

# THE RECOGNITION OF SHAME

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The nine days of mourning for Jerusalem's fall and the destruction of the Temples are upon us. This Shabat, which always precedes Tisha B'Av itself, takes its name from the haftarah of the prophet Yeshayahu read in the synagogue. The words of the prophet condemn the social ills of his times and society - governmental corruption, economic unfairness and a lack of legal and social justice. But these are the problems that have plagued all human societies from time immemorial. And they are omnipresent in our current world and national society today as well.

So, at first glance, one could conclude that the prophet is making impossible demands, since human behavior and social interactions can never eliminate these issues fully. And we are all well aware that the Torah never demands the impossible from its human subjects. So what is the point of the prophet's criticism and harsh judgments? What is it that he really demands from us fallible mortal creatures?

I feel that he demands of us that we at least realize and recognize the shortcomings in our society. We may not be able to correct them all completely, but we should know that they exist. We should never allow apathy the ability to overwhelm our better instincts and arrest our never-ending quest for an improved social structure.

The prophet demands that we remain relentless in trying to improve the social conditions of the world we live in even if we know at the outset that complete success is beyond our human capabilities. By accepting our societal deficiencies without a murmur of regret or complaint we become complicit in our own eventual destruction.

The Chafetz Chaim is reputed to have said that what motivated him to write his monumental work about the evils of slander and evil speech was that he noticed that people who had engaged in such speech no longer exuded a sigh of regret over their words. Evil speech had become societally acceptable and there was no sense of shame or embarrassment present about engaging in that type of behavior.

Shame is a great weapon for good and when it disappears from society, when brazen self-interest and greed is somehow legitimized, then the prophet warns us of impending doom. Politicians disgraced by their previous behavior openly vie again for public office as though having served one's time in jail or being forced to resign from public office wipes their slate clean permanently.

A society that knows no shame, whose leaders never recognize the moral turpitude of their past

behavior, dooms itself to the ills of favoritism, corruption and unfairness that will plague its existence. The prophet demands of us that even if we are unable to correct all ills and right all wrongs we should at least be ashamed that such ills and wrongs exist within our society.

That recognition and sense of shame that accompanies it serves as the basis for possible necessary improvement in social attitudes and societal behavior. Then the prophet's optimistic prediction "Zion shall be redeemed through justice and those who return to it will also find redemption through righteousness" will yet be fully fulfilled.

Shabat shalom

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