

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Pinchas

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Pinchas, I Book of Kings 18:46-19:21

## **The Twilight of a Great Career**

This *haftarah* tells of the beginning of the end of Elijah's career as a prophet, soon after its climax on Har haCarmel. The haftarah actually continues that story, which we read as the haftarah of Parshat Ki Tissa. We skip some middle events, such as Elijah ordering the people to kill the idolatrous prophets and priests, and of his warning Ahab to get home before the drought-ending rain hits.

We start with Elijah running before Ahab all the way to Jezreel, where Ahab tells his wife what had happened on the mountain. Instead of conceding his theological victory, she tells Elijah he will die in the morning. He flees to Beersheba, leaves his servant, and goes on alone for a day's journey into the desert.

He sits under a tree and longs for death, saying "better to die than to live, for I am no better than my forefathers." Dying at Jezebel's hands was intolerable, perhaps because it would give a Baal-worshiper victory over a prophet of God. Death itself, though, was attractive at that point.

Elijah does not get his wish. Instead, he goes to sleep and an angel rouses him, offers him a cake baked in the coals and a jug of water, and tells him to eat. He does and then goes back to sleep, only to have the angel re-awaken him, tell him to eat again, for he has a long journey ahead of him. He obeys, and, on the strength of that eating and drinking, went for 40 days, ending at "the mountain of God, Horeb."

## **Mimicing Moses**

From here, the story repeats Moses's experience of "seeing" God at Sinai, an event he too preceded by not eating or drinking for 40 days. Rashi in Pesachim 54a explicitly links the two prophets, telling us the cave where Elijah stood with the cleft in the rock in which God placed Moses.

Preparing for a clear vision of God apparently requires, among other things, 40-days of physical abstinence. Radak comments that Elijah had a last meal to keep him going, whereas Moses did not, suggesting that Elijah is being challenged to rise above himself, whereas Moses's experience was a more natural extension of who he already was. This may explain why Elijah, to some extent, fails at this juncture.

When God asks Elijah what he is doing there, we might dismiss it as another example of God beginning conversations gently, to help humans. Here, I think it is also meant to give Elijah the opportunity to define his presence, to say what he thinks he's doing there.

Elijah answers that he has been jealous for God—that he has striven to increase God's honor and Presence in the world—and the Jews have violated the covenant, destroyed the altars, killed

the prophets, leaving only Elijah himself alone.

### **Rise or Fall, Elijah**

God responds by telling him to go out of the cave, where a wind, noise, and fire came, each very powerful, followed by a *kol demmama daka*, a still, silent voice. After each of the first three, we are told that God is not “in” them. Radak thinks God was telling that to Elijah, but one could also read the verse as saying that Elijah already knew that. When the Voice comes, Elijah wraps himself in his cloak and goes outside.

It would seem that God appears this way to teach a lesson. Moses merited his vision in this place by saving the Jews from the Divine Wrath at the sin of the Golden Calf. Elijah got there by convincing the people to believe in God, at Har haCarmel, but there he also had the people kill the prophets of Baal.

The destructive side to Elijah’s heroic act, I think, leads God to show him the wind, noise, and fire. Necessary as they are, “God is not in” them. God employs them in running the world, but they are not of God in the same way as the still, small voice.

God then asks the exact same question as before, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” I can only understand that as God giving Elijah an opportunity to answer differently than before. The vision, which stressed that destructive forces are not as much “of” God as calm and quiet, and the repeat question, were attempts to break through Elijah’s unyielding negativity, to get him to revive himself for another period as prophet, lovingly and patiently helping people find their way to God.

### **Fall**

Elijah either cannot or will not. He answers word for word as before, and Elijah Zuta 8 thinks he stood there for 3 hours, insisting on his position. At that point, he is told to anoint three figures to exact the vengeance he had insisted on.

Rashi and Mechilta see this as a punishment, a way of telling Elijah he had failed. Unlike Moses at the Calf—where the Jews were no less wrong—Elijah cannot find a way to speak up on their behalf. Moses’s ability to still identify the Jews’ vital role in bringing God’s message to the world stands as a rebuke to Elijah’s despair.

### **The Haftarah Connects to the Torah reading**

Elijah’s attitude is quite possibly what Pinchas is warned about at the very beginning of this week’s Torah reading. His killing Zimri and Cozbi was the right action at the time, but his reward, a covenant of peace, reminds him there is more than one way to achieve a goal. As a priest, his general task would be contributing to God’s goals for the world by acting peacefully and welcomingly. A violent act has its time and place, but he needs to know that that is neither the preferred nor the common way to bring people closer to God.

Especially if we follow the Rabbinic tradition that identifies Elijah as Pinchas, the *haftarah* tells us of a time when he reached the end of his rope, the end of his ability to look the other way at the Jewish people’s many failings while working patiently to bring them closer to their Creator.

Once he could no longer do that, his time on Earth was up, not as a punishment (he does rise to heaven in a fiery chariot) but as a recognition that his effective service o God had reached an end.

Shabbat Shalom