

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shemot

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Shemot, Isaiah 27;6-28:13, 29;22-3

Visions of Redemption

In obvious parallel to the Torah reading, the *haftarah* discusses redemption, starting with the actual fact of the Jewish return and “rooting” in their Land, but focusing more with the (sometimes unpleasant) steps leading up to the redemption.

For Jews stuck in Exile, the promise of return might itself be attractive enough, but the Talmud and Midrash expand it. Shabbat 145b quotes R. Joseph as reading the first verse’s references to *yatzitz & pharach*, sprouting and flowering, as referring to Torah scholars, who make fringes and decorations for Torah. Song of Songs Rabbah 7;3 takes the verse as evidence that the Jewish people are rooted to their Land in a way other nations are not.

Putting the two together, tradition seems to be suggesting that our greatest redemption involves attaching to and beautifying the Land, as Torah scholars do with Torah. Without belaboring the point, that nods in the direction of Bnei Akiva-type views of what it means to be Jewish in Israel, combining Torah study and performance of mitsvot with active concern with building up the Land of Israel.

After starting with the unequivocally good, several verses refer to punishment for our sins as readying the Jews for their salvation. Exactly how that works is a matter of debate, as we’ll see in the “Famous Verses” section, below. Here, we can at least not Isaiah’s insistence on full and proper repentance as prerequisite to redemption, and his assumption that some element of punishment will (sadly and unfortunately) be necessary before we will get to that repentance.

What Does Redemption Look Like? The Redeemer

Exodus Rabbah 1;26 reads verses 10-11 as relating to Moses and the Messiah, both of whom, according to tradition, will have grown up in non-Jewish environments (Moses in Pharaoh’s palace, the Messiah in Rome). At least according to this Midrash, it sounds like the redeemer might be someone who was raised in a not-specifically Jewish environment, who learned significant lessons from non-Jewish society, and only then came to take the Jews to their land.

Possibly, the Midrash implies that our attachment to our land is not meant to exclude an awareness of other nations. A leader raised in a foreign milieu will be more likely to lead us in a continuing engagement with the world.

What Does Redemption Look Like? The Different Places of Exile

Verse 12 says that God will take us out of the middle of the rushing stream, bring us back from the river of Egypt, and one by one take Jews back. Rashi reads it as referring to three types of exiles—the Assyrian, the Egyptian, and a future one. Radak identifies the river as Sambatyon, which spews stones from the strength of its flow, except for Shabbat, when it rests.

Either version makes the point that Jews inhabit exiles differentiated by more than just geography. Some are in the middle of a rushing stream, part of an exciting, vibrant society not, perhaps, particularly antithetical to observance. Others are in large groups, but in a place like Egypt, the paradigm of a culture hostile to Torah observance.

Finally, some Jews live in small groups, or in situations where so many will be assimilated that only individuals will survive (spiritually) to reach redemption. Aside from promising that God will take Jews back from all types and locations of exile, the verse also indicates our challenge to forge a unified society out of people from such different experiences.

Verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 28 point out that the Kingdom of Judea's overinvolvement with wine, while less severe a sin than the Northern Kingdom's, still suffices to deserve punishment. Verse 8, about which see below, highlights the problem with any competing commitments to God; even just too much of a focus on drinking wine loosens our connection to God, leading to exile and postponing redemption.

What Will Redemption Look Like? The Challenge of Change

Starting from verse 9, Isaiah makes a comment about how God's wisdom can only be taken in little pieces. Rashi thinks he means only babies will be able to absorb that wisdom, while Radak thinks even adults might, but only in bits and pieces over long periods of time. Either version reminds us of the difficulty of retaining the kind of openmindedness, of flexibility and readiness to admit to being wrong, that might be necessary for salvation. The change of redemption might therefore need to be multi-generational, each generation moving only small steps towards absorbing enough of God's to gain the the ultimate redemption.

Famous Verses

As mentioned above, 27;8 speaks of God measuring out our punishment, "*b'sa'asa'ah b'shalcha t'rivena*, In that measure, when God sent them out, did they (the enemies) contend with them" which Sotah 8b-9a took two ways. First, it read the verse as meaning that God's punishments are directly responsive to the sins committed; the Midrash adds that the same is true in reverse, that God rewards in a way directly related to the good we did.

Second, the Talmud notes God's kindness in punishing the Jewish people at each step along the way. Other nations are left untouched until the weight of their sins demands their downfall and exit from the world stage. Punishment helps us in two ways, perhaps making us aware of our sin before we get too caught up in it, but also allowing us to expiate it in small pieces instead of having to face it all at once.

Verse 13 of Chapter 27, famous because it became a song, tells of those lost in various exiles being brought back to Jerusalem. Makkot 24a sees it as Isaiah reversing Moses's warning that we will be lost in the nations where we are exiled.

Verse 8 of Chapter 28 is cited by Avot 3;3 to require including words of Torah at a meal where 3 people eat together. One of the ramifications of this reading is that it assumes that involvement in eating for its own sake is similar to idol worship in some way. Like with the drinking of wine in the Kingdom of Judea, this shows that the wrong of idol worship is in allowing competing

commitments to God, whatever form they may take.

Shabbat Shalom