Every year, the reading of Parashat Dvarim (the opening of the book of Deuteronomy) falls on the Shabbat immediately preceding the holiday of Tisha B'Av. This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Hazon (the Shabbat of Vision) because the haftarah reading, the corresponding selection from the prophetic books, is Hazon Yeshayah (the Vision of the prophet Isaiah) the opening words of the 66-chapter long book of Isaiah.

The Haftarah of Hazon Yeshayah opens with collective chastisement for the community of Israel. The community has assembled to bring their offerings at the Holy Temple. The prophet Isaiah lambasts them, as a mouthpiece for Divine rage and frustration at the injustice perpetrated by the community of Israel. Through Isaiah, God accuses the community of participating in meaningless ritual, asking rhetorically, "Why do I want your offerings? Who asked you bring me this?" God promises punishment for our collective arrogance and stubbornness.

This is the final haftarah in a series of "hafatarot of rebuke" before the holiday of Tisha B'av. After reading this rebuke, the Jewish community traditionally observes Tisha B'Av. This year, our observance falls on the very next day, which means that tomorrow evening, Jewish communities around the world will gather together to enact various symbolic rituals, like fasting, praying and lamenting.
If it seems paradoxical that we should engage in symbolic ritual after being rebuked for engaging in symbolic ritual, we haven't even gotten started.
This point in the year is full of such paradoxes. Our Torah reading tomorrow promises that the Israelites will be numerous as the stars in heaven, even as the haftarah promises that the Israelites will be utterly vanquished and scattered.

Tisha B'Av itself is a day of mourning, but it is also considered a festival, because of the multiple traditions that hold that the redemption will come on Tisha B'Av. And finally, the great paradox of the rhetorical question in the Haftarah: "Who asked you to do this? Why should I want your offerings?" Well, according to Biblical point of view that wrote the Book of Isaiah, the answer to that question is clear: much as God might reject our practices now, it was in fact God who not only asked but commanded that we engage in those practices. How can ritual be both commanded by God, and scorned by God? How can it be both holy and empty?

During this season, the experience of gathering in collective lamentation reminds us how potent ritual can be. It can lead to personal catharsis, communal connection and renewed passion for justice. This is the case even when that lamentation is ostensibly over something as symbolic and distant as the ancient Temple. If you're not sure you believe me, I invite you to join us for our rituals tomorrow evening and on Sunday, and see how they move in you.

Yet the text of this haftarah tells us that these rituals can be done incorrectly, can fail to stir the Divine, even when we think we're doing something powerful.

What is it that makes ritual work - or not work? What failure of ritual is God so upset about at the opening of the Book of Isaiah?
Near the beginning of Isaiah's diatribe, in verse three of the haftarah, God makes what at first seems a bizarre analogy. "An ox knows its owner, a donkey its

master's crib," says Isaiah in the name of God, "[but] Israel doesn't know; my people do not discern."

Somehow, the Israelites' failure is tied to what they do not know. What is it that we do not know?

A Jewish philosopher named Bahya Ibn Pakuda lived in Spain, in the 11th century. 700 years later, a Jewish scholar and mystic named Moshe Chayyim Luzzato lived and wrote in Italy. Both are influentials thinkers and writers in what became known as the "Mussar" movement. Mussar means "discipline" - in all of the senses of the word: a regular, committed practice, as well as rebuke or correction. Mussar is the closest thing to mindfulness practice to have arisen authentically out of Judaism until the Hasidim came along.

Both of those ethical theorists, living on different continents, 700 years apart, interpret that opening diatribe of Isaiah in the same way. The failure of the Israelite community, says both Bahya in the 11th century and Luzzato in the 18th century, is a failure of gratitude.

The ox knows its owner - and is grateful - and even a donkey knows where its food comes from, but the Israelites are not sensible enough to feel grateful to the One that brought them out of Egypt and continues to provide for them. What they don't know is a feeling of gratitude.

Now, I don't understand gratitude in the same way that these commentators did. Their gratitude was directed to a King God who provides nourishment or takes it away. But I am inspired by their concept. When I think of gratitude, I think of a certain sensibility, an awareness that the world owes us absolutely nothing.

The world owes us absolutely nothing.

Everything we have - the nourishment physical and emotional, the community and relationships - none of it is to be taken for granted. We don't enter the world entitled to any of it - and if we were to keep our eyes wide open all of the time, we would acknowledge that many of our fellow human beings on this planet do not have those things. If we are entitled, what about all of those people who don't have the nourishment, the community, the home?

In a certain sense, any failure of gratitude is a failure of justice, which certainly sheds some light on Isaiah's accusation of us.

I go back and ask again why Isaiah, representing God, is so angry at the Israelites performing exactly the ritual that God commanded. And with this reading, inspired by the mussar writers, I begin to see an answer. The people show up at the Holy Temple, bringing their sacrifices. They say the words they are supposed to say. But it is all rote. Those rituals were designed to remind us of our own vulnerability, to remind us that the fact itself of having animals to bring to sacrifice, is nothing short of miraculous. Those rituals were designed to remind us to take nothing for granted and to share with compassion the blessings we have.

Once those rituals failed, the Temple had to be destroyed, and the rituals had to evolve, so that we could relearn to feel the reality of our place on this earth.

Each time we come together in community to pray, we are enacting a continuation of the Temple service, a ritual that evolved to stay relevant. For many of us, at least some of the time, this experience of gathering in prayer does *work*, in this sense that it helps us to connect with awe, it helps us to feel gratitude, or gives us the energy to be kinder than we felt coming in.

But goodness knows, the rituals do not *always* work. The words in the prayer book, at least for me, sometimes seem rote. Maybe prayer, like the temple service before it, is no longer fully effective at fulfilling its purpose of bringing us to greater gratitude and compassion. That being the case, this season, and the haftarah of Hazon Yeshayah push each of us to examine in the present: Where are our rituals failing? How can we use prayer to shake ourselves up, so that the original intention of the whole sacrificial system, and of prayer, can be manifest in our lives?

The Book of Lamentations, which we will read tomorrow night, concludes with the line Hashiveinu Hashem Elecha v'nashuvah, chadeish yameinu k'kedem. (Return us to You, God, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old). Some Jews say those lines and focus on a literal return: a redemption in Jerusalem, a renewal of Jewish self-governance and a rebuilding of the Holy Temple.

When I say those words tomorrow night, I will mean something simpler and perhaps more difficult. I mean a return to that sense of reality, of gratitude and humility about my place in the world. Remind me to take nothing for granted, so that I might face destruction with equanimity, and difference with compassion. Remind me that there is holiness in both the memory of the Temple, and in its burnt ruins. Help me find divinity in humanity.

I will say those words fervently, and so for me, prayer is - and will continue to be - meaningful.

It is fitting that we conclude the service with Aleinu - the words that mean “It is up to us.” It is up to us to make meaning out of all of these words that we say here; up to us to actualize divinity in the world, to return ourselves, even as we pray for return. May it be so.