

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shemini

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Shemini, II Samuel 6:1-7:17

## **A Haftarah in Three Sections**

To understand the main message of an *haftarah* long as this one, we must split it into its three or four distinct parts. First, there is the story of David bringing the Ark to the City of David, with two sub-parts, the first initiative to bring the Ark, aborted when Uza got killed, and David diverted it to the house of Oved Edom. The second half of that story comes when David is reassured, and brings it the City of David with great celebration.

Having finished, we see his interaction with his wife Michal, who disdains his undignified actions during the celebration. David's reply that he would gladly be even less dignified when it comes to celebrating before God captures what will be a theme of the week. I note that Sefardic Jews and some Hasidim end the *haftarah* at the end of the celebration itself, leaving out the Michal interaction.

Third, we have the discussion between David and Natan about building a more permanent structure to serve as a House of God. One immediately striking aspect of that story is that Natan gives an answer and then, that night, has a prophecy informing him he got it wrong. He comes back to David the next morning to take back his encouragement of the day before.

The theme of death of celebrants at dedicatory ceremonies offers the simplest connection between the haftarah and the Torah reading, Nadab and Abihu in the Torah, Uza in the *haftarah*. As so often, though, the simple answer does not explain the length of our selection of Prophets to read for the *haftarah*. Sefardic Jews, who stop after David brings the Ark to the City of David, might accept that answer, since their reading only encompasses the tragedy of Uza and recovery from it. The Ashkenazic custom to continue calls for a more satisfying answer.

## **Uza Is the Key**

From the text itself, we might understand that Uza died because he grabbed onto the Ark when it looked like it was going to fall. Rashi, working off of Sifrei, notes that a prior error set the stage for Uza's demise. As Rashi phrases it, King David mistook a matter of simple Jewish law, clear to schoolchildren, that the Ark is supposed to be borne on the shoulders of Leviim. (Radak adds that the Philistines were not punished for sending the Ark back in a carriage because they had no reason to know any better; he suggests that David did not ignore the rule, he concluded it only applied in the desert).

Uza's grabbing the Ark betrays a further misconception. As Rashi points out, he ought to have realized that the Ark is not an ordinary physical item, prone to falling when its support is taken away. (The Midrash holds that the Ark held up the priests who took it through the Jordan; if it could support others, it could certainly hold itself).

It seems to me that the two missteps share a common denominator, an insufficient awareness of

God's Otherness, which extends to the Ark that bears the Covenant. David knows—as every schoolchild should—that the Ark is carried on the shoulders, but assumes that was not inherent to the Ark. Uza knows the Ark's past, but is still convinced that if it is tipping, it needs his assistance to stay upright.

That explains David's fear of being near the Ark when he sees what happens to Uza. It seems irrational, since he might have learned the narrow lesson of avoiding touching the Ark. Rather, David has been confronted with his inability to predict the Ark's rules. Worried that he has no way to appease God and control the Ark, he leaves it with Oved Edom. It is only once he sees that the Ark has a rhythm of its own which leads to blessing, once observed and accepted, that he brings it to the City of David.

### **Michal And A Permanent House**

This framework explains the rest of the *haftarah's* relevance. Michal sees the celebration over the Ark as akin to any other, which makes David's lack of dignity upsetting. His response, *v'nikaloti od mizot*, roughly translated as I would be willing to give up even more of my dignity, shows he has learned the lesson of God's difference, which sets aside ordinary human modes of conduct. (We might wonder why her mistake deserves the severity of his reaction, but that is for another time).

The challenge of understanding what God wants without direct consultation figures in David and Natan's conversation as well. At first glance, the idea of building a permanent structure sounds right—it is part of the eventual plan, we know, and David seems to have pure motives in suggesting it. Natan, too, assumes that this is an idea so clearly appropriate that he answers right away, without consulting God.

That night, a vision tells him once again of the broader message of the *haftarah*, that the closer a topic is to God's plan, the less able we are to predict what the Divine Will dictates. Natan has to come back to David the next morning with the humbling message (for both of them) that God does not see David as the right person to build the Temple, a task that will have to wait for his son. Some explanation of God's reasoning is given in Chronicles, but that is again not our issue.

Looking back to the Torah reading, this *haftarah* now seems to editorialize about Nadab and Abihu's misstep. The Sages offered many options for what the "strange fire" was that they offered, and we need not decide among them. Our *haftarah* does suggest, though, that the underlying issue was their arrogating to themselves the right to make decisions about the new Tabernacle's needs and rules.

That is not completely untrue—later in the same Torah reading, Moses becomes upset about Aaron and his sons' failure to eat a certain sacrifice, and then concedes that Aaron and his sons have successfully reasoned it out to realize they should not be eating that sacrifice on the day their sons and brothers died.

The key challenge, in all these instances, highlighted for us by the segments of the *haftarah*, is to know when we are to seek God's law and when we can assume that our reasoning and extrapolating from experience can guide us in serving God properly. In the case of the Ark and

the timing of the building of the Temple, in our haftarah, the weight was heavily on the side of taking direction from God.

Shabbat Shalom