

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Beha'alotcha

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Behaalotecha, Zachariah 2:14-4:7

Interestingly, this *haftarah* is the same as that for the first Shabbat of Hanukkah. There, we relate the reading to the holiday menorahs we light, in parallel to the one Aaron is told how to care for in this Torah reading. That cannot be the whole story, at the very least because the haftarah starts fourteen verses before the Menorah is ever mentioned, and stops before the vision is fully explained (the symbolism of the olive branches is elaborated just after we stop our reading).

Chapter 2, Verses 14-17: Particularism and Universalism in Zachariah

The first section of the *haftarah* has Zachariah telling Jerusalem to rejoice in her future redemption, when God will come and reside in her midst. The section closes with a call for “all flesh” to be silent before God, having said before that that “many nations” will come to see God as their deity as well.

Note the two sides—the other nations will be part of the future, and will accept our version of the One True God. At the same time, the Jewish relationship with God will continue to be different and special, as God is portrayed as residing in our midst. That mix of universalism, being concerned with all nations’ sharing in the future for which we long, and particularism, being aware that we are and always will be special and different, characterizes Judaism and our view of the future.

The Midrash notes that verse 13 connects Jerusalem’s rejoicing to God’s residing in her midst, suggesting that the redemption will not be complete when people return to Jerusalem, the return of a Davidic kingship to Jerusalem, or even when the nations of the world come to accept our version of God and how God relates to the world. Jerusalem’s full rejuvenation only happens when God’s Presence is once again ensconced in the city.

Another Midrash, incidentally, understands the reference to God “awakening” from His Holy Place to say that God’s Presence has in fact never left the Temple Mount, that it is now dormant, awaiting events that allow it to reveal itself. I find such a picture stimulating, reminding me of those who see prophecy as tapping into a Voice that is always present in the world, but only certain special people manage to hear.

Two Connected Stories: Joshua’s Rejuvenation and the Menorah

Moving on to the rest of the haftarah, chapters 3 and 4 seem to tell of two different prophecies, one in which Zachariah sees Joshua, the High Priest, with Satan standing on his right and dressed in soiled clothing. The second, the Menorah vision, chapter 4, tells of the Menorah that Zachariah saw. The traditional grouping of the text splits the visions differently, grouping the High Priest with the vision of the Menorah and its symbolism. After a full break, we are given the interpretation of other aspects of the Menorah vision.

In the first story, Joshua has two problems that need to be solved, Satan and the clothing. While God takes care of the first, the clothing remain, a reminder that even after we overcome our evil inclinations, the distractions that lure us from serving God, we still need to cleanse ourselves of the dirt of those past sins.

The Imperfect Priest: Does It Affect His Service?

To explain why the High Priest's clothing is soiled, Rashi says it refers to Joshua's descendants marrying non-Jews. Rashi assumes that the actions of children and grandchildren reflect back on the ancestor. It is not enough to have children; raising them, setting them on a path where they will raise their own children properly, is all a part of what it means to have fulfilled the commandment of procreation.

An alternate view thinks Joshua's clothing was dirtied when he was thrown in the fire. In that story, following the successful escape of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar challenged the two false prophets, Ahab and Zidkiyah, to reproduce that feat. They protested that there were three when Hananiah and the others were thrown in, and the numbers provided safety; Nebuchadnezzar agreed, and threw Joshua in along with them.

In the Talmud's view, the two were burned up and Joshua saved, but singed by having been thrown in in such proximity to evil. Here again, Joshua is seen as a person of great personal piety caught up in surrounding events that leave him damaged, with dirty clothing as the metaphor.

Human Input into the Future

In the vision, the angels replace Joshua's dirtied clothing with clean ones, and Zachariah adds that they should put a *tz'nif tahor*, a pure hat, on him. Worth emphasizing is that Zachariah says to do it; he is not just a witness, he is an active member of the team remaking Joshua. So, too, Joshua is told that he and his descendants can guarantee a positive future, as long as they do what God wants.

Zachariah's readiness to make a suggestion perhaps explains why he is expected to understand the vision of the Menorah on his own. The angel tells him that it shows that God's spirit is what guarantees success, which does not quite explain the whole vision. The *haftarah* then closes by saying that no mountain can stand before Zerubavel, and that the foundation stone will be turned into a building of remarkable beauty.

Since Zachariah's prophecy occurs during the rebuilding of the second Temple, his words could be seen as a reaction to the building of a House not nearly as magnificent as King Solomon's. The Menorah is a sign of the Spirit of God, the key ingredient to any kind of future success, whether it be Joshua's, as in our *haftarah*, or Zerubavel's, the political leader of Zachariah's time.

Conclusion: The Menorah as a Central Sign of the Priests' Service

Although there is much more to be said, what we have seen already explains why this Menorah vision connects so well to the Torah reading. As Rashi tells us, Aaron was disheartened by the gifts offered by the heads of the tribes, since he could not give one. The insights about the

Menorah in our haftarah tell us what God meant by reminding him that he was given the service of the Menorah.

The people in the outside world have much to accomplish, and donate some of that in impressive ways to the service of God, but Aaron and his sons, forbidden by God from being ordinary, hold the key not just to the Temple but to the success of the entire people. Certainly as great a legacy.

Shabbat Shalom