

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Devarim

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Devarim, Isaiah 1:1-27

Jeremiah was the New Isaiah

While Isaiah lived 150 years before the Destruction, and is better known as the prophet of consolation, the Midrash notes that he, like Jeremiah, was active during the reign of four successive kings. While the point seems banal, the Midrash's raising it suggests it saw a parallel between the two prophets, the one of consolation and the other of destruction.

Noting that Isaiah's last king was Hezekiah, held up by tradition as the paradigm of how a king should act, one who convinced/coerced the Jews to worship God, I wonder whether Isaiah's career might have been different had he not had the good fortune of associating with Hezekiah. Possibly, had Hezekiah not acted as he did, Isaiah would have had to have been Jeremiah.

Remember that the Northern Kingdom was exiled by Assyria in Isaiah's time, and that the defeat of Assyria around the walls of Jerusalem was a dramatic miracle, not an expected result. If so, the Destruction of the Temple was the culmination of hundreds of years of the Jews' failing to listen to their prophets, failing to adhere to even a minimal standard of observance. This week's haftarah lists a few of those failings, making clear that God was not nitpicking, God was complaining about the Jews' ability to see themselves as righteous despite obvious and glaring flaws.

A Pause to Consider a Corollary to Sherlock Holmes' Rule

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had Sherlock Holmes tell Watson his famous rule: eliminate the impossible, and whatever remains, no matter how improbable, is the truth. Rothstein's not-so-famous corollary is: be careful what you define as impossible, because you might eliminate the truth.

Perhaps a non sequitur, I bring it up here because Isaiah faces a people so confident in their rightness that he fails to budge them, despite speaking in the name of God. The people he addresses "know" that sacrifice and other purely ritualistic aspects of the religion are what God cares about, more than social justice or caring for society's legitimate neediest.

It is this failing Isaiah characterizes as not knowing God. His call to Heaven and Earth, in terms that are meant to remind us of the Torah reading in Haazinu, obliquely feeds into three other themes that appear here. Since Moses had set up Heaven and Earth as witnesses and guarantors of our pact with God, it is their job to administer punishment as well. We are supposed to recognize that punishments and bad times stem from our abandonment of God, a challenge for people, such as in Isaiah's time who do not even agree that they have abandoned God. Note, too, that abandonment did not mean that they left God completely, only that they left the Torah's desired path enough for God to deny the value in what they were doing.

The Comparison to Sodom

Isaiah's striking use of Sodom and Amora as a metaphor for his audience was sure to catch their attention, but also focused on the central failing, their dealings with the poor and underprivileged. In this context, we can see how their sacrifices might be rejected as service of God. The ability to compartmentalize one's ritual life, walling it off from the other actions, shows the ritual itself is so flawed as to be almost useless. Any time observance can comfortably coexist with glaring inadequacies, the rituals are not as whole as they could be, and may lose their meaning completely.

Yet the people observing them assume they are better than okay with God, they are doing what God wants. Imagine the situation Isaiah depicts, a Jew coming to genuflect before God, arms outstretched beseechingly, when he has killed someone. While we may not know people who embody quite as glaring a contradiction, a little honest reflection, I suspect, will give many examples from within segments of the Jewish community we think of as our own.

As a side note, the comparison to Sodom also reminds us how rare it is for evil people to think of themselves that way. Even in Sodom, perhaps, the people thought they had a workable morality, and were shocked when destruction rained down on them. Evil is not always obviously so, and sometimes it is the reverse—the evil morality is more obvious and intuitive than the one upon which God insists.

That same problem bedevils our ability to rise to the challenge Isaiah offers, in which God guarantees inconceivable forgiveness if only we hear God's true messages. Since everybody thinks they're listening to God's messages, how do we separate the true from the false or flawed ones, and then convince others of that truth? Like I said before, beware what we eliminate as impossible, because sometimes that is exactly what God seeks.

Two final points are all I have space for. First, the Talmud uses a verse in our *haftarah* as proof that the Jews of Isaiah's time would reject rebuke by pointing out similar flaws in the person raising the point. The tragedy in that scenario is a) that everyone had the flaws, so no one was free of taint, but more importantly, b) that people could not accept criticism that accurately captured their flaws, because of the failings of the person bringing it up. It is never pleasant to deal with a hypocrite, or someone so in denial they do not realize the irony in their criticism, but if the point they make is true, it behooves us to learn from it anyway.

When God Does It, It Will Not Be Nearly as Much Fun

The last point, vital to stress repeatedly since so few recognize its truth, is that the other option always out there is that God will bring the redemption by cleansing us of the sinners in our midst. That cleansing, which may not happen all at once, will be painful, with segments of our nation being killed or punished for their wrongs.

If we repent without denial, we can find the God of Mercy. If not, the God of Truth (same God, different modes) will purify the nation, actualizing truths we have been avoiding all these years. We can get to redemption ourselves by meriting it, or have God drag us there. As we face yet another Tisha B'Av without having taken the first road—not an easy one either, since it involves giving up our self-serving untruths-- we can hope that this will be the year we absorb the messages we need to, and merit the true and complete return for which we all long.

Shabbat Shalom