

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Vayakhel

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Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Vayakhel—I Book of Kings 7:40-50

For Ashkenazic Jews, this haftarah is the same as for the second Shabbat of Hanukkah, but Sefardic Jews read verses 13-26. Even for Ashkenazic Jews, we here focus on something other than the *Menorot*, which are the proper center of discussion when we read this on Hanukkah.

The haftarah is somewhat technical, devoted to listing various parts of the Temple that the builders of Solomon (in particular, Hiram, to whom we will return below) completed. It presents a similar dilemma to the Torah reading, how to comment meaningfully on a discussion of a building we have not had for thousands of years.

Truth is, the Torah reading is more easily discussed, since it has a few verses of easier relevance, such as the command to observe Shabbat, the appointment of Betsalel as chief designer of the Tabernacle, the collection of funds, etc. The haftarah is more uniform in sticking to technical details, but trying to figure out the differences between the Ashkenazic and Sefardic customs will help us find productive insight.

## **The Sefardic Reading: The Pillars of the Temple and Their Names**

Sefardic Jews read of Solomon's having chosen Hiram, a resident of Tyre, to be the main builder of the Temple. He should not be confused with the king of Tyre of the same name, whom we met in an earlier *haftarah*.

Sefardic Jews then hear of his building several of the parts of the Temple, including especially the *amudim*, the pillars, which had names, the right one *Yachin* and the left one *Boaz*. These names were appropriated by several authors for later Jewish books (for example, two brothers from the Duran family, residents of Algiers in the fifteenth century, wrote *Responsa* collected in a volume known as *Responsa Yachin u-Voaz*; the best-known edition of Mishnah before Kehati had that name also, because its central commentary was split into two parts with those names).

Rashi records a Midrashic tradition that the right pillar, the *Yachin*, corresponded to the moon, to which the Davidic monarchy was also compared. He emphasizes that the comparison was to the *yareah* aspect of the moon, a term that ignores its quality of waxing and waning (in contrast to *levana*, which Rashi sees as incorporating that aspect).

The differentiation perhaps makes sense if we consider that the moon only gets bigger and smaller in our view of it, not in reality. So, too, (I understand Rashi to mean), the comparison of the kingdom of the House of David to the *yareach* indicates the permanent underlying aspect. An example of this, incidentally, is that the Talmud tells us we insert the blessing praying for the arrival of *tzemach David*, the sprout of David (the Messiah), just after the one for the building of Jerusalem because the city is not considered to be rebuilt until there is a restoration of a King of

David.

### **Creativity in the Making of the Temple**

These pillars were additions not included in the original architecture of the Tabernacle, reminding us that the structure in the desert was a minimum, open to adjustment and expansion (as were the dimensions, since Solomon's Temple was much larger than the Tabernacle).

This reminds us that even when God gives detailed commandments of how to serve, those are not always meant as the full parameters of what can be done; sometimes they are the lower limits, defining what must be done. Given the detail of the Torah's description of the Tabernacle, we could easily have assumed that was the whole of the structure God wanted. Solomon and Hiram apparently knew different.

### **Hiram: A Return to a Family Legacy**

The Sefardic haftarah, then, focuses on the process of Solomon's chief builder, and the creativity he brought to that task. The text tells us that this Hiram was the son of a widow, from the Tribe of Naftali, but his father lived in Tyre (which is outside of Israel, the capital of the King Hiram we've seen several times before).

The confusing name-similarity—Hiram the king provides materials for Solomon, while Hiram the craftsman shapes the structure itself—alerts us to at least one interesting tension in this Hiram's life. He is the son of a man who chose to live outside of Israel during Solomon's reign, when it was at the pinnacle of power and economic success. As a further sign of his alienation, this father gives his son a non-Jewish name.

While Hiram's place of birth and name might have distanced him as it had his father, our builder chose differently. In the Sages's reading, in Erechin 16b, he took the path of his mother's family, who descended from Oholiav of the tribe of Dan, Betsalel's chief assistant in building the Tabernacle.

Hiram's little drama reminds us that those who return to our community from afar often bring with them skills we can use for Jewishly valuable purposes. It would be a shame if we encouraged such people to abandon those skills, rather than finding the way to channel them to service of God.

### **So What Do Ashkenazic Jews Read, and Why?**

I have spent so much more time on the Sefardic haftarah than the Ashkenazic one, since it is simply richer. Seeing how technical the Ashkenazi reading is, and that we would read it (potentially) on two different occasions, we should wonder why this was such a popular choice.

As part of the answer, we note that while this haftarah does not recount the completion of the Temple—that comes in the next chapter and is the haftarah for Pekudei as well as the second day of Sukkot—it tells us of the last steps, the finishing touches, the inventorying of what has been built and insuring that it all was done properly.

One element of the Sefardi/Ashkenazi difference here, then, is that the Ashkenazic custom

focused on getting to the end, not the exciting times during the course of it, while the Sefardic one focuses our attention on what was new, different, and conceptually compelling.

**Shabbat Shalom**