

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Tetzaveh

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Tetsaveh--Ezekiel 43:10-27

The Dedication Ceremony and Its Connection to the Torah reading

This haftarah, as so many others, comes in the middle of a longer discussion. In the original context, Ezekiel is giving a lengthy description of a Temple. It is not clear whether he intended his predictions about the second one (which had not yet been built) or the third, but it is clear that his vision did not come true in the Second Temple and would therefore (presumably) be in the Third.

In the selection we read, the connection to the Torah reading would seem to come from their both outlining a dedication ceremony. If so, the *haftarah* would seem to signal that the dedication part of the Torah reading is central to the portion of the week.

The altar's sanctification is described in the second half of the *haftarah*, which might fool us into glossing over the first half. That section-- in which Ezekiel is told to embarrass the people by informing them of the Temple, and then, once they are properly chastened, to tell them the design of the House—carries important messages of its own.

Tanhuma to Tsav 14 sees the verses as supporting the contention that just thinking about the Temple can somewhat replace the structure itself. This idea is more commonly known from Hosea 14, where the verse says *uneshalma parim sefateinu*, we will replace bulls (of sacrifices) with our lips. These sources cannot be taken fully literally, since there would then be no need for the Temple itself.

Study, Knowledge, Action: An Unbreakable Chain

Looking more broadly, the reference raises a problem that plagues philosophical readings of Judaism, those that focus on how religion is supposed to affect us internally. For many, if the internal goal is reached—such as thinking of God as one would at a Temple—it is not clear why action is necessary.

I believe the sources actually only mean to say that study puts us in the ballpark of having an actual Temple, not replaces it. The mention of embarrassing the people suggests that studying about the Temple makes us feel its absence, and stimulates the kind of teshuvah that will merit its rebuilding. Similarly, studying the laws of sacrifices might bring us close the kind of reaction to our sins as were stimulated in the person bringing that sacrifice. Study is not instead, it is the next best way to achieve that.

The introductory material thus reminds us to see this week's readings—Torah and haftarah— as a way of trying to make up for our loss of the structure and practices that best focused our thoughts and actions on God. This additionally serves to keep us conscious of what we lack, to

avert our ever thinking that we can practice the religion fully even without that building.

Unpacking the meaning of the various measurements of the altar would take us too far afield here, but I will note Midrashim that focus on the prophet's use of the phrase *mei'cheik ha'aretz*, from the bosom of the Earth, to indicate measuring from the ground up. Several midrashim, such as the introductions to Lamentations Rabbah, explain this as reflecting the assumption that the Temple is itself the bosom of the Earth. Here, too, we see the Temple being given a significance beyond its atonement function.

Contrasting Dedications

Comparing the dedication ceremony described here to the one in the Torah reading draws our attention to Ezekiel being told to give a bull-offering for the priests, but after that first day, to spend seven days offering a *se'ir*, a goat, as a sin-offering, which seems to be more about the altar itself. In the Torah reading as well, the offerings made for the priests, a bull and two rams for seven days, seem separate from the offerings that dedicated the altar itself, a bull and then two sheep daily.

We can explain these separate dedications, I think, based on Nachmanides's comment in Numbers 7;13. He says God had not planned a formal dedication of the Tabernacle, but the *nesi'im*'s, the heads of the tribes, initiative brought about a whole ceremony. His view is an example of what we've seen several times, that God leaves room for human beings to contribute creatively to the system He outlined.

What Was the New Role of the Mizbeah?

Nachmanides does not discuss whether he means that God left blank spaces with many options for how to fill in, or whether God expected or wanted one kind of future but yielded to human desires for another kind (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive; there may be examples of each). Another of Nachmanides's examples, the second opportunity to offer a Paschal sacrifice, known as Pesach Sheni, highlights this issue: Did God not care about the topic, and left it open for human input, or did God have a different view of how it should work?

Applying that idea to the dedication ceremony for the mizbeah is no simple matter. My own guess would be that God would have seen the need to dedicate the priests, to have them spend a week formally being inaugurated into their roles, because they were being converted into living representatives of God.

The mizbeah, on the other hand, was an object and was built for this specific purpose. Such an item, we could have imagined, would not need dedication other than use (as was true for the rest of history, when vessels of service in the Temple were sanctified by use). When the heads of the tribes brought offerings that led to a dedication ceremony, they were pointing out that people need pomp and circumstance to properly focus their minds on the goals of this place and this altar. That truth, Ezekiel shows us, will apply as much in the future as it did in the past.

Our haftarah, then, complements the Torah reading in several ways. It reminds us of how embarrassing it is not to have this central structure of Jewish life; it suggests that immersing ourselves in study of the Temple can serve to partially make up for its loss; and it shows us how

the dedication ceremonies for the Temple combine the Divine Will with human input in a way that readies the Temple for its role as the center of the earth, as the place where humans can serve as living representatives of God, and where pomp and circumstance will serve people by focusing their minds and actions towards service of God.

Shabbat Shalom