

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Ki Tisa

- Gideon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Ki Tissa, I Book of Kings 18: 1-39

Public and Private Recreations of the Challenge of the Golden Calf

This week's *haftarah* starts with God sending Elijah to tell Ahab that He is going to make it rain. Everything else in the *haftarah* extends from there, but the connection to the Torah reading would seem to come only in the second half, where Elijah and Ahab meet, joust tensely about the cause of the current drought, and then Elijah defeats the priests of Baal in the contest to bring fire down from heaven.

That the story flows in the original text does not explain why we choose to read it all, since Elijah's meeting with Obadiah, a servant of Ahab, has little to do with later events. Elijah sends Obadiah to the king with the news that he would be coming that day, and the latter protests. A spirit of God would surely whisk Elijah away, leaving Obadiah—who mentions that he has saved a hundred prophets from Ahab's wife, by hiding them in caves—to face his master alone.

Honing in on the connection between the second half of the *haftarah* and the sin of the Golden Calf will also show us why Obadiah's life story is surprisingly prominent in our *haftarah* readings, appearing in two others besides this one.

Carmel and Calf: Two Ways of Proving God's Power

A crucial component of the Torah reading and the *haftarah* is that the Jewish people had lost sight of the identity of the True God. Some part of the people declared the Calf "the God Who took you out of Egypt." In the *haftarah*, Elijah offers a stark choice between Baal and God, and the people are silent, unable to choose. The prophet in each case had to prove and/or reinforce faith in the true God.

Emphasizing the people's inability or refusal to choose explains aspects of each story. Ahab greets Elijah rudely every time he sees him, and accuses the prophet of being the source of the people's problems. At the same time, he obeys Elijah's orders, gathering the people and the priests of Baal to Carmel as he commands.

It is not that he and his people lacked belief in God or Elijah, it was that they believed in God and Baal. Elijah's thundering insistence on choosing between the two was so foreign to their perspective they could not respond.

That helps us understand Elijah's reason for mocking the prophets of Baal as they tried to bring fire on their sacrifice. It was almost not enough for him to win, since that might only convince the people that God was stronger than Baal on this occasion: he needed to win so fully as to erase the people's connection to Baal.

This theme of rejuvenating faith explains what we learn of the altar he uses. The verse tells us he rebuilt "*mizbeyach Hashem ha'harus*, the altar of God that was destroyed." Then he took 12

stones—the verse itself notes the parallel to the tribes, to whom God had said “Israel will be your name.” The altar and the stones remind his audience of their heritage, shows them how far they, the descendants of the Twelve Tribes, epitomes of faith and originators of the Shema, have fallen.

The Calf—National Calamity?

In parallel, God’s reaction to the Calf might surprise us when we notice that the Levites killed “only” 3000 Calf-worshippers. While no small number—it is as many deaths as on 9/11 in a smaller group— it is still only a half a percent. Were 50,000 New Yorkers (or 1½ million Americans) to develop some crazy religion, would we expect God to blame the city or region as a whole?

We need to realize, instead, that the sin lay in the broader community, who saw the Calf as no big deal, who were either silently supportive or at least agnostic. The actual worshippers became liable for death, but God’s reaction focused on the wider nation, whose lack of protest made the sin so intolerable.

Obadiah: Presence Beyond Apparent Impact or Importance

Recognizing that the Jews of Elijah’s time had this pluralistic and confused religiosity helps us decode his meeting with Obadiah. According to tradition, this is the third time we meet Obadiah in the haftarot, since the Sages assumed it was his widow who cried out to Elisha for financial assistance (and he told her to borrow pots, and fill them with oil, etc.), and we read the entirety of his book as the haftarah for Vayishlah. Considering his relatively small impact on Scripture as a whole, it is surprising to see him so often.

The answer may lie in his role in this era; his central act was hiding and sustaining God’s prophets, revealing him to be a force for good despite his inability to invoke supernatural assistance (in contrast to both Elijah and Elisha). He circumvents Ahab rather than challenge him; knows supernatural forces will save Elijah, but does not expect them for himself. When the text shows us his meeting with Elijah, we see two ways people can make God’s Presence known in the world, working within the natural order or beyond it.

The two halves of our *haftarah* thus combine to show us the test of the Calf and at Carmel in its fuller difficulty. In a world of competing allegiances, the Jewish people repeatedly develop an attachment to controlling powers other than God. Weaning them from those other worships has proven difficult, since Jews may insist that other powers than God control the world. Recognizing that God is the only ultimate power in the world is a lesson that has proven hard to inculcate.

Most of us have to work towards this goal as individuals, like Obadiah, doing our best in a sometimes hostile environment. The examples of those who could make the point more splashily, like Moses and Elijah, serve as brilliant flashes of light to help the rest of us continue working at the task.

Having watched the Jewish people fail to avoid those sins in the Torah reading, and seen Moses’ need to battle back from that nadir, the *haftarah* shows us that the battle is one which continues

throughout history, sometimes in the model of Elijah, but more often that of Obadiah.

Shabbat Shalom