

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Bechukotai

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Behukotai, Jeremiah 16:19-17:14

This week's *haftarah* has many verses that are justifiably famous and could lead to full-scale discussions of their own. Instead of covering the whole *haftarah*, then, I am going to here try to take just a couple of themes I have not belabored before.

What Leads Us to Miss Truths Other Nations Might Figure Out First

The first two units of this week's *haftarah*, meaning the last three verses of chapter 16 and the first three verses of chapter 17, have different thrusts but combine together to make a surprising point. The first unit consists of Jeremiah complaining about the possibility that in the future other nations will come to realize the emptiness of their objects of worship (whether they are actually idols or not), while the Jews will still not fully repent of their sins.

The next unit speaks of how deeply entrenched the Jews are in those sins, but the Talmud cites the opinion of R. Yehuda in the name of Rav, that the Jews began worshiping idols only as a cover to allow them to engage in wrongful sexuality. Whether that means they were willing to commit a worse crime in order to avoid being rebuked for a lesser one— a sad choice people make today as well, working so hard to avoid facing their wrongs they end up committing much worse ones—or that idol worship provided good opportunities for illicit sex, the Talmud is telling us that the original motivation for the idol worship was not the worship itself.

However it started, the Talmud then interprets the verse as saying the Jews eventually developed deep and honest affection for those idols, as if they were close relatives. This reminds us that once we start certain actions, for whatever reason, they can easily become a pull of their own, long after the original stimulus faded. So, for example, psychologists point out that people who eat, smoke, or watch TV to escape stress can often find themselves still enmeshed in those activities long after the stress is gone.

Taken together, these first two units imply that at least one possible future of the world involves the Jewish people getting so caught up in some idea—one they originally took on for a subsidiary reason, such as greater access to social interactions they desired—that they adhere to it even after the non-Jews who originally promoted it have abandoned it for its falsehood. Truly a frustrating experience for Jeremiah to contemplate.

Turning Theory Into Practice and Trust in God

Two of the next four verses are well-known to students of Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, because Avot 3; 18 cites them as the proof-text for its claim that one whose “wisdom outstrips his actions” is like a tree with too many branches for its roots.

Seeing the verse in context makes the Mishnah problematic, since the prophet refers to one who

puts his trust in people and turns his heart away from God; it is such a person whom Jeremiah says will be like a tree living in inimical conditions.

Faced with situations like this, we have two valid choices: separate the two comments, saying that Jeremiah made one point and the Mishnah a separate but also legitimate one, or we can find a greater unity between the two. I prefer the second strategy when possible, for its greater elegance.

The person whose wisdom outstrips his actions, I suspect, has misunderstood the value of wisdom. While many people in the world continue to assume that scholarship, intelligence, and knowledge are inherent values, Avot is telling us that the point of wisdom is to apply it to improving the world. One who does has given root to his wisdom, grounded it in the real and important matter of improving this world.

That perspective of wisdom, it seems to me, extends from a faith-based worldview. Those who leave God out of their analysis of life and the world are more likely to be those who see the value of wisdom in what it does for that person; the jump from having wisdom to putting it into practice confounds philosophers (look, for example, at contemporary academic discussions of the end of Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed, where academics struggle to understand how or why Maimonides would have moved from the pure intellectual plane to seeing the highest level of perfection in taking one's intellectual understanding and putting it into practice).

If linking wisdom to action is a sign of faith, we understand what Jeremiah was saying, as well as how Avot applied it. Jews of Jeremiah's time did not construct their picture of the future with God centrally in mind. Security, wisdom, wealth were all issues to be taken care of by people, and often for themselves, without any broader picture to consider. That would also fuel a focus on wisdom over actions, since how wise one was would determine personal safety and security. Jeremiah is urging his listeners to do otherwise, as were the Sages in Avot, and as we can learn for ourselves today.

Money and Trust in God

The last Mishnah in Peah cites the verse about trusting in God to support its assertion that one who struggles not to take charity even when he is allowed to (but can, with effort, live without it) will eventually become wealthy and support others. Part of trust in God involves avoiding making others one's source of sustenance. Verse 11 also speaks of one who gets money wrongly, only this time by misleading others.

Taken together with all that we've seen here, we see the issue of trust in God, of guiding our actions by our belief in God and by no other standards, as a key to securing the kinds of outcomes we want. Whether it is in attaining money, wisdom, or other, there is a Godly way and a non-Godly way, and it is up to us to choose wisely.

God Will Help If We Ask

The penultimate verse of the haftarah, *Mikveh Yisrael Hashem*, speaks of God as a *mikveh*, a source of purification that involves immersing oneself. The late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once suggested that this signifies a self-purification in which the person plays an active role, the

kinds of role laid out in the rest of the *haftarah*.

Our theme here, then, is finding the way to get in God's good graces through our own actions, through trust in God, and focus on God.

Shabbat Shalom