

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Eikev

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Eikev, Isaiah 49:14-51:3

## **Verses 14-21: Repopulation, A First Comfort**

The first section of this haftarah, the second of the seven of comfort, stresses the repopulation of Jerusalem as a vital part of her rejuvenation. Zion thinks of herself as abandoned, which the Prophet vigorously disputes by telling us that our connection to God is stronger than a mother's to her child or nursing infant, that Zion is inscribed on God's "palms", her walls before Him constantly.

That connection will show itself in the return of Zion's children from all over, turning a desolate city into one where people complain of a lack of room to live, astonishing the city itself. Repopulation's centrality to assuaging the wounds of destruction suggests that a significant aspect of Jerusalem's role in the world—its status as a city of God-- can be fulfilled even before we have a return of a Temple, king, or Sanhedrin, but not without a bustling successful city. Her mourning is not just sadness at her decreased state, but at her ineffectiveness; the return of citizens will allow her to serve at least some of her functions.

## **The Exodus as the Unbreakable Bond**

When the verses refer to God not forgetting us, various Midrashim read God as "remembering" aspects of the time of the Exodus. That time, including the Giving of the Torah at Sinai and the construction and utilization of the Tabernacle, are what the Midrash looks back towards as the source of God's indissoluble bond with us. The Exodus and all that came after-- up to and including the Conquest of Israel-- were signs of our having been chosen by God as agents of His Presence in the world, a choice and connection that will never be broken or forgotten.

Verses 22-23 record God's promise that non-Jews will bring us back to Israel on their arms (does paying for our flights count?), that their kings will raise us, will bow down to us, and lick our dirt. Seeing their obeisance will fully convince us that those who follow God will never be lost or wither away.

We might mistake these verses for joy in returning to non-Jews some of the abuse they've given us over the years. Sifrei Deuteronomy 314, however, relates their actions to those God did for us during the Exodus. We care less about their subservience than about their conceding on the importance of enhancing God's Presence in the world.

Rather than envisioning non-Jews as slaves, Isaiah was prophesying that significant numbers of them, especially their leaders, will come to appreciate our unique role in the world, and will want to assist us, not out of fear, but out of respect for our status, for our position as representatives of God.

## **Chapter Fifty, Verses 1-3: Hope is Vital to Sustaining Religious Engagement**

The opening of chapter fifty goes back to the theme of abandonment, with God questioning what

bill of divorce He ever gave the Jews, who act as if they have been written out of God's picture. We here see the danger of disillusionment, since it may lead people to cease even trying to secure a better future. Disengagement starts with a lack of hope, a sense of being shut out of God's concerns.

### **Verses 4-11: Sustaining Hope**

The next eight verses might seem to move on to a different topic, Isaiah's boasting about his prophetic prowess. He tells of his confidence that God will protect him, notes that God gave him the power to speak in a way that shores up people's energy, and says that God gives him new messages every morning. He closes by predicting that his attackers will dry up like moths, so that those sensitive to God's Word should believe in him, join him, and listen to God.

Radak thinks Isaiah was telling us that he was born with the power to accomplish the difficult tasks set for him. If so, what might look like self-aggrandizement is more him trying to convince a discouraged people they could seek God and His Word from this prophet. That Isaiah has daily updates, that he is naturally endowed both with the ability to hear God's messages and to transmit them in an encouraging and invigorating way, would ideally have led the people to listen to him and adjust their lives according to what he says they should do.

Incidentally, the revelation that Isaiah had prophecies every night means that his 66 chapters of Scripture is a sort of "greatest hits," highpoints of his forty years of daily prophecy.

### **Chapter 51, Verses 1-2: Abraham and Sarah as Our Sources**

The next verses urge us to look back to the rock and pit from which we were taken, traditionally read as a reference to Abraham and Sarah. Part of the comfort in remembering Abraham and Sarah, I believe, is Abraham's legacy as one of the few humans with whom God chose to consult about how to run the world. Abraham became an active partner in running God's world, a legacy we are supposed to find comforting and inspiring, suggesting we could do the same if only we adopted the right motives and strategies.

### **Summary**

This week's comfort—better than last week's, for sure—comes from a return to the Land not just in population but in status as the source of God's Presence. Non-Jews will recognize that and eagerly assist us in accomplishing it (talk about Utopian!!!).

In his own time, Isaiah's presence could have eased the way for the Jews to accomplish what they needed; with his passing, we need to look to our roots, particularly Abraham and our time in the desert. Remembering all three of them—prophet, Patriarch, and passage-- should help us remember the bright future that is available to us whenever we get serious about reaching for it.

Shabbat Shalom