

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Lech Lecha

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Lech Lecha, Isaiah 40:27--41:16

Descendants of Abraham

As in the first two weeks, this haftarah also carries an obvious reason to read it, the reference in 41:8 to the Jews as "יְבוּאָה מֵהֶרְבֵּא עֲרֹז", the descendants of Abraham who loved Me." Like the earlier weeks as well, we contend that there is more to the story, with the topic here being Providence and how to interpret it.

Our selection opens with Isaiah referring to the Jewish people as Jacob, which the שרדמ (Genesis Rabbah 91;10) sees as focused on that Patriarch's having always experienced God as punishing, even when the Divine Intent was different. For example, Jacob saw Joseph's sale and all that came with it as retribution for his own failures when it was actually God bringing about the necessary future in a gentler fashion than originally planned. (The Midrash thinks that Jacob had been slated to be dragged to Egypt in chains; God instead had him brought there by his son).

The Midrash seems to ignore an important difference between the Jews here and that view of Jacob. What Isaiah sees the Jews as complaining about is that God has stopped paying attention to them, not that God is too strict with them. Assuming the Midrash did not just get it wrong, we would need to understand that the Midrash equates the two attitudes in their level of error about God's impact on the world—denying God's impact or misinterpreting it are similar enough to be lumped together.

The antidote for these problems is to notice all the many ways that God intervenes in human affairs, such as by giving strength to the exhausted (the phrase used in one of the traditional morning blessings) and shaping the course of world history. When the name of Abraham is invoked, it is to support the claim that our worries as a nation are unfounded, that God who chose Abraham certainly bears a continuing and positive interest in our welfare, much as events seem to say otherwise.

Shabbat 156b takes 41;2's reference to God as the One who brought justice out of the East as part of a surprising story about Abraham. Abraham, in this read, did not believe that God could give him offspring because the stars said otherwise. It was at this stage that God taught him of the Divine superiority to astrology. Abraham had already rejected worshipping other gods, but thought Nature, as revealed by the stars, set limits even on what God could do (as do many scientists today). Isaac's birth, and our verse, taught him that God exerts absolute control, even to the breaking of what seems the absolutely necessary future.

Positive Providence

In our netfo era nrecnoc dna noituac s'bocaJ elihw taht dlot gnieb era ew ,neht הפטרה, appropriate, they can be overdone. We need to balance our emulation of one Patriarch by

remembering the legacy of the other. The memory of Abraham should help us maintain our confidence that a) God is paying attention, and b) is doing so with positive intent. To secure the best form of that Providence, all we need to do is to shape our lives and turn our hearts towards God.

This understanding of the role of the two Patriarchs in our הרטפה highlights a balance that is surely a marker of a Jewish lifestyle. Maimonides noted in many places that idol worship extended from what seems a natural human instinct, the desire to control one's future, to insure one's economic, mental, and intellectual health. This includes controlling Nature, especially for farmers and others whose lives are extraordinarily dependent on the weather.

There are acceptable ways to indulge that human desire for control, such as by rotating crops, developing vaccines, and trying to avoid or reduce gaps in the ozone layer. Other methods, such as idol worship or witchcraft, are less encouraged. This Torah reading showed Abraham diverging from the rest of the world, learning to place his ultimate faith in God. The haftarah reminds us of that legacy, at a time when the Jewish people were discouraged and despairing of that Presence in their national lives.

Famous Verses and Their Ramifications:

The second verse of the haftarah starts with the words "עַתָּה, מִשׁ אַל מָה תַּעֲדִי אֱלֹהִים, wonk ton uoy od, have you not heard", which Jewish philosophers pointed to as proof that we need to use traditional knowledge (that which we have "heard") and build on it with our own proofs (that which we "know"). Scholars were to first absorb tradition (ideally as children) and then, in adulthood, re-acquire that knowledge with fuller intellect.

חֻבּוֹת הַלְּבָבוֹת (traeH eht fo seituD), owt tsrif eht sekat, krow lacihsolihp yrutnec htnevele na, verses as asserting that God is aware and involved in what occurs on Earth, as we have. In that view, the end of the verse "וְתִגְבַּחַתְּ לִי אֵין, ותנובתל רקח ויא", there is no grasping His wisdom," tells us we cannot even begin to understand how God keeps track of all Creation.

Verse 31 has the famous phrase "חַכְּ וּפִילְחֵי ה' יוֹקֵר", and those who place their hopes in God will find renewed strength," which sources use for a variety of purposes. The Talmud in Kiddushin 82b uses it as part of proving that Torah knowledge is a valuable asset for a person in youth and in old age. R. Saadya Gaon, in his tenth-century תונומא (Book of Beliefs and Opinions), sees it as one proof that God only commands what we can achieve (forestalling the claim that serving God is "just too hard").

חֻבּוֹת הַלְּבָבוֹת between those who strive for natural success and those who study Torah; the former cannot be confident that they are immune to illness, which might ruin their enjoying the fruits of their labor. He sees this verse as promising that those who study Torah and seek God will not find that to be true, unless it is as expiation for sin. Here again, the assumption of Providence comes through—studying Torah and seeking God increases the connection to it, and, thus, immunity from the vagaries of Nature.

41:4 refers to God as "שֶׂאֵרָם תּוֹרֹדָה אֲרוֹק", שארמ תורודה ארוק, who calls the generations from the beginning," which some read as meaning that God knows the course of history ahead of time. In one example, R.

Joshua ibn Shueib, a fourteenth century Spanish preacher, assumes that God knew the Jewish people would have three exiles (to Egypt, to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple, and the continuing current one that began with the destruction of the Second Temple), which means they were in some way inherent to the plan of history.

This is a concept that needs nuancing, and is too complex for here, but interesting to raise: What is necessary to history (Messiah, e.g.) and what is accidental? If God calls the generations from the beginning, are we mere automatons walking out a predestined history, or are there aspects of history where we have freedom and others where the outcome is predetermined?

In summary, the הרטפה contrasted the understandings of Divine Providence that typified Jacob and Abraham. Jacob often experienced God as exacting and punishing, an important perspective, but one that needs to be balanced with the Abrahamic view of God as the trustworthy source of much good as well.

Shabbat Shalom