

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Tzav

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Tsav, Jeremiah 7:21-8:3, 9:22-23

Jeremiah opens this week's *haftarah* by telling the Jews to add their olot, burnt-offerings, to their zevachim, sacrifices where the owner gets some of the meat to eat him or herself. Rashi understands it as sarcasm, that at least that way they would get something, since God is rejecting the sacrifice as a means of closeness.

The Missing *Hatat*: Religiosity for Show

Radak notes that Jeremiah does not mention sin offerings, such as the *hatat*, the sin-offering, or *asham*, guilt-offering. Radak assumes the Jews of that time were not offering those sacrifices, because they would never confess a sin. He does not specify, but his theory opens two possibilities: that the Jews either were not willing to admit to even sins committed without full knowledge, the only kind for which there are offerings, or all their sins were committed knowingly and deliberately.

His view highlights an ever-present danger for religion, that people may be more concerned with the appearance of religiosity than with the actuality. In Radak's reading, the people would buy the feeling of religiosity for the cost of a voluntary sacrifice, but admitting sin and trying to rectify it came at too high a price.

Going Their Own Way: The Jews and God's Commands

To emphasize the Jewish people's misplaced values regarding sacrifice, the next verse speaks for God in saying that He did not command us about sacrifice on the day He took us out of Egypt. Rashi explains that he means that God never indicated that sacrifices should loom so large in Jewish life. The battle here—one Jeremiah lost—was to convince people to do what God wants, as God declares it and with the emphases God provides, to wean them from picking and choosing what seems best to them.

Sadly, at least then, Jews insisted they knew better. The prophet notes that this is despite God's having sent them prophets ever since the Exodus. They did not listen to the earlier prophets, nor will they listen to Jeremiah. When that happens, God tells Jeremiah, he is to tell them they are a nation that has not listened to the Voice of God, has not accepted reprimand, and has lost faith.

These verses highlight how easy it is for people to know they are right in the face of mounds of countervailing evidence. While many claim they would believe more if only there were (insert your answer here: miracles, scientific evidence, etc.), our text suggests that no evidence is compelling enough on its own.

This carries a sobering message for those who work in fields that try to articulate truths about God and how to serve Him. Being right gives no guarantee that those messages will be heard and the erroneous ones ignored (at least in the short term).

From Sham Religiosity to Idolatry

In verses 29-31, God tells the Jews to remove their nezer, which either means that their misdeeds have lost them their special status or that they should stop growing their hair like a nazirite. The latter interpretation offers a striking image-- a generation that refuses to listen to its prophets, but has many accepting nazir status, a voluntary and extreme set of practices meant to foster closeness to God!!!

Jeremiah mentions that people would pass their children through fire (a form of idol worship) at a place called *Bamot haTofet*. Rashi says the word "*tofet*" refers to the drums the priests of *Baal* would bang to prevent fathers from hearing their children's cries. It was not, in other words, that parents did not care about their children, it was that they assumed this was the best practice for all involved.

We know the experience of conquering our compassion in the name of a higher goal, because we do it with circumcision each time a Jewish boy is born. The striking difference in our Jewish reaction to the two cases bears considering. One father is violating a serious Torah prohibition; the other is fulfilling a central and significant obligation. Religious observance can and does entail acting in ways that might ordinarily seem unsympathetic, perhaps even cruel, but only when God declares the act necessary. It is not the dedication we should applaud, since idol-worshipping fathers were equally dedicated, it is the obedience to the Divine Will.

Why Should the Soul Care If the Body Does Not Get Buried?

The next six verses describe the degradations that will be suffered for lack of burial space. The chapter division separates what will happen to those already dead from what will happen to those who will have no place to be buried, but the traditional grouping shows that the prophet meant to emphasize that the punishments of that time will affect even the dead.

I have long wondered why not being buried, or having one's body defaced, is a punishment. Once we're gone, the rationalist in me wonders, what does it matter? It would seem the prophet was assuming that the soul has some knowledge of what happens to the body even after death, a view implicit in Sanhedrin 46b. There, the Talmud accepts the view that the pain of burial serves as expiation of sin. Lack of burial, then, is a real threat that there is no escape from bodily punishment.

Making Sure the Message Is Clear

Perhaps my stress on the flaw of choosing what to emphasize in serving God does not jump out at readers, but the the *haftarah's* moving to verses 22-23 of Chapter 9 confirms its centrality to this *haftarah*. In the two verses, Jeremiah denies the right to be proud of qualities that people ordinarily see as great, wisdom, strength, and/or wealth. True pride, he says, comes from seeking and knowing God, Who performs acts of kindness, justice, and charity in the Earth.

Without analyzing the many rabbinic and medieval readings of these verses, sticking to what an average listener would get from hearing this *haftarah*, these last verses drive home the need to know that religion is about doing what God wants. We may decide to use our money well, to train our bodies to perform remarkable feats, to become nice people, or even smart and wise, but the *haftarah* points out that those can become kinds of metaphorical idol worship just as much as the real thing.

The only perfection, the only source of pride, is to gain an understanding of God, to the extent possible for each of us, and to use that understanding to spur us to activities that would be those that our Creator would want, in fulfilling our mandate to take His Earth, work it, protect it, and perfect it.

Shabbat Shalom