

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Balak

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Balak, Micah 5 :6-6;8

## **Other Nations, Who Needs Them?**

The opening of this week's *haftarah* echoes a question I've long had about the Torah reading. None of the events with Balak and Balaam happens to Jews or involves them, raising the question of why it's included in the Torah. The haftarah's call for us to remember what Balak intended to do to us, and the advice that Balaam gave him suggests that the haftarah is meant, at least this week, to explain some of what is unclear about that Torah reading.

The first three verses focus us on the central question of the haftarah and Torah reading, how we are supposed to relate to non-Jews. The prophet describes the remnant of the Jewish people as dew that comes from God, which does not need to wait or hope for any human help, as lions among animals, cubs among sheep, meaning that if they chose to run amok no one could stop them, with the last of the three saying that our right hands will be strong and powerful over our enemies.

My instinct is to read the verse as meaning that the Jews will be like the dew for the non-Jews, bring them some form of blessing. Dew is a naturally occurring phenomenon that Scripture views a sign of God's beneficence to the world. If the Jews are like dew, our being spread among other nations, whether physically or by social and economic interactions, seems to mean that we provide a service.

That service, one we and they have denied for so long we cannot even imagine it, is to remind non-Jewish nations (read: the world) that success depends on a person's or nation's connection to God, Whom we as a people symbolize. We have given up on this because of how far much of the world has gone from believing in a God Who affects events here on Earth (and many of those who do are Christian fundamentalists, who make many uncomfortable for other reasons).

## **Destruction Right After Bounty?**

Given the importance of the Jewish people's role, the next six verses jar, since they seem to predict destruction and collapse. While Micah may have simply switched gears, Rashi and Radak agree that, at least for the first two verses, he meant that the Jews will not need horses or fortified cities, giving them the kind of independence (whether we are living among them or on our own) that allows for true influence.

In that reading, self-sufficiency is a religiously valuable move, aside from its economic advantages. Just as a prophet and/or judge is supposed to be free of monetary concerns, to impress those around him and/or to avoid possible influence from them, so too the Jews. If we are dependent on other nations, militarily, economically, perhaps even culturally, we are less able to point out to them how much they miss by refusing to recognize the truths of our God.

Independence need not mean separation. Micah is not arguing for a lack of contact, or protesting the people's becoming intertwined with them. He is only pointing out that we at the same time

should be striving for the kind of independence that allows us to speak truths that need to be spoken. Foremost among them is the existence of a God Who is involved with the world, Who “cares” about our actions, and Who rewards and punishes based on those actions.

Since that only explains the verses that speak of not having fortified cities, whereas the prophet goes on to speak of a broader destruction, let me suggest that Micah was pointing out two other truths of Jewish history. First, God “needs” us to serve as emissaries before we’ve completed the process of self-perfection. If so, God might punish us at the same time as sending us on our mission. Indeed, it may be that our failure to perform our mission led to our exile, confronting us more regularly with that mission.

Second, exile may have been the only way God was able to convince us to undertake that task. Too often, when Jews are comfortable, they assume that that comfort is their right, and allow it to foster a closing-in on themselves. If I live in a community where Judaism is well-set-up, can have my kosher food and Shabbat services, I may allow myself to ignore those others—Jewish and not—“out there.”

Sadly, then, we may force God to cast us out of our comfortable surroundings, to force us to engage with the others we were always supposed to. The middle verses of the *haftarah* would then connect well with what came before—we are meant to be dew to the other nations; we can do that from the comforts of home if we try, but are likely to need to be shoved out of the nest before we’ll be willing to.

### **How to Get Back to That Role**

Speaking of errors in how we try to represent God, the next verses point out similar problems. Aside from a stubborn tendency to turn to other gods, Jews of Micah’s time also mishandled God’s commandments. Forgetting Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Jews insist on focusing on rituals such as sacrifice, when God was concerned with “doing justice, loving to perform kindnesses, and walking humbly with God.” As Makkot 24a reminds us, this was Micah’s way of encapsulating all *mitsvot*, meaning that our performance of *mistvot* must always reflect these lessons, or we’ll be getting it wrong.

To bring us back: We might include the Balaam-Balak story as an example of the Jewish people’s affect on the nations around them, a reminder that that is meant to be part of our role in the world, and the *haftarah* is a call to return to that mission, and suggestions on how to do so.

Shabbat Shalom