

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Noah

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 2, Parshat Noach, Isaiah, Chapter 54:1-55:5

A Deceptively Simple Explanation for Why We Read this *Haftarah*

A verse in the middle of the *הרטפה* (v.54:9) refers to the promises God is making to the Jewish people as similar in some way to the waters of Noah. (The exact similarity is a matter of debate, as we discuss in the essay on the *haftarah* of Parshat Ki Tetsei ; it either means that the promise of redemption is as ironclad as the promise not to have a Flood or that the number of the days of Redemption will be similar to the amount of time from Noah to Isaiah).

One issue with that view of the connection is that it turns the promise to avoid future Floods into a central theme of the Torah reading, which seems untrue for the Torah reading itself. Second, were that our focus in the selection, we could have stopped reading at verse 10, a section break. Indeed, the extra twelve verses constitute a whole haftarah of their own, read for Parshat Re'eh.

We seek, therefore, an understanding of this reading that makes it significant enough to return to throughout the year.

Central Themes Point the Way

The haftarah speaks of the ways in which Jerusalem will grow in the future. The first half focuses on the physical expansion of Jerusalem, which in turn will lead to its becoming the clear seat of God's Presence in the world. Note that the first event is celebrated because it leads to the second, not for its own sake.

The second half of the haftarah divides into two parts. The first continues physical expressions of Jerusalem's future glory, speaking in seemingly hyperbolic terms, saying that the city will be paved with precious stones. At least one Rabbinic tradition took that even further, asserting that the stones would be incredibly large. A student who expressed doubt about the literal truth of those claims was rebuked as lacking in full belief, indicating that tradition attached an unexplained significance to accepting the miraculous here.

In spiritual terms, we are told that all of the city's inhabitants will be learned of God, creating such a strong connection that God will make our enemies' weapons fail when they are wielded against Jerusalem. The last piece of the *הרטפה* reminds us how easy it is to form the kind of relationship with God that would allow for such supernatural interventions. Like water, Torah is so available that we should not need to pay for it, we could just absorb it (free) and see its fruitful results.

Taking the two halves together, the *הרטפה* focuses on how we can help bring about a future we long for in our own terms, but that also has ramifications for the world and its success at accomplishing one of its central goals, establishing the well-accepted rule of God.

The Flood As Reminder of God's Power and Consistency

Some who read about the Flood will get caught up in the most obviously tragic aspects, such as the loss of life, human and animal. The saddest part of the Flood, though, was that so soon after Creation (in the Torah's presentation), and at least so soon after Adam and Eve were sent out into the world, their progeny had strayed so far that they could not retain the most minimal standards of behavior, nor recognize that God would punish them for those failures.

The root of all evil is not money, the Flood tells us, it is forgetting or ignoring God's relationship to the world. When God swears never again to bring a Flood, the oath is to find other ways of insuring that the world can be reminded of its need to engage with God. Selective punishments, even horrible ones, are always available, but so are the positive ones of making Jerusalem into the center of the world's focus.

The *הרטפה* thus continues the Torah reading by showing us how it is that God can insure there will be no need for another Flood, the ways in which the Lord can assert His Presence without violating His oath.

Of course, as always, the preference would be for God not to have to be the one to teach these lessons, for Jews and humanity generally to learn it on their own; this utopian ideal would lead to an even better future than imagined in this haftarah. Barring that, though, we have a bedrock promise that God will eventually clearly reveal Himself, and that Jerusalem will be the venue for that blessed event.

Famous Verses and Their Ramifications

Like with the first *haftarah*, this one has several famous phrases that deepen our understanding of the selection's themes. First, there is 54;5, "ומש תואבצ'ה דישוע דילעב יכ", for your husband is your Creator, God of Hosts is His Name, and your Redeemer, the holy One of Israel, will be known as Lord of the Earth." It is by becoming our partner and redeemer, we are being told, that God can expand to become the recognized Ruler of the whole world.

54;13, "דינב מולש ברו'ה ידומיל דינב לכו", and all your sons will be learned of God and will have much peace," is well known because it is recited at the end of Sabbath morning prayers, as part of the statement of R. Elazar b. R. Hanina that scholars increase peace in the world, reading דינב, your sons, as דינב, your builders. The inference interestingly connects scholarship with peace and building the world; as in the rest of the piece, we are being told that scholarship is one of the surest paths to knowing how to build a world that will reveal God.

Finally, Maimonides twice cites 55;1, "מימל וכל אמצ לכ יוה", Ho, all who are thirsty, go to the water." In *The Laws of the Study of Torah* 3;9, he cites Taanit 7a, which sees this verse as highlighting an important similarity between Torah and water: both flow downwards from high places. For water, that is a physical reality; for Torah, it's an attitudinal one—those who are arrogant (high on themselves) will not readily find Torah, while those who are lowly, who place themselves at the feet of the Sages, will become repositories of Torah.

In Guide I;30, Maimonides notes that the metaphor of food and drink is used for wisdom, especially Torah, since those are also nutritive, like food. For us, the call to go to Torah, then, becomes as simple as the call to eat right and exercise. And, as before, it reminds us that the

physical world portrayed here is a vehicle to recognition of the broader spiritual world. Food for thought.

In summary, then, this haftarah mentioned the Flood in the context of the promises of physical and spiritual bounty that will occur in the future Jerusalem; that suggested that the tragedy of the Flood was as much in its cause-- the loss of realization of God so soon after Creation-- as in its resulting death and destruction.

Shabbat Shalom