

On the Eve of Destruction

Shabbat Chazon 5782

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I read history for pleasure, but my current book is disturbing. *The Lincoln Conspiracy*, by Brad Meltzer and Josh Mensch,ⁱ is not about the successful plot to assassinate our martyred president in 1865. Instead, it's about a failed conspiracy to murder Lincoln much earlier, in 1861, before he even took office.

The would-be assassins were members of extremist self-appointed white supremacist militias. They planned to take control of the capital city by force. Lincoln had won a clear majority in the Electoral College, but his election was widely viewed as illegitimate throughout the South, where he was not even on the ballot in most states. While outgoing President James Buchanan had not sought reelection, his administration, and particularly his Secretary of War, would not intervene to stop the murderous plot or to ensure a peaceful transfer of power, a dereliction of duty. The U.S. House convened a Treason Committee. The attempted assassination was only stopped because President-Elect Lincoln's supporters—including a powerful railroad executive who hired Allan Pinkerton, the nation's first private investigator—sneaking Lincoln into Washington, D.C., more or less in disguise.

As Mark Twain is purported to have observed: “History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.”ⁱⁱ

In our Jewish calendar, this Shabbat is all about history. As the sun sets this evening, the Hebrew date will be 9 Av—in Hebrew, *Tisha B'Av*—observed as the anniversary of the destructions of the First and Second Temples in ancient Jerusalem and as a date on which numerous other catastrophes have befallen our people throughout our history. *Tisha B'Av* is a day of fasting, second only to Yom Kippur, for traditional Jews. Because mourning is prohibited on Shabbat, when ninth of Av falls on Shabbat, as it does this year, *Tisha B'Av* is observed on Sunday.

The Shabbat on which we are embarking, immediately preceding *Tisha B'Av*, is called *Shabbat Chazon*, the “Shabbat of Vision,” named for the first word of tomorrow morning's Haftarah from Isaiah in which prophet foresees the destruction.

Rebuking the people, the prophet accuses them of having forgotten the God who created them and forged a special bond with them since the days of Abraham and Sarah.ⁱⁱⁱ He describes the destruction as if it has already come,^{iv} though Isaiah

lived more than a century before the First Temple was destroyed, which establishes him as a visionary.^v He castigates Israelites who are apparently punctilious in observing the Temple's sacrificial rituals, even as they behave immorally.^{vi} He implores them: "Wash yourselves; cleanse yourselves, put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice; relieve the oppressed. Uphold the orphan's rights; take up the widow's cause."^{vii}

Our rabbinic sages designated this reading for the Shabbat on the eve of recalling destruction. They wanted the Jewish people to know that fidelity to God's will is a requirement for retaining—or, by their time, regaining—sovereignty in the Land of Israel. And what does the prophet emphasize as God's desire? Justice. Relieving oppression. Caring for the poor and most vulnerable members of society.

Neither ancient Israel and Judea, nor the Jewish people, are alone in being vulnerable to destruction as a result of immorality.

The United States was nearly destroyed in the 1860s by the same people and nefarious causes that attempted to assassinate President-Elect Lincoln and to prevent the peaceful transition of power. Lincoln was not the most radical of abolitionists: In 1861, he did not believe that the Constitution permitted the abolition of slavery where it already existed. Though he was on record abhorring slavery, in his campaign, Lincoln expressly sought only to end slavery's expansion into territories that were not yet states. Nevertheless, his election was viewed as so catastrophic that white supremacists sought to murder him, and states began seceding from the Union even before he was inaugurated. The nation was torn asunder, and well over a half million people lost their lives in a Civil War waged to protect an unjust institution, oppressing the most vulnerable members of society, the same crimes that Isaiah condemned in ancient Israel.

Given the striking similarities between the plot to assassinate President-Elect Lincoln and the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, we could be forgiven for asking if America is on the verge of belligerent disunion once again. Tens of millions of Americans continue to be misled into believing that the 2020 presidential election result was illegitimate. We may take comfort from Georgia primary voters, who renominated statewide office holders who bravely affirmed their state's election results, even though they were personally disappointed with them and faced enormous pressure to manipulate them. More recently, though, primary voters in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Arizona have nominated candidates who have ominously pledged that, had they been in office in late 2020, they would have undermined democracy by certifying electors whose candidate lost their states' elections.

Doing that, of course, would be unjust. And these same would-be officials seek and celebrate the oppression, for example, of transgender youth and of pregnant people who cannot afford to travel long distances to access medical care—two groups who are, like the ancient Israelite widow and orphan, among society’s most vulnerable. Yes, our nation could, even today, be on the verge of destruction at the hands of forces who commit the very sins that Isaiah denounced. Waving American flags and engaging in performative patriotism while trampling democracy and the poor is precisely analogous to bringing sacrifices to the ancient Temple while ignoring the poor.

Isaiah’s vision, though, does not end with destruction in this Haftarah for *Shabbat Chazon*. Instead, he concludes by describing a future in which Jerusalem is liberated: “I will restore your judges as in the beginning, and your counselors as in days of old. Then shall you be called ‘*Righteous City, Faithful Town.*’ Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and its repentant people by righteousness.”^{viii}

When the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple, the entire leadership class of Judea was exiled to Babylon. We read in Psalms: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.”^{ix} Mourning that which has been lost is an important first step in addressing the downfall of a great nation.

But our ancestors did not stop there. They heard the words of an anonymous prophet, recorded in the latter part of the Book of Isaiah, urging them to repent, to be faithful to God, to restore justice, and to care for the poor and most vulnerable among them. And so they did, and they were restored to the Promised Land, rebuilding the Temple.

Let our prayer on this Shabbat be that our nation will bring itself back from the eve of destruction once again. Grant Americans the vision, articulated by Isaiah, to unify in the pursuit of justice, relieving oppression, always mindful of the most vulnerable among us.

Amen.

ⁱⁱ Brad Meltzer and Josh Mensch, *The Lincoln Conspiracy*, Macmillan, 2020.

ⁱⁱ The source of this quote, often attributed to Twain, is not confirmed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 1:2-4.

^{iv} Isaiah 1:7.

^v W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition*, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, p. 1180.

^{vi} Isaiah 1:10-15.

^{vii} Isaiah 1:16-17.

^{viii} Isaiah 1:26-27.

^{ix} Psalms 137:1.