

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Pekudei

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 11: Parshat Pekudei—I Kings 7;51-8;21

Taking Care of Unfinished Business

This week's *haftarah* continues from where the *haftarah* of Vayakhel left off, telling us of the completion of the actual building of the Temple, and then some of the dedicatory events that occurred. It is also the same haftarah as for the second day of Sukkot, except that this one begins two verses earlier.

The first of those, I believe, offers an emphasis for this reading that differs from the themes we will stress in the context of Sukkot. It establishes the framework in which to experience King Solomon's construction of the Temple, telling us that it completed an initiative begun by David, his father.

That explains why Solomon's first act upon completing the construction is to deposit in the Temple the gold, silver, and other vessels his father had prepared. Rashi and Radak report two views among the Sages as to why Solomon did not use the gold and silver in the construction itself. According to one, he foresaw the destruction of the Temple and did not want to subject these items to that fate.

The other suggestion is that Solomon did not use them because he saw them as morally tainted. In his father's time, there had been a famine for three years in a row, and yet David apparently did not dip into the reserve he had been building for Temple construction. Solomon could not see using gold and silver that had been kept at the expense of the suffering of those in a famine for the House of God.

What fascinates me about the second view is its portraying Solomon as more concerned than his father with caring for the poor. Especially since, after Solomon's death, the rebellion of the Northern Kingdom starts as a tax revolt, a desire to loosen the heavy burden Solomon had placed upon them for the purposes of funding his construction, this Midrash is both stimulating and difficult. It would seem to be saying that Solomon would never have built the Temple and his palace when there was a famine need for those funds, but he was willing to overtax the people when famine was not an issue.

Continuing and Breaking from the Past: Inducting the Ark into Its New Home

There are two parts to the rest of the haftarah, eleven verses devoted to telling of the bringing of the Ark into the Temple, and then ten more with Solomon's first words after that event. For the bringing, note that Solomon gathers the entire leadership of the nation, I assume to insure that people properly experienced this as a major national event. (It's a little interesting to see that he had to make that point to them, as if they did not know to gather there themselves).

I would point out that the verse mentions that they brought the entire *ohel moed*, the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle from the desert, but does not tell us what they did with it. The verse also

says that it was the *Kohanim haLevi'im*, “the priests the Levites” who brought these items; the phrase is not uncommon, and is usually interpreted to mean the priests who, originally, were from the Tribe of Levi.

Here, Radak splits the phrase apart, reading it as saying that the priests took the Ark itself, and the Levites took the other parts (which Radak thinks were then also left in the storehouses of the Temple). In contrast, Gersonides (Ralbag) assumes it was only priests who did this, and argues that they insisted on performing this function—even though it’s theoretically a Levite task—because it involved entering the *Kodesh Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies.

Radak also makes the most noise about the *Keruvim*, the cherubs, which (as all recognized) are not the ones that were always on top of the Ark itself. Instead, like with the extra tables and Menorahs, King Solomon had made a distinct set for the Temple. Radak here says that Solomon chose what to build anew based on prophecy. Since there are no verses that say that—nor do I know of a statement in the Rabbinic literature to that effect—I feel free to suggest an alternative: King Solomon built new appurtenances that supplemented the items Moses built, not replaced them.

That view connects well to Solomon’s attitude towards his father’s initiative in building the Temple, if we take the more positive view, that he did not use the items themselves out of a worry that they would be part of an eventual Destruction. Solomon, it would seem, saw himself as the caretaker of earlier legacies, finding ways to move them forward in positive ways.

We have stressed his creativity on other occasions, but here we see that creativity channeled and guided by those who came before him. He builds the Temple his father wished to, using the vessels of the Tabernacle Moses built in the desert, and holding on to all the pieces of the past, each in their appropriate place.

Solomon’s Words

Seeing Solomon as aware of his past even as he creatively advances it explains his first verbal reactions to the completion of the Temple. Witnessing the physical sign of the Divine Presence’s residing in the structure (its filling with cloud), he articulates that fact (“God has chosen to rest the Presence in a cloud”), and adds that he has built it to be a permanent House of God.

Then, turning to the people, he tells them of his father’s desire to build a Temple, and of God’s telling David that Solomon would be the one to do it. Noting that this had now come true, he recounts his bringing the Ark, the sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

If the Torah reading told us of the first step in establishing a place of concentrated Divine Presence, our haftarah shows us the after-history of trying to make that arrangement permanent. King Solomon, presented here as someone who balances fidelity to the past with adaptability to the present and awareness of the future, completes his structure, with its vessels from the time of Moses, its stored gold and silver from the time of King David, and the new items he himself added.

We can only hope that we, soon, will have the chance to add to that tradition, building again a

structure that allows us to experience the Divine Presence more directly, and more fully, than in our present Exilic state.

Shabbat Shalom