

# SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES

## ENVISIONING A MORE JUST FUTURE

Jews have inherited a rich tradition that consists not only of stories and laws, but also of prophetic calls to action. We turn to the teachings of our prophets to open our eyes to the reality around us, and to draw inspiration from their visions of a world redeemed. This session will allow you to explore your own dreams for the future, to envision a more perfect world, and to consider what role you might have in bringing those dreams to fruition.

*Consider the following prophetic texts:*

For instruction shall come forth from Zion; the word of Adonai from Jerusalem. Thus God will judge among the many peoples, and arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant. And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war. But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree, with no one to disturb him.

— Micah 4:2-4

Cry with a full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn! Declare to My people their transgression; to the House of Jacob their sin. To be sure, they seek me daily, eager to learn My ways. Like a nation that does what is right, that has not abandoned the laws of its God, they ask me for the right way; they are eager for the nearness of God: "Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did you pay no heed?" Because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers! Because you fast in strife and contention and you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when Adonai is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry and to take the wretched poor into your home. When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn, and your healing spring up quickly. Your Vindicator shall march before you, the presence of Adonai shall be your rear guard. Then, when you call, Adonai will answer; when you cry, God will say "Here I am." If you banish the yoke from your midst, and evil speech, and you offer your compassion to the hungry, and satisfy the famished creature, then shall your light shine in darkness and your gloom shall be like noonday.

— Isaiah 58:1-10

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What visions of redemption to these texts offer? What does a more just world look like to these prophets?
- (b) What is our role in bringing about redemption, according to these texts? What is God's role? How do these expectations compare to your own aspirations for creating change?
- (c) Do these visions of a more just future comport with your own? Does reading these texts add anything to your understanding of what a just world would look like?
- (d) Do these texts inspire you? Agitate you? Do they matter differently to you than other inspirational texts because they come from Jewish tradition?

*Next, consider the following text:*

I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous one abandoned, nor their children begging for bread.

— Psalm 37:25 (also quoted in *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after meals)

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What is your emotional response to this statement?
- (b) It is unlikely that this statement was an accurate description of reality, even at the time it was written. Instead, it is an aspiration stated as fact. What purpose is served by reciting this statement after meals as though it were true? Is this kind of cognitive dissonance productive?
- (c) How does this aspirational vision line up with your own hopes for the future? Does this Jewish text add anything to your understanding of your dreams for a more just society?

*Consider this alternative reading of the prayer, offered by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman:*

For years, the only way I could read [the blessing above] was to supply my own punctuation. Since classical Hebrew texts come unpunctuated, and supplying them with periods and commas is a modern innovation, it is sometimes possible to read lines differently from the way they appear in print. So I decided to read it as:

“I have been young and now have grown older, but I have not seen! There are righteous people abandoned by God, with their children seeking bread.”<sup>1</sup>

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think about Rabbi Hoffman's alternative reading of this blessing? Is it more, or less powerful than the more standard reading? Which one most strongly inspires you to action?
- (b) Elsewhere, Rabbi Hoffman has recognized the aspirational nature of this blessing and the “*motsi*” – the blessing over bread, stating:

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Way Into Jewish Prayer* (New York: Jewish Lights 2004), 140.

*In the birkat hamazon, the grace after meals, where we praise God for feeding the whole world, it is not that God already does so, but that someday, we trust, God will. . . . The motsi and the birkat hamazon are prayers. Prayer is precisely the medium that punctuates the humdrum and the harrowing with the poetry of possibility.*

Do you, like Rabbi Hoffman, find inspiration in the “poetry of possibility” offered by prayer? Where else do you find such inspiration?

*Concluding thoughts:*

The philosopher Martin Buber wrote: “The encounter with God does not come to man in order that he may henceforth attend to God but in order that he may prove its meaning in action in the world. All revelation is a calling and a mission.”

What call have you heard today? What mission have you identified? And how might you work with the people in this group or others in your life to move closer to realize your dreams for a more perfect world?

# *If not now, when?*

## ENVISIONING A MORE JUST WORLD

Please reflect on the following questions. You may wish to take notes in the spaces provided:

When you picture a more just world, what does it look like? If you were to rewrite Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, what would your dream be?

Reflecting on your response above, what change would you like to see in the next 5 years?

What would you need in order to take action that would advance this 5-year goal? Information? Money? Political influence? Something else?

What is one thing you could do now to move you closer to your goal? Who might you enlist to help you achieve it?