

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Va'era

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Vaera, Ezekiel 28:25-29:21

## **The Most Significant Challenge of Our Times (All Right, One of the Most)**

This *haftarah* is a complex piece of writing, with many themes, but repeated review shows that it overall deals with how and when nations should see world events as connected to the hand of God, a question central to our times as well.

Many people instinctively recoil from the topic, since it is so widely abused. Almost every time a calamity strikes the world, some religious leader, Jewish or not, will confidently announce why it happened. In reaction, many choose to avoid considering the topic; the *haftarah* teaches us that that, too, is not a solution.

The main body of the *haftarah* records God's complaint about Egypt's seeing itself as all-powerful, and the threat that Egypt will be fully destroyed, lie desolate for forty years, and then return to spend the rest of history in subservience to those around it. Egypt is called the "Great Alligator," proud of its Nile as a source of its power. In addition, the Midrash thinks the punishments promised to Egypt here parallel the Ten Plagues begun in the Torah reading.

In the parallel Torah reading, we see Moses trying to convince the Egyptians they cannot hold on to the Jews against God's Will; they ignored the message and bore the consequences. Egypt in Ezekiel's time is repeating Pharaoh's error, seeing itself as fully independent, all-powerful, god-like. The *haftarah*, by showing us a similar situation, raises the question of how nations will ever learn to submit to that Will.

## **Punish Them Until They Learn**

One option, that of the *haftarah*, is to administer warnings and punishments. When Egypt will be laid waste, it will show the survivors and surrounding nations the folly of ever thinking of oneself as all-powerful. Forty years is a traditional time of reeducation—think of the Jews in the desert after the sin of the spies, which proved they could not shift their mindset from that of slaves to that of free devotees of God—so Egypt's time of desolation would seem to be geared towards teaching them a lesson.

That last point is made even more strongly by a Midrash that says that those forty years will be repayment for the five years of famine the Egyptians avoided in the time of Joseph. (Tradition has it that once Jacob came to Egypt, the famine ceased, after only two of the predicted seven years).

Since forty years is many more than five, I suspect the Midrash is making a thematic connection—in Joseph's time, when the famine had been directly predicted and prepared for under his guidance, the five years would have fortified their understanding that God rules many world events. At a later juncture, when the Egyptians have ignored all the various prophecies and been punished for that, they will need a fuller dose of reeducation before they can return.

### **Failure Leaves a Mark Which We Might Hope Will Teach Others**

Even then, having failed twice to react appropriately to God's power, they will be doomed to subservience to other nations. Lord Acton famously said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but God expects it to be used wisely, judiciously, and with humility. Those who cannot will find their power taken away, never to return.

The introduction and conclusion to the *haftarah* flesh out the importance of trying to understand how and when world events can be traced back to God. It opens with the concluding verses to an earlier prophecy, which tell of the Jews' returning to their land, building homes, planting vineyards, and living securely.

There can be many reasons for a prophet to promise that, but the emphasis here is on the example it will set for other nations, which makes the prophet's singling out vineyards worth pondering. While it may simply reflect his time, I suspect that planting a vineyard is also seen as an inherently religious activity. Aside from the mitsvot connected to agriculture and to wine, farming is one of those human endeavors most reliant on factors out of human control.

Indeed, Maimonides thought all of idol worship had its roots in farmers' attempts to gain greater control of the supernatural factors that would affect their harvests. (In defense of farmers, it is only in the last few hundred years that agricultural yields have been good enough to make food plentiful in most years in most parts of the world; until then, good years were good enough to keep everyone alive and fed, and bad years were disastrous. The temptation to seek any possible advantage in securing a better harvest must have been overwhelming).

### **World Leaders as Servants of God**

The end of the *haftarah* points in the same direction. God suddenly speaks to Ezekiel of Nebuchadnezzar, who is seen as having done God's work in destroying Tyre, despite the likelihood that he did that for his own reasons. As part of that reward, God says that the Babylonian king will replace Egypt. That reminds us that Egypt had a role to play in world history, that it could have been successful and earned reward. Its failure created the need for a replacement.

Possibly, God envisions the world as always having one or two superpowers, entrusted with directing the course of events, and, ideally, seeing their job as given to them by God, for Godly purposes. Our *haftarah* shows us a superpower that instead became intoxicated with its power, leading to its eventual, but certain, downfall.

Nebuchadnezzar eventually did the same, becoming too sure of his power. The question he raises for us, though, is how and when we can see such leaders as instruments of the Divine Will or as opponents of that Will. In this context, the verse from Proverbs, 21:1, "*Palgei mayim lev melech b'yad Hashem*, like waves of water is the heart of a king in the Hands of God", tantalizes us with the suggestion that God limits the freewill of world leaders, but does not give us exact guidance on how to distinguish one from the other.

In concert with the Torah reading, the *haftarah* reminds us that political events, especially those

of great import for the Jewish people, often have a component of Divine Providence to them. The search for an exact definition of when that happens, as well as for a superpower that handles its job as an extension of God's impact on the world, that humbly and honestly seeks to do what God would want, continues.

Shabbat Shalom