

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Re'eh

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Re'eh, Isaiah 54:11-55:5

Stones and Water: An *Haftarah* Richer in Metaphor Than In Content

The two parts of this week's *haftarah*, verses 11-17 of chapter 54 and 1-5 of Chapter 55, seem distinct from each other. In addition, their literal content is less rich than the meaning the Sages find in it, so I will focus more than usual on their themes.

The first section finally, in our third week of *haftarot* of comfort, gives us a prediction of how the rebuilt Jerusalem will look. The streets will be paved with jewels, gates made of precious stones, and the city so bright that nations will follow that light.

Moving from the city itself to its inhabitants, they will all be “learned of God,” a phrase that means something different than being learned. Learned implies knowledge, learned of God means having built a certain kind of relationship with the Holy One.

Further, the city will be full of peace (remember that those learned of God create peace, perhaps the most famous verse in the *haftarah*). Part of that will be the city's firm foundation of charity and good deeds, acts that help produce peace. Note that the prophet ascribes the people's ability to act so well to a lack of fear; that claim assumes that crime and wrongdoing stem from fear. If so, eradicating fear becomes a religious endeavor, a contribution to hastening a Jerusalem of peace.

Another claim we might need to educate ourselves to believe is Isaiah's statement that others will not be able to attack the Jews because God can make their weapons fail. This is a different and more metaphysical claim than that God can protect us, one I think it would take some work to come to believe in our times.

Rejecting Converts in Times to Come

One of the verses in this section says that those who have already joined the Jewish people will stay with them. The emphasis on those who already joined leads Yebamot 24b to deduce that we will not accept converts in the times of the Messiah.

We have a similar tradition about the times of David and Solomon, raising many interesting questions. Did David and Solomon—and in the future, will we-- reject converts because of suspicions about their sincerity? Is it fair to bar sincere people from getting closer to God to protect ourselves against the insincere? Why do motives matter at all, if the person will stay Jewish and keep mitzvot? Or, from a different perspective, was conversion perhaps unnecessary in David and Solomon's time? Would that mean that it is as good to be a faithful non-Jew (*ger toshav* or *ben Noach*, a resident alien in Israel, or a God-fearing non-Jew) as to be a faithful Jew? How could that be true? These are too complicated to answer here, but deserve thought.

The Stones of Jerusalem: A Heavenly or Earthly Matter?

Two comments in Baba Batra 75a attach a significance to the stones of Jerusalem's future that we might not have realized. In recording a debate about which stones the prophet intends, the Talmud mentions that it was not sure whether the debate was between two Talmudic rabbis or between the angels Micha-el and Gavri-el.

That the Talmud could imagine angels debating the nature of those stones means it saw the details of the rebuilding as of cosmic importance. Only then could we see the endeavor as worthy of the angels' time, since then it means that the rebuilding is part of understanding God. As we have the privilege of watching what would seem to be the early stages of that rebuilding, remembering the importance the Talmud attaches to it can help us reap the maximum religious benefit.

Belief in the Words of the Sages: Another Lesson of the Stones

That same Talmudic selection tells of a person who mocked R. Yohanan's claim that the stones would be incomprehensibly large; the "*apikoros*," which originally meant one who doubts or ridicules the Sages, noted that in his time, there were not even small stones of that type, let alone big ones.

In the Talmud's telling, he then went on an ocean voyage and was shown angels hewing exactly such stones, to rebuild Jerusalem. When he got back to land, he excitedly told R. Yohanan of what he had seen, happy to have confirmed the rabbi's teaching. Rabbi Yohanan's reply—the reason I find the story worth retelling—is to upbraid the man for basing his acceptance on having seen it. We need to accept authoritative traditions, R. Yohanan says, because they were said by figures of authority, not because we already understand their truth ourselves.

Torah As Water or Fire: A Most Flowing or Explosive Metaphor

The last five verses call for all the thirsty to go to the water, which we can get for nothing, adding the rhetorical question of why we would pay for meaningless banalities when we can get Torah free. Aside from its being free, Torah brings with it the return of a Davidic rule, and of a time when nations we do not even know will see the truth of our position and join us.

Sukkah 52b notes that other verses compare Torah to fire, which it explains by differentiating between two types of evil inclination, each of which Torah can remove. For the stone-like one, Torah acts like water, with a melting action; with a metal-like evil inclination, Torah acts like fire, explosively.

The Talmud implies that there are two central ways we can struggle with ourselves: we can notice a psychological/spiritual lump that blocks us from acting as we should, or we can struggle with desires that burn inside, pushing us to act wrongly. Torah can help us avoid or resist each.

Moving back to the water metaphor, the Talmud understands our verse to be only one half of the story, since another calls on us to pour water for the thirsty. In the Talmud's explanation, we are supposed to pour the water for a proper student, but can wait for other students to come to us. A teacher's obligation, in this reading, depends on the student's interest and readiness to work. Without that commitment, the teacher bears no responsibility to spark such interest, although the Talmud clearly would not have objected to his doing so.

This is a *haftarah* easily read superficially, as a prediction of Jewish power, invulnerability, and renewed relationship with God. The Sages alert us to its deeper ramifications, some of which I hope we have seen here. May we soon see all of the prophecy, and all of its implications, realized before our eyes.

Shabbat Shalom