

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Bereshit

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 1, Parshat Bereshit, Isaiah 42:5—43:10

Creation as Power

The הפטרה opens with God mentioning that He created the Heavens and spread them out, formed the Earth, etc. This similarity to the Torah reading explains choosing a text like this one, but many other prophetic statements also speak of God as Creator. Moreover, that is not what the הפטרה is actually about. God's having created the world quickly takes a backseat to other concerns, such as mentioning how much God has until now refrained from fully revealing Himself.

Isaiah tells us that that will change in the future, as God promises to make His Presence so manifest as to spur the Jewish people to sing a שיר חדש, a new song. Whereas now he describes the people as blind and deaf, he promises they will find spiritual places they never knew or imagined. That context lets us understand that Creation here is a point of reference for emphasizing God's power, for noting how often humans neglect to notice His presence, an error that often shapes how we view the world. In the future, the obvious Creator will once again emerge.

At Creation, God was fully revealed. After Creation, He hid Himself, in order to leave room for human freewill, since it can only be truly free in an environment where God is not so obvious that any intelligent person would assume His existence and active involvement.

The הפטרה reminds us that God will eventually return to the Creation mode, this time to fully redeem the Jews. Many today bemoan or complain about God's hiddenness, pointing to it as a barrier to faith and fidelity. Our haftarah asks us to consider the balance between God's hiddenness and openness, the values and costs of each.

Famous/Important Phrases from this Week's הפטרה:

Our general method of studying an הפטרה will be to take it as a whole,

summarizing and analyzing it in order. In these first weeks, though, some phrases have achieved a life of their own outside the הפטרה itself; it seems equally useful to focus on those phrases to see where the הפטרה as a whole was taking us.

The phrase in 42:10, “שירו לה' שיר חדש”, sing to God a ‘new song’,” is generally understood to refer to the song of praise the Jews will sing when God has publicly redeemed them, when all recognize the Jews as His nation. Some of the Sages’ statements emphasize that this kind of song only comes in response to supernatural events, such as the Splitting of the Sea or when the Philistines yoked two cows to a wagon on which they placed the Ark. The text only says the Philistines wanted to test whether the cows would head straight back to Israel, but the Talmud (Avodah Zara 24b) assumes the cows also sang as they walked along.

42:21, “ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר”, God wants to help others become more righteous, therefore makes the Torah great and strong (and therefore attractive to people).” This phrase closes a collection of verses recited at the end the daily liturgy. In addition, many communities cite this verse before saying a kaddish d'rabbanan, a Rabbis’ Kaddish. Tradition has it that such a Kaddish is said only after mentioning Rabbinically derived insights into Torah. After a Torah study class, the custom has become to recite the final Mishnah in Makkot, where R. Hananiah b. Akashya interprets this verse as saying that God gave much Torah and mitsvot to benefit us.

In Laws of Torah Study, 2;7, Maimonides cites the phrase to justify opening another *yeshiva* or school even when there already is one, since the verse tells us that God wants more and more Torah. While halachah often frowns on competition, in terms of spreading Torah—and knowledge of God- the rules differ.

More famously, Maimonides understands the משנה in Makkot as fitting his theory that any Jew who keeps one מצוה fully, without any motives other than worship of God, is guaranteed a place in the World to Come. The stress on many mitsvot in the Mishnah was to celebrate the range of options God gave us for finding one to fulfill in this way. Again, staying with our theme, Maimonides is assuming that the way into at least the first level of the World to Come is by having a moment of complete God-focus, God-awareness that His hiddenness

makes a challenge.

42:24, “מי נתן למשסה יעקב...הלא ה' זו חטאנו לו”, Who gave the Jews over to spoil...Is it not this God to Whom we have sinned?” Gittin 58a tells us that R. Joshua heard of a boy who had been imprisoned. He went outside his window and said the first half of the verse, and the boy completed it. Certain this indicated a bright future, R. Joshua ransomed him and he became R. Yishmael b. Elisha.

The story is a good one on its own, but the verse used suggests that R. Yishmael already at a tender age recognized God’s impact on history, despite its hiddenness. Other Talmudic stories show R. Yishmael having remarkably direct interactions with God. Seeing God’s “tracks” in the world is, apparently, the first step towards having even more intense such contacts.

43:4, “כל הנקרא בשמי ולכבודי בראתיו יצרתיו אף עשיתיו”, All that is called by Name I created, formed and made.” God as Creator does not mean just once, it means a continuing connection to and ownership of the world.

In his commentary to the last משנה in עדויות, Maimonides cites this verse to explain the position of the Sages in a debate about which lineage issues the Messiah will settle (the Torah establishes rules about lineage that had been violated already by the time of the Mishnah; in theory, all of the descendants of such families were no longer able to serve whichever functions required that lineage).

The Sages said Messiah will not deal with such issues, he will only bring peace to the world. To explain, Maimonides quotes this verse, which shows that lineage is not an essential concern of God’s, since God created us all.

It’s a challenging claim, since the Torah established those lineage rules, but it does fit the overall theme of the haftarah, that we have nowhere near a sufficient understanding of God, God’s power, and God’s Truth. It is attaining that Truth that Maimonides thinks will bring about the peace the Sages did see as Messiah’s job.

In summary, then, this הפטרה used the act of Creation as the paradigm of God’s power and Presence being made most manifest in the world. The הפטרה challenges us to see God’s impact even on occasions when it is not so clear.

Shabbat Shalom