The 9th of Ab and Religious Hypocrisy

This Shabbat morning (July 17th) we will begin reading the book of Debarim and at the end we will read a special Haftara from the book of Yesha'ayahu (Isaiah). This Haftara is known as "Chazon" (from its first word) and by extension the Shabbat before the 9th of Ab is called Shabbat Chazon. This text of the Haftara is found in the book of Isaiah 1: 1-27, and is a prophetic vision in which this great Jewish prophet rebukes the inhabitants of Jerusalem for their lack of integrity and corruption.

The Haftara describes the sins that caused God to ignore their prayers and pleads and eventually led to the destruction of our first Bet haMiqdash. By reading and remembering the mistakes of our ancestors, we can reflect on our own behavior, improve our actions, and deserve to see our Bet haMiqdash rebuilt very soon, in our days.

Among the points the prophet mentions, his criticism of religious hypocrisy is worth recalling.

1: 14-15: "Thus said the prophet to the people of Yerushalayim in the name of haShem: [Thus says God], when you stretch out your hands in prayer, I will take My eyes away from you; Even if you offer Me many prayers, I will not listen to you, [because] your hands are full of blood. "

Yesha'ayahu denounces the corrupt people who kill steal, cheat in their businesses, practice bribery and corrupt justice, and simultaneously pray to God, expecting God to hear their prayers! As the prophet Yesha'ayahu says: these people came to the Temple, "with their hands stained with blood," and offered sacrifices, as if God could be bribed with gifts or offerings in order to ignore their wrongdoings. These individuals, who

were possibly very powerful, had a very immature and pagan idea of God. Yesha'ayahu explained to them that there cannot be a divorce between what a person does and how he prays. A Jew cannot practice all kinds of immoralities, and then go to the Temple and pray as if nothing had happened and everything is fine. As if God does not know, or is not interested, in his affairs outside the Temple. This is a completely pagan concept, in which the pagan gods are limited to the affairs within the sanctuary and had no involvement in the lives of their worshipers.

Yesha'ayahu explains to them that this is unacceptable: that honesty and morality, and the protection of the weakest, is an imperative religious obligation. And if a person behaves piously in the Temple but is corrupt in his business, he is a hypocrite! And HaShem detests religious hypocrisy more than non-religiosity. God is not secluded in the Temple. He knows what we do. He rejects the prayer of the corrupt and demands that our life be honest and virtuous not only in the Temple, but also (or especially) outside it.

Yesha'ayahu also tells them that they are not condemned to be forever ignored by God. He explains to them that if a corrupt person repents, improves his behavior and becomes honest, HaShem will accept him or her again. For this situation to be reversed and for God to be willing to listen to their prayers, they need to change: (1: 16-17) "… Purify yourselves [of your wrong deeds]. Stop doing evil, learn to practice justice, seek righteousness, defend the oppressed, fight for the cause of the orphan, and defend the widows."

When HaShem sees our repentance ,He accepts us again and hears our prayers. This is what we can do to have the merit of seeing our Bet haMiqdash rebuild again.