal of the inward focus – certainly, in traditional synagogues where that Leviticus passage is read just before this it has to be seen as a response to it! And at the least, this is a reminder that looking deeply inside ourselves *must* lead us to discover, not a private world of inner spirituality, but a common bond with all humanity. Listen... listen to the words, on this, the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, on this...one day before the 50th anniversary of the Birmingham church bombing:

Is this the fast I have chosen? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Eternal? Is not *this* the fast I have chosen: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to tear every yoke apart? Surely it is to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, never withdrawing yourself from your own kin.

The inner must lead to the outer, spirituality to social justice. Or else this is, as I will share later this morning, all about ourselves, our own fulfillment, our own glory. Our fast only works, when it is for a purpose: to know what others feel like, to respond to the needs of those around us. This stirring passage from Isaiah is not just the choice of our own movement... This is the traditional reading – or at least the latter part of it.

So now we hear, these ancient words: Isaiah 58:1-14. They are found in Hebrew on page 346, and in English beginning on page 347 of the *Machzor*...