

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Miketz

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Miketz, I Kings, 3;15-4;1

This is an haftarah that is rarely read (if ever), since the week we read Miketz in synagogue is almost invariably the week of Hanukkah, and we read the special *haftarah* for that occasion.

The central story is well-known; soon after he becomes king, Solomon is asked to judge between two women (*zonot*, in the Prophet's term, probably meaning they were prostitutes) who had each given birth to a baby. One of the babies had died in the middle of the night, but the women each claimed it was the other's baby that had died (the woman currently in possession of a deceased baby presumably claimed the other woman had switched them).

One-Time Solutions As a Mark of Solomon's Wisdom

Faced with the seemingly intractable problem, King Solomon called for a sword, announcing his intention to split the baby in half, much as one would do in a parallel monetary case. The true mother gave in, agreeing to give up her claim to let the baby live, while the other woman, perhaps embittered by her loss, agreed that this was fair.

Seeing their reactions, the king could now declare the true mother, and return her child. The people all heard of their new king's wisdom, and became awed by his insight.

The story as told (and probably as remembered by most people) emphasizes Solomon's great insight. From the perspective of 3000 years later, it is worth noting that Solomon's trick can only work once (if that; Makkot 23b wonders whether the woman might not have been lying anyway, but understood the importance of compassion. The Talmud therefore claims a Heavenly Voice declared Solomon was right. Rashi and Radak both mention this tradition). We today cannot imagine anyone agreeing to Solomon's idea, both because we have pity on the baby and because we know the story.

Aside from that, the *haftarah* adds a verse at the beginning and at the end (not part of the story itself, set off by spaces in the traditional writing of Scripture) that shape it differently. The first verse tells us that Solomon woke and realized "it" was a dream. Starting the *haftarah* there assumes, as the Sages often did, that Scripture was familiar to ordinary Jews. Such people would know the preceding scene: God came to Solomon soon after he had taken the throne, and offered him anything he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom to judge God's people properly, and God, pleased he had not asked for wealth, long life, or military success, gave him all four.

This, too, is a trick that only works once. Once we know that asking for the selfless option will get me all the selfish goals I want, the gesture loses its value, and there is no reason for God to give all the other desires as a reward.

Solidifying a Monarch's Hold On His People

Solomon wakes, sees it is a dream, returns to Jerusalem, stands before the Ark, offers sacrifices,

and makes a big party. To those who like to think of the *haftarot* as casually slapped together, this verse would be the connection to the Torah reading, in which Pharaoh awoke and realized he had had a dream. As so often, this view does not satisfy us, for the simple reason that if it were true, the *haftarah* should have consisted of the dream itself, ending at this verse, rather than starting it.

In addition, the *haftarah* does not end at the point where Solomon's dream had proven true by virtue of his wisdom being publicly shown. Instead, it goes one more verse, to tell us Solomon was king over all of Israel (a verse so different from what came before that it is a new chapter in the common current division of Scripture).

Radak's interpretation of the awe of the Israelites when Solomon renders judgment helps us understand better. He recognizes that their emotions were more complex than simple admiration—they became afraid to act wrongly even in private, fearful that Solomon's great wisdom would extend to figuring out what they did in their own homes.

In light of that perspective, Rashi and Ralbag's (Gersonides, a 13th century Provençal philosopher and Bible commentator) reading of the last verse resonates more. They agree that the verse means that the Israelites were all happy with Solomon's rule, since he had proven his qualifications for the job.

Brilliance Is Not an Unmixed Blessing

Putting Radak, Rashi, and Ralbag together, we can understand the point of this reading, as well as how it relates to the Torah portion. Solomon has been blessed with unequalled brilliance, in an incident we allude to but do not read. So, too, Joseph's road to power lay in his remarkable talent for dream interpretation, which led him to know how to face the crises upcoming for Egypt and its environs.

It is not obvious, in either case, that people will welcome the person thus blessed. Pharaoh hears Joseph's interpretations and his ideas for the future and decides that no one is better suited for the tasks at hand; the people are awed by their new king's wisdom, but perhaps a little anxious as well. Both, then, suggest that extraordinary talent is not always easily assimilated by those around them.

Song of Songs Rabbah 1;10 helps us see that as well, engaging in an extended comparison of Solomon's court and God's. In our case, Solomon, like God, was able to judge accurately and well even without witnesses or warning, usually indispensable for human courts.

This reading of the *haftarah* enriches our Torah reading, at least by explaining the tenuousness of Joseph's getting the position he wanted. Nachmanides notes that Joseph intended Pharaoh to choose him to oversee preparations for the famine, and compliments his strategy as an example of Ecclesiastes 2;14's saying the wise man "has eyes in his head," meaning understands and prepares for the future. The *haftarah* suggests that even his doing so did not guarantee the reception he wanted.

If so, the *haftarah* is alerting us to the challenges sometimes faced by those whose excellence

sets them too far apart from their generation. Joseph attracted attention wherever he went for his success, but that could arouse opposition. Solomon was handed a kingdom with a strong foundation, and wisdom unparalleled in human history. Mostly, people appreciated the added value it would bring to their kingship, but Radak points us to the other side of that coin.

In summary, then, we read the story of Solomon finding the real mother of the live baby as an example of the challenges of brilliance, even that which is God-given. While all can recognize it, it is not always easy to get others to accept it, to follow the brilliant person in the direction he (or she) leads.

Shabbat Shalom