

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Behar

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Behar, Jeremiah 32; 6-27

A Bifurcated *Haftarah*: Introduction and Summary

This *haftarah* tells of Jeremiah's buying a field from his cousin, Hanamel, as God had told him to, his prayer after following God's command, and the first verse of God's reply. In the sale itself, Jeremiah announces that God had told him, a day before, that Hanamel would come to ask if he wanted to exercise his right of redemption. Jeremiah does, taking pains to insure the record of purchase will last a long time.

Jeremiah's prayer notes God's greatness, both in general and to the Jewish people, concedes that the Jews had violated the covenant with God, and are about to be correctly punished by the conquest of their city. He closes by saying, and yet You have commanded me to buy the field. The first verse of God's answer only has God say, rhetorically, "I am the Lord of all flesh, is there anything I cannot do?"

Problems You May Already Have Noticed

Verse 15 seems to hold the key to the several problems our summary should have raised. The traditional text sets it off from those before and after, and Jeremiah prefaces it with its own "For thus saith the Lord of Hosts," when he had done so in verse 14.

Further, Jeremiah's puzzlement confuses us. He wonders why God was commanding him to buy the field at such a dire moment in Jewish history, when he should already know the answer—God is having him perform a public act of faith in real estate, to stress that the upcoming exile is not permanent, nor does it imply complete abandonment by God.

God's response does not fully enlighten us, either the part we read or its entirety. He pretty much repeats ideas even we know, since they appeared in the text already—the Jews are about to get their deserved punishment for their sins, but will, in the future, be restored to their Land.

The one line of God's response that we do read highlights the problem, since God says, "I am the Lord of all flesh, is there anything I am unable to do?" language Jeremiah had explicitly used in his prayer.

Jeremiah's Uncertainty

Early in the *haftarah*, when Hanamel comes, Jeremiah notes that he then knew it was *devar Hashem*, the word of God. This seems odd coming from a prophet—the previous day, he had a vision of his cousin coming, and only when it comes true does he know that it was from God!?

Radak suggests Jeremiah was saying he only realized God wanted him to buy the field when Hanamel came. Radak is noticing that the day before, God only told him Hanamel was coming to ask him to buy the field, not how he was supposed to react. If he is right, it would seem to mean God requires prophets to figure out some aspects of their missions on their own, a stimulating

idea that can be applied to many parts of Scripture.

For it to work here, we would have to assume that verse 14, which says that God told Jeremiah to put the deed in clay vessels, happened at that moment (in front of everyone), after Jeremiah had decided to buy the field himself. That would leave us to figure out which parts of a prophecy God tells, and which are left for the prophet to figure out on his own.

The Veil Pulls Back Slowly

Radak's suggestion that Jeremiah was not told to buy the field affects our understanding of prophecy in general—what does God tell prophets, how do they understand what they are told, etc-- but are not central to this haftarah. The idea that God only slowly revealed what was going on to Jeremiah does, however, offer an explanation of the prayer and the piece of God's response we read.

One reason God might reveal the plan slowly to Jeremiah is that it was inconceivable, even for a prophet. Jeremiah understands what he is being told at each step, and obeys, but it is literally unbelievable to him. His prayer (and now we understand his hesitation) is not meant to question God's power, but the sense of what he, Jeremiah, was being told.

Rehabilitation After Destruction: A Radical Idea

Jeremiah could understand that God creates the world, and does initial kindnesses to all. Part of that world, too, is a system of justice, and Jeremiah does not, at this point, see how God could plan to rehabilitate a people who are about to get the proper punishment for their many and repeated sins.

God's taking Jeremiah's words as the opening of His response now becomes even more pointed. Jeremiah meant only that God can do, physically, whatever He wants, whereas God is informing him that God's conception of the world, of right and wrong, also vastly outstrips (really, is incomparable to) the human one. The prophet cannot see why God would return the buying and selling of land, but that is because even he does not fully understand the Holy One.

This also yields a deeper connection to the Torah reading than being examples of redemption of land. The Torah premises those laws upon the assertion that we cannot sell the Land permanently, since it belongs to God. We probably tend to overlook that as hyperbole, and to explain the laws of the Jubilee year as examples of a Jewish concern with social justice.

It might be, though, that the Torah means what it says, that these laws emphasize that the Land is God's, and the Jews tenants. Their tenancy explains why they'll be brought back to the Land even though, by rights, their sins might have doomed them to disappear from the face of the earth. Their role in the Land, though, did not depend only on their own rights and merits, it also stemmed from their assigned place in world history.

The *haftarah*, in this reading, builds on the Torah's emphasis that the Jews' handling of the Land is a way of giving physical reality to God's connection to the world. It is to give physical meaning to that idea that we are prohibited from ever experiencing the Land as fully enough "ours" to buy and sell in perpetuity, and which also saves us from the permanent oblivion our

actions otherwise deserved. And it was that mystery Jeremiah did not at first understand, leading to his praying to God in our haftarah.

Shabbat Shalom