

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Ma'asei

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Masei, Jeremiah 2;4-28, 3;4, 4; 1-2

Straying From the Normal

An overall question I think worth raising during the Three Weeks is: in what contexts are we, any of us, prepared for the unvarnished truth? I don't mean a debatable truth, where I experience an event one way, and the other person insists it transpired in another, with other connotations. No, I mean a truth that is clear—I worship idols, I drink too much, I mistreat my loved ones, something along those lines. What would be the circumstances that allow a person to hear someone telling him that and responding positively and sincerely, seeking to make amends?

It's an important question because the idea of prophets assumes a people able or prepared to respond to those kinds of calls. Prophets do not gentle us along, they do not sugarcoat our flaws so we can feel unthreatened by them; they tell us what we've done, hoping and expecting that we will admit it and repent of it.

In our time, I wonder whether a prophet could appear, since my experience is that we nowadays are unable to recognize relatively simple uncomfortable truths. Assuming we can be openminded enough to think we may have flaws that need changing, let's see which of those Jeremiah focuses our attention on in this week's episode.

Betrayal Can Be Unwitting, and While Sincerely Declaring Love

The first five verses complain that the Jewish people, particularly their leaders, have betrayed God. Aside from the lack of gratitude that involves, since God has done so much for them-- taken them out of Egypt, led them through a completely uninhabited land, and brought them to a wonderful Land-- their status as leaders adds to the culpability they bear for doing so.

Among the leaders named in this betrayal are the "*tofsei haTorah*," those who study and know Torah. It seems to me astounding to contemplate that those knowledgeable in Torah did not "know" God. We could understand how other leaders might ignore God—prophets could be false, priests could focus on sacrifice rather than the God Who commanded it—but how can Torah sages not know God?

Let me float the following idea: The study of Torah itself, vital as it is to Jewish life (I stress), can at the same time distract one from hearing God's call. Over-focus on one area of Torah, for example, can mean that one spends one's whole life fulfilling the *mitzvah* of Torah study and yet still warps the kind of life God wanted from us (since God wanted the whole picture, not one section of it).

A Betrayal Even Other Human Beings Would Never Commit

The next five verses point out that God is not complaining about a failure to keep the minutiae of Torah, which would at least be understandable, but about the Jews' refusal to live up to the standard of fidelity kept even by nations who worship obviously false gods. For example, the

Kittites and Kedarites worship fire and water, each of which has an obvious weakness as an all-powerful god, and yet remain faithful to their deity.

Despite all this, God stresses the goal of rehabilitation, not punishment. Although Jeremiah is the last of the prophets of the First Temple, with previous prophets having failed to stimulate change, God is trying again. At any point in this process, had the Jews fully and sincerely admitted their errors and resolved to change their ways, the future could have been altered for the better.

The Challenging Balance Between Self-Reliance and Trust in God

Skipping a few verses, Jeremiah upbraids the people for seeking assistance from Egypt and Assyria, since they should have relied on God. What he does not explain to us, but should be on each of our agendas, is when and how we are required to trust that God will take care of us and when we should rely on our own devices. How should the Jews have known not to go to Assyria or Egypt?

Perhaps the answer was clearer when there still prophets performing miracles, and the supernatural was more generally accessible than now. Or perhaps Jeremiah is signaling that the answer is always the same: we can and should take all possible self-protective measures as long as they do not mislead us into thinking that we are fully in charge of our destiny. Seeking the assistance of those nations might have been all right, had it not led to the Jews' adopting their culture and values.

Rashi adds a twist, noting that the Jews were turning to the Egyptians, who had drowned Jewish babies, and to Assyria, whose rivers flowed from Eden. Turning to them for help involved ignoring the past wrongs they had committed, which eased the way to assuming their way of life was as valid as our own.

Dispensing with identifying right and wrong is often useful in ending conflict, but carries the heavy price of teaching society that there is no need not confront or admit wrongs as long as we move away from them. Part of Jeremiah's complaint is that the Jews' blindness to Egypt and Assyria's wrongs lured them from focusing where they should, God.

Let me close by noting how verse 26's reference to the embarrassment of a thief when caught encapsulates the Jewish people Jeremiah has been addressing. The only thief who is embarrassed is one who thought he had fooled the rest of the world, who thought he had convinced others, and often himself, that he was a fine, upstanding citizen.

The Jewish people, at least, despite being idol-worshippers (!!!) would, when the end came, experience exactly that same embarrassment. The tragedy of Jeremiah and his times is not that an evil people were finally punished for their sins, it is that, after hundreds (!) of years of warnings by prophets, focusing on the same issues (lack of social justice, overemphasis on sacrifices, refusal to abandon idol worship), the Jews were still shocked when the end came.

Denial is not the name of a river in Egypt

Shabbat Shalom