

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Bamidbar

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Bemidbar, Hosea 2:1-22

Hosea: The Unknown Story

This week's *haftarah* comes from the second chapter of Hosea. Pesachim 87b-88a offers necessary background, telling us Hosea was the oldest and greatest of four prophets who functioned in his time, the others being Isaiah, Amos, and Micah.

The Talmud also stresses his early attachment to justice. In their view, God came to Hosea saying "your sons have sinned." Hosea responded that God should drop them and take another nation. To teach him his error, God commands him to marry a prostitute, Gomer b. Divlayim, and they have three children.

Once his family has been formed, God reminds Hosea that Moses separated from his wife as he became more advanced in prophecy, yet Hosea was still staying with his wife. Hosea protests that he could not abandon the woman who has borne his children, nor the children themselves (the source of Moses' right to do that is an important question for another time).

This was the response God sought, much like Jonah and the plant. In both cases, the human has become attached to a relationship at the same time that he is advocating God's abandoning one that has stood for generations. In the Rabbis' reading, Hosea understands and accepts the point, and prays for the Jews to be saved.

The Talmud's reconstruction explains why our haftarah leads into the rebuke with two verses of comfort. It is Hosea's prayer for the Jews, his understanding that mercy must always serve as background, that allows him to administer the warnings God "really" wanted him to deliver. The comforting verses say the Jews will be uncountable (the connection to our Torah reading, it would seem), will once again be known as God's children, that the Jews of the two Kingdoms will gather, make a single head, and leave their exile to return to Israel. (That all the Jewish people would ever agree on one leader may be the most utopian part of the vision).

The Uncompromising Prophet

In this reading, Hosea's prophecy, and life, was deeply affected by his stance in his original conversation with God. Until that point, his book might have started with the rebukes of chapter 2, our haftarah. It was only when Hosea responded so strictly that God decided to show him the lesson of marriage and children, after which he was ready for his real work as a prophet.

One explanation of this is that Hosea's comment showed God pressing matters that needed prophetic attention before even getting to his true mission. Related to that, we might suggest that even prophets can only hear that part of God's infinite messages for which they are ready. If so, the Talmud was telling us of the personal lesson Hosea needed to learn before he could deliver

God's message. That his needs shape the Word that comes down to us is both a sign of his greatness and a sobering reminder of the limitations of even our greatest prophets.

The Rest of the Section

The rest of the *haftarah* consists of rebukes we all know. God complains that the Jews have not been faithful, in part by turning to other nations for assistance and ascribing the good in our lives to sources other than God. God announces that He will withhold those goods, which will (eventually) bring us to realize the many bounties God bestows upon us.

The Sages stress that this punishment is solely concerned with eliciting obedience. Berachot 7a cites R. Yohanan saying in the name of R. Yose that internal submission to God is as good as several external punishments. Berachot 35a contrasts verse 11, which says that grain belongs to God, to the verse in Shema that says "*v'asafta deganecha*, you shall gather your grain".

The Talmud's answer, that the grain is ours only when we do God's will, highlights the point of our *haftarah*: The road to freedom, wealth, and blessings beyond all imagining, is through honest and sincere submission to God's Will.

The Hard Way to Renewal

God then says that the Jews will need to return to the desert, to be spoken to and enticed by God. Exodus Rabbah 2;4 draws the obvious parallel to the original Exodus, seeing our future redemption, like our past, as starting in the desert. The prediction that our nation can only get back to focusing properly on God in a desert is a sad comment on us. A mature people would attach to the true and necessary even without being taken to a place where all competing factors have been removed.

We can hope that this and similar prophecies—such as Jeremiah 3;14, which says that God will gather us back one from a city, two from a family, describe only the most likely outcome (not the necessary one). That leaves us to hold on to the possibility we will find a way to waken ourselves and our brethren, to hear God's messages properly and appropriately, before it is too late.

Forging a Complete and Unbreakable Bond

The end of the *haftarah* predicts a day when Jews will no longer call God *baali*, but *ishi*. The plainest sense of the text is that the Jews will no longer use the term *baali* even as a praise for God, since it reminds us of a form of idol worship that once tempted us away from devotion to God.

Similarly, in the next verse God promises to so fully remove the mention of *Baal* from the Jews' lips that they will not even remember the name of the idols they used to worship. It is only then that God will promise to keep us safe from all forms of danger—animals, vermin, sword-- to allow us to reside in Israel without fear.

At that point, Hosea speaks the three verses we say when wrapping the *tefillin* around our fingers, that God will betroth us to Him forever, with righteousness, justice, kindness, and empathy. The order seems clear: we reject idol worship, God helps us remove it from our lips and memories, and then we can forge a complete, lasting, and unbreakable bond, based on the qualities we know (from Scripture) to be the ones God values.

Shabbat Shalom