

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Korach

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Korach, I Samuel 11:14-12:22

Two vital realizations make this week's *haftarah* more understandable. First, almost everyone, if not everyone, has an internal justification for what they do, no matter how evil they may actually be in fact. It is not true that evil people—substitute your favorites, Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein being the usual suspects, but with plenty of competition (Pol Pot, Kim Jong Il, anyone?)—wake up in the morning and say, oh, wow, what evil can I commit today? No, they wake up wondering how they can make the world a better place, as do you and I. The difference between us is how we define the words, who is part of the world we care about, what “better” means, and the acceptable methods of getting there.

The second necessary tool to decipher this week's Torah reading and *haftarah* is the knowledge that many people are in such thorough denial they do not have a clue as to how self-contradictory and self-destructive their behavior is. Recognizing those two truths, we can understand what was happening in our *haftarah*.

Saul is Now Accepted As King

Having defeated Nahash, Samuel opens by calling for a celebratory renewal of the coronation. This was needed because when Saul originally was chosen, *b'nei b'liaal*, worthless people, questioned his fitness for the job.

Step One in oxymoronic behavior: The Jews have a prophet they believe in, they go to him for a king, he draws lots through the *Urim* and *Tumim*, finds the answer, that guy is hiding, the *Urim* tell where to find him, and there's still a sizable minority of people who do not believe he's right for the task. (I say sizable minority because I do not imagine Samuel would call for another ceremony to convince a few crazies).

The people's following Samuel to the ceremony and reveling in it suggests they had forgotten his original reaction to their request for a king. One possibility is that Samuel was happy to celebrate Saul's success and re-coronation despite his negativity towards the whole process that led to his being made king.

That may be true, and the choice of Gilgal—as opposed to Mitspah-- suggests sincerity on the prophet's part. Radak points out that Gilgal was where the Ark and Tent of Meeting resided when the Jews first entered the Land, indicating, I think, that it was the first spot of the people's residence in the Land (like Plymouth Rock). This would mean that Samuel was telling them that the choice of a king should join their national narrative of their roots and formative events, going all the way back to their first entry into the Land.

But the people's easy acceptance of Samuel's positive attitude jumps out. Did they not remember that he was unhappy with them? Did they not know?

Suspicion of Samuel, Part of the Package

Another example of odd (and, perhaps, evil) behavior by the people is suggested by Samuel's feeling he had to fully verify that he had never used his office to personal advantage. Unless we see him as paranoid, he seems to understand that the people are not fully behind him, would not easily accept the words of admonishment he is about to give them. He may have been their prophet for a lot of years, consistently spread God's Word, but he can never be sure they will accept what he has to say.

To the Meat of the Matter

Having verified that they have renounced any suspicions of him, Samuel can get to his real point, emphasizing the evil of their actions. Readers of the book up until this point would not have known that the people's call for a king was primarily stimulated by the threat of Nahash, not by the flaws in Samuel's sons, as the people expressed it to him. (This also clarifies why Samuel waited until Nahash had been defeated to renew the kingship—Saul has now fulfilled the prime directive underlying his rule).

The call for a king also broke a pattern that had been itself distressing, but at least always brought the people back to God. As the book documents, the story of Jewish history up until his time was the Jews' forgetting God, getting into trouble, returning to beseech God for salvation, getting a leader who does so, and then forgetting Him again, starting a whole new cycle.

Even though the cycle was still in force in Samuel's time, with the arrival of Nahash, they insisted on a king, hoping, apparently, not to need to turn to God each time, to already have a leader in place to protect them.

But, as the saying goes, you can't get outta the game. Samuel is here to tell them that their success in this world, at least as a nation (deep breath, because few accept this today) depends on whether they follow God, king or no. To back up his point, he brings a rainstorm in the middle of summer.

I find it endlessly fascinating that the prophet Samuel— thought by the Sages to have approached Moses and Aaron in his level of prophecy-- still could not count on his audience believing or accepting what he had to say, needing miracles to back up his claims.

The people get some of his point, admit they've sinned, and ask him to pray for them. Of course, the job of a leader is to accept whatever signs of penitence the people exhibit, and to encourage more, which Samuel does, so the haftarah ends on a relatively happy note.

Read this way, though, the *haftarah* highlights for us the recurring truths of the Jewish people's behavior throughout history, especially in the Torah reading. Remember that a day after the earth swallowed up Korah and his gang, presumably proving that Moses did not act on his own, the people complain that Moses and Aaron had killed too many people. And God decides to have one more test to prove to everyone that Aaron was Divinely chosen to be Kohen Gadol. We are, apparently, a people who take a long time to learn our lessons.

Shabbat Shalom