

Delivered on Yom Kippur morning, September 19, 2018 (5779) at Shir Tikvah in Minneapolis as a response to the traditional Yom Kippur morning Haftorah text of Isaiah 57:1 – 58:1

Adonai says:

Build up, build up a highway!

Clear a road!

Remove all obstacles

From the road of my people!

Does the land consent to this road? Does it welcome us, have we offered thanks and scared gifts for what we might take? Who counts as “my people” for the purposes of this road? When will “my people” become “all people.” When will we know with our hearts and our spirits and our bodies that we are each a part of one another, that this connection is our birthright and perhaps our only one, That we are made of the earth and sky and all that is. How do we learn what we already know – that there are no other people’s children, that our collective life breathes into one another and that the borders of conquest and occupation are anathema to our prayers.

Here on the ancestral and occupied land of the Dakota people, in the place of the Anishinaabeg, I give thanks to the Native people of this land. I offer gratitude for all the ways that they have stewarded and for the ways that they continue to steward the deep truths of this place that I dare to call home. And for my gratitude to be meaningful, I think that means that I must question the building of roads.

I dwell on high, in holiness;

Yet with the contrite and the lowly in spirit-

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I who make spirits flag,

Also create the breath of life

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For their sinful greed I was angry;

I struck them and turned away in My wrath.

I note how they fare and will heal them:

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I will heal them.

Said the eternal, whose name is holy. Who dwells in multiplicity, in more than one place and in more than one time, in holiness and with the wicked, in wrath and in solace. How do all of us too, dwell in more than one place, in the past and in the future, in our pain and in our joy, reviving our own hearts every day, from grief, from the shattering truth of love gone so very right and from love gone maybe a little bit wrong, with those before us and those to come. Said the eternal who in these words exists in dissonance – offering compassion and judgment in the same breath, dreaming of healing so vast that all shall be well, knowing still that there shall be loss – unbearable and unthinkable loss, and also an afterwards to loss.

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

To break off every yoke. Every yoke. Not some but all. And then. Words of water and gardens and healing. Glimmering star glitter of freedom, everywhere and everywhere. And then.

If.

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,

From pursuing your affairs on My holy day;

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Then you can seek the favor of Adonai

I will set you astride the heights of the earth,

And let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob

If you do this.

If you follow my rules. If you observe my holy day. Then. Then I will ensure your reward. Accept my command, and you will flourish. After all, we have a deal.

Oy.

Systems of oppression reproduce in our hearts and in our communities in part because for those systems offer many of us with access to specific forms of privilege one hell of a deal. Comply, and we'll spare you the hammer of targeted violence. Give voice to justice but strike not at the foundations of Empire, and you will be known as a leader. Hold your tongue, be a good girl, mind your manners, just wait till it's over, and we won't make it worse.

This Yom Kippur, I come in atonement for every time I have struck a bargain with the systems that bind us. Every time I have accepted a quiet deal from patriarchy, white supremacy, extractive capitalism. Every time I have shook hands with hierarchy, promising – I'll behave, I'll wear the right clothes, I won't fuss about work meetings on Shabbat, I'll agree that my co-worker over-reacted to your racist b.s., I'll snicker about someone who didn't go to the right school, I'll say yeah – I don't believe her either – and someone with more power will reward me. I'll get the job, I'll keep the job, I'll be picked to run the campaign, to be lead attorney on the case, to hang out with the cool kids, to hold the mic. A thousand small bids for acceptance within a system of power that I want to burn to the ground. A thousand small cuts to the soul.

I and the people I love are hurting because every day we are asked to placate men. Mostly white men. Mostly cisgender men who say, be strong, be smart but don't overturn the system, don't say things I can't understand, don't say abolition, don't take my power, don't make me feel small, don't make me feel embarrassed, don't name my racism, don't name my misogyny, don't question too much, don't start a revolution, don't demand a union, don't get too political, don't make a mess, don't throw your brilliance in my face, don't actually act like black lives matter, run for office but don't win, be gay but not too queer, acknowledge Dakota and Ojibwe land but don't talk about treaties and sovereignty in the present time and don't organize so fiercely and with so much love that this death-cult of a white supremacist colonial monstrosity can no longer lay claim to our spirits our actions....and I'll make sure get what you want. I'll make sure you're protected. I'll let you keep what you've already fought to gain.

Do this, and I will set you astride. Do this, and I will let you enjoy your heritage.

Adonai. Holy of holies. I'm not sure how I feel about that being yours to decide.

Eternal one. What if to come to your fast, I first have to tell the truth of my rage. The truth of being told again and again here in this place of human struggle that my life is somehow ever contingent on what a man might let me do.

I don't have answers. But I do know that in every text, we might find a key.

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.

If you observe my command, but do it in a way that abuses our interdependence in community and in collective life, then your fast will not bear spiritual merit.

Which might be to say – a reward gained by reproducing relationships of dominance and oppression comes as no reward at all. What if the prophet of these words is teaching us to ask questions, even of you Adonai, whenever we are offered conquest in return for compliance. What questions then do we need to ask not only of roads but of ourselves.

I don't want dominion. I don't want to be lifted up or astride. I want to know every day, a little bit more of the connectedness to all beings that binds us all, to know a bit more everyday something of the trees and the sky and the water and the wind, to know the strength of my own life and the ways of honoring all other life. To be free because all of us are free. I don't know exactly how we get there. All I know is that if we want liberation, and if we cannot have liberation of ourselves without the liberation of all, then we have to build the conditions of liberation among us. We have to do the work. We can't simply fast. We have to mean it. We have to stop making deals with white supremacy and with patriarchy. Even when it costs us. Even when it's hard. Fewer rewards. More questions.