

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Kedoshim

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Kedoshim, Ezekiel 22; 1-16

*(Note: this haftarah is read rarely, only when Aharei and Kedoshim are separate and Aharei is not Shabbat haGadol. Some communities read Ezekiel 20;2-20, instead of this one, but that is largely a gentler, less specific version of this one).*

## **Unflinching Looks Are Not So Easy To Take**

At a simple level, the *haftarah* tells us of Ezekiel being told to “judge” Jerusalem, telling her her various failings in the time just before her destruction. Before we get to the substance of that critique, we note that God hints that doing so will be no easy task.

God says “*hatishpot*, will you judge?” a rhetorical question that indicates-- at least according to Nachmanides—a sense of the difficulty of an endeavor, not a lack of belief in its outcome.

Applied here, God would be saying to Ezekiel “Prepare yourself for this hard, but doable, job of telling Jerusalem all her sins.” Radak says the word is doubled for emphasis.

Metsudat David and Metsudat Ziyon (late seventeenth century commentators on the Prophets) here translate the word *hatishpot* as argue or dispute, rather than to judge. In that reading, God is calling Ezekiel to dispute with Jerusalem over her character, as if she, the city, was arguing, right up until the end, that her virtue had not been lost. The task for Ezekiel was harder than to recite Jerusalem’s sins; it was to find a way to judge the city, to get the city (and its inhabitants) to comprehend, to accept, to recognize, the enormity of their perfidy.

## **The Whole Is More than the Sum of Its Parts**

Rashi notes that the twenty-four sins mentioned in these sixteen verses match the ones that God warned us about in the Torah reading. I am unused to seeing Rashi make such comments, so it makes me wonder whether he was trying to implicitly explain why we read this haftarah on that week. Even if not, Rashi is correct in noting that the sins here are all included in this week’s Torah reading.

That idea adds an interesting twist to the endeavor the Midrash and some commentators set for themselves, trying to figure out which of these sins was “the worst” or the one that was the final piece of the puzzle that became the Destruction. As important as those questions are, they risk neglecting the bigger picture, that the people of Jerusalem had in fact violated all of the central principles of Parshat Kedoshim.

Rashi at the beginning of the Torah reading notes that the verse has God telling Moses to speak to the entirety of the Jewish people (not the usual locution), because this part of the Torah was read at the ceremony known as *Hakhel*. Celebrated once every seven years, on the Sukkot following a shemittah year, the ritual involved gathering as many Jews as possible and reading the Torah together. Rashi explains that Kedoshim was selected for that occasion because the Torah’s central principles are entioned in it.

Ezekiel's list thus tells us that the Jews' disobedience went beyond the ordinary wrong of not listening to God. They had managed to cast aside the bulk of Torah; exactly that list of sins God designated as the ones Jews most needed to be reminded of at national gatherings, was what the people had chosen to violate.

### **The Final Straw as an Organizing Principle**

Our recognition of the list of sins being a kind of unit does not negate the project of figuring out which sin was the final straw that produced the Destruction. We can note that the Jews had rejected the majority of the body of Torah and still wonder whether one of them in particular spurred Divine retribution.

Tanhuma Shoftim 2 suggests that it was perversion of justice, because verse 5 refers to it as defiling of her name. Rashi notes that Jerusalem was known as a city of justice, so this defiling means forsaking the legacy that was central to her character. Leviticus Rabbah 33:3 offers a similar idea, noting that the last sin enumerated was armed robbery, a different but related example of Jerusalem failing to be a city of justice. Sifrei Numbers 116 thinks it was the mistreatment of the sacrifices.

### **Murder as a Gateway Sin**

I would expound on the idea of the final straw but for Radak's convincing note that murder is central here. Radak points out that Ezekiel is told to address the "city of blood," and that verse 3 says that it was murder that caused the city's time to end (we can reconcile that with the Midrashim above—Radak, e.g., notes that armed robbery was mentioned last-- but it would take too long here).

In addition, Ezekiel mentions murder in seven of the fifteen substantive verses in the prophecy. More than that, murder is a problem here beyond the murder itself; it is a crime that serves to spur other crimes. When the prophet mentions the corruption of the leadership, the presence of bribery, the use of slander, all are seen as ancillary to the murder for which they intend to pave the way.

### **The Intentionality of the Sin**

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:21 uses our verses as a prime example of the intent to anger God. Verse 11 mentions adultery with a married woman and then incest with one's daughter in law. In the Midrash's reading, this reflects the Jews of the time working to violate the worst sin they could imagine.

Depressing as it is to think of a Jewish people who sought so assiduously to rebel against God, who defiled themselves with all sorts of sins (Radak notes that we sometimes think of defilement as coming from touching certain objects, but that in fact improper sexuality and worshipping idols defile more thoroughly than that), there are two pieces of comfort we might find in this *haftarah*.

First, as Radak notes, the non-Jewish nations are portrayed here as disdainful of us for abandoning our traditions. While this is not as true in Western countries today, Jewish history has generally

shown us that we do best, and earn the most admiration when we keep to our legacy.

Second, the reminder of that time can serve as an alert, reminding us to be aware of our national tendency to abandon and/or reject what God wants from us. Forewarned is, we can hope, forearmed, and we can use the *haftarah* of Kedoshim as a spur to better observe the obligations of the Torah reading itself.

Shabbat Shalom