The Shabbat Before Tish'a beAb

Tonight we begin a special Shabbat called: "Shabbat Chazon" , the Shabbat previous to the 9th of Ab.

From Saturday night, we begin a period of mourning that goes in-crescendo until Tish'a BeAb – the Jewish National Day of Mourning. In addition to all the restrictions we kept since the 17 of Tamuz, as of Saturday night we stop shaving, refraining from taking hot baths or showers, refraining from washing our clothes or even wearing a freshly washed cloth.

Saturday morning we read a special Haftara, CHAZON YESHA'AYA, which gives the name to our Shabbat. This text, Isaiah 1:1-27 , is a prophetic vision of Yesha'ayahu haNabi in which he rebukes the people of Israel, and particularly the citizens of Yerushalayim, for their lack of integrity and their corruption. This Haftara describes the sins that made HaShem ignoring people's prayers and eventually allow His Bet haMiqdash (the First Bet haMiqdash) to be destroyed. By reading and remembering what our ancestors did wrong, we can reflect on our own behavior, change and improve our actions and merit to seeing our Bet haMiqdash built again.

Among the many points he raised, the prophet discussed religious hypocrisy.

He said (Chapter 1:15) *"When you raise your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes [I will ignore you]. You would be offering many prayers, but I will not listen to them. "*
The prophet tells us that sometimes HaShem ignores us and flatly rejects our prayers. Fortunately, Yesha'ayahu also explains to us in what circumstances HaShem rejects our prayers. (1:15) I will not listen to your prayers because *"… your hands are full of blood."*
Yesha'ayahu denounced the hypocrisy of some corrupt people, who killed, robbed, cheated in their businesses, practiced

bribery to corrupt justice, did not help the widows, did not defend the orphans or assisted the poor … and still expected God to listen and answer their prayers! Yesha'ayahu denounced these people, who offered sacrifices to God as if HaShem could be coerced or bribed by gifts or offerings. They had a very childish, immature and pagan idea of God.

Yesha'ayahu explained to them that there cannot be a divorce between *what we do* and *how God responds* to our prayers. HaShem did not listen to their prayers and rejected their sacrifices because their behavior was horrible. They came to Bet haMiqdash after practicing all kind of immoralities and acted as if nothing had happened, or as if HaShem did not know what they actually did. Yesha'ayahu told them categorically: HaShem knows what you do and rejects the prayer of the corrupt.

Yesha'ayahu also told them that they are not doomed forever: if a corrupt person repents and improves his o her behavior, HaShem will accept him back. In order for that situation to be reversed and for God to be willing to listen to their prayers, Yesha'ayahu told them what to do: (1:16-17)

"Wash yourselves, purify yourselves [from your evil deeds]. Stop doing evil, learn to practice righteousness, seek justice, defend the oppressed and fight for the cause of the orphan, plead for the widows."

When HaShem sees these good deeds, He will listen to our prayers.

SHABBAT SHALOM