

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Va'etchanan

- Gidon Rothstein

PART V: HAFTAROT OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Vaetchanan/Shabbat Nachamu, Isaiah 40:1-26

A Difficult Haftarah

Haftarot like this one raise a thorny problem. What if important truths about how the world works, how our relationship with God should work, how our future as a people and individuals can, should, and will go, was embedded in a difficult text?

I ask because I recognize the difficulty in reading certain sections of Scripture, especially Isaiah. Grappling with how to present a *haftarah* such as this one, and to do so in a thousand words, reminds me that the vast majority of Jews will not get much out of this week's haftarah. How can the truth reach them if they refuse to hear?

Comfort: A Hard Topic, Even for Isaiah

Some help comes from remembering that tradition divides the *haftarah* into small sections, each with its own perspective of comfort. That comfort is not of the kind we like to read, where the prophet waxes rhapsodic about the future (although Isaiah knows how to do that—see the coming weeks' haftarot). It seems like a first stage of comfort is figuring out how to bring it, dealing with such issues as what background will shape it and who will be the major actor(s) in inaugurating it.

By background, I mean Isaiah's statement that Jerusalem will be comforted for having taken "double" for all her sins. While some commentators minimize the implications of this (such as Targum Jonathan, who reads it as meaning we will be comforted as if we were punished double what we deserved), Rashi understands it literally, that we will have been punished both for our actual sins as well as for having continued the sinful ways of our forefathers.

That latter concept is so foreign in our times that it bears explaining. Rashi assumes that we bear culpability not only for the evil we create, but also the evil we continue. According to Rashi, if I was taught at home that it was proper to focus on sacrifices rather than the poor, my responsibility is to learn that that is incorrect and change. Failure to do so, Rashi is telling us, will itself be a whole new level of guilt, incurring punishment of its own.

For the minimizers, our punishment will have been within reason, so the Redemption will only mean an end to that understandable process. For Rashi, who in this case represents the more literal reading, we will need comfort for having borne the burden not only of our own sins, but those of our forefathers' sins that we made part of our lives. (Remember the verse in Lamentations that speaks of us bearing our forefathers' iniquities), which would then need a comfort that differs in kind and degree from that of the other commentaries.

Flattening the Way Physically or Metaphorically

Isaiah is told in verses 3-5 to predict that the way will be flattened before God. Rashi and some Midrashim read the verse as telling us that at the time of the Redemption, the roads will be flattened to ease the path home. Since Midrashim think that happened when the Jews left Egypt as well, this reading sees the Exodus as a first example of the kind of progression to Israel we will experience in the future. The implication, I believe, is that had we only acted properly, that might have been the only time we entered the Land of Israel.

Befitting the rationalist he was, Radak assumes the verse should be taken metaphorically, that it means the road back will be as easy as if it had been flattened. That ease, according to Radak, will itself lead Jews and others to recognize God's hand (with interesting ramifications for whether going back on a plane, almost at one's will, counts as redemption).

Verses 3-11: The Link Between Our Involvement in Redemption and God's

These nine verses contain three versions of how the Voice will go out to announce the redemption, each assuming a different level of Divine involvement. At first, we are told of a Voice calling from the desert, a distant Voice, to speak of the flattening of the roads. The distance means the involvement of God will only be perceivable to those who pay attention.

Then, the Voice tells Isaiah to call out, confusing him as to what he, a human, could have to say. At the same time as he is being encouraged to issue his call, he is told that the Jews should only rely on God, not other peoples. After that, in the third version, the harbinger of Zion is told to call out, with no details at all, seeming to leave up to him how to phrase it. It is precisely here, however, that God speaks most directly of coming "Himself" as it were.

The verses don't say it explicitly, but seem to me to hint at a linkage between how active we are in bringing redemption and how involved God will be. Counterintuitively, the more active we are, the more direct a Divine role we can expect. As the Midrash says elsewhere, if we make a small opening for God, God will expand it almost immeasurably.

The Might of God: Believing is the First Step

The rest of the **haftarah** focuses on God's power, His not needing advice or assistance, His plans being largely beyond human ken, implicit discussions of how God created the world, the nature of the Heavens and His relationship to the world through those Heavens, and other esoteric matters of God's power as compared to the powerlessness of the idols.

At the close, the last two verses add one more element to that discussion, speaking of how God knows the stars by name. The idea that the Divinely Other also relates directly to aspects of Nature stresses the tension between transcendence and immanence that characterizes so much of Judaism.

In our context, it perhaps explains why the comfort message is muted. The physical appurtenances of comfort that we seek can only arrive after we solve our faith and practice challenges. How we will get back, how we will have experienced our punishment, how we can gather the necessary faith to act ourselves and see God's acting, and how we can experience a God both other and close, are all the building blocks of the redemption we once again remind

ourselves is out there, we hope arriving speedily.

Shabbat Shalom