

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Vayetzei

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Vayetse, Hosea, 12:13-14:10

The Metaphor of Faithfulness

The challenge of speaking meaningfully, articulately, and intelligibly about God, the Ineffable and completely Other, looms large before each Prophet. One central tool in that task, metaphor, seeks to shed useful light on our relationship with God—itself a metaphor—by aligning it with other ones we have.

This search for the familiar as a way to assimilate new experiences shows itself in everyday life. People facing the entirely new, geographically, physically, or culturally, will often say, “This is just like...” or “This is so different from...” We comprehend the new by comparing and contrasting it—those mainstays of examination questions—to what we already know well.

In our *haftarah*, the metaphor is marriage, especially the faithfulness of partners in a good one, the betrayal of spouses who cheat, and the readiness of some spouses to take a wayward partner back, even after great damage to the relationship.

The opening, which connects us to the Torah reading, has Hosea invoking Jacob’s service to earn Rachel as a parallel to God’s having brought the Jews out of Egypt with a prophet, and watching over them with one. Just as Jacob worked resolutely towards his goal, never abandoning it in the face of various challenges, God metaphorically works resolutely on the relationship with us.

Continuous striving is one way to be faithful to a goal, but the *haftarah* implies and suggests others as well. Jacob ran away from Esau to get to Haran, a retreat strategic and appropriate for the circumstances. Leaving the scene, Jacob’s actions teach us, is sometimes the only way to be able to move forward towards a goal.

Just as continuous forward motion is sometimes impossible, God’s punishment, which might seem a disruption of our relationship, does not even have to mean a break in continuous divine involvement. When Ephraim incurs retribution here, God speaks of being like various animals—a lion, a bear—in attacking and punishing them. The punishment hurts, but there is the solace of God’s deep involvement in administering it.

Getting From Punishment to Involvement

The *haftarah* records Hosea’s attempt to convince the people to return to a more positive version of that deep involvement. Ephraim, probably the Northern Kingdom, was at one point highly faithful. The traditional reading of the text sees Jeroboam as having been given the Northern Kingdom for criticizing King Solomon’s sleeping late on the day of the dedication of the Temple. The Midrash portrays God as either rewarding him for his zealotry or challenging him to outperform Solomon. Either way he failed, the lure of power enticing him into

establishing a competing worship to the one at the Temple.

Love Story, the book, makes the famous assertion that Love means never having to say you're sorry. While I think generally the opposite is true—it is precisely those we love most to whom we ought to be apologizing most fully and carefully-- the statement properly emphasizes that love cannot hang on the question of an apology. Love can be broken, but not by something so small as failure to apologize. Apologies can, however, improve a relationship, taking it to whatever its next level is supposed to be.

With God, the equivalent of saying sorry is repentance, so the prophet's call for repentance fits well here. In a relationship blessed with permanence but plagued by one partner's inability or refusal to shoulder responsibilities, the only barrier to improvement is that partner's willingness to acknowledge error and rededicate him or herself to fulfilling the promise inherent in the relationship. As Jacob contributed permanence and effort to perfect his relationship with Rachel, we are being called to do so with God (Who already reciprocates).

Maimonides's Read of Famous Verses

13:8, refers to God punishing us by acting towards us as a "*dov shakul*, a bear bereaved of her whelps." Avot 5:7 defines seven qualities of a person with poorly formed character; in his commentary there, Maimonides notes that few people completely lack intellectual and character qualities, but anyone so bereft of humanity will be similar to a rampaging animal, and can be referred to that way. This raises the possibility that Maimonides could have interpreted our verse as meaning that God will punish us by forcing us to grapple with such people, a terrible task and burden.

The most famous verse in the haftarah, 14:2, "*Shuva Yisrael ad Hashem Elokecha*, Return O Israel to the Lord Your God," emphasizes the power of repentance to fully rejuvenate (even improve) a relationship with God. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 7;6, echoes these messages when he speaks of how close repentance brings the penitent to God.

14;4 tells us that in the future we will no longer say "*Elokeinu l'masei yadeinu*, God to the work of our hands." Maimonides in Laws of Repentance 2;2 understands this to mean that we will no longer need to falsely invoke God to support our actions, since God will truly know our positive intentions.

The final verse of the *haftarah*, which Maimonides does not cite, challenges us with its claim that the ways of God are productive for the righteous and destructive for sinners. We tend to assume that good is good always, but the verse sees God's ways as more malleable.

Baba Batra 89b tells of R. Yohanan b. Zakai struggling with whether to publicize a certain halachic fact, for fear that it might teach evildoers how to get away with their evil. He finally announces the information anyway, citing our verse. In his view, then, Hosea was speaking of how some positive truths can be warped by evildoers. Horayot 10b assumes the verse is referring to how motive affects an act; positive motives can make it a meritorious one and negative ones can make it sinful.

The sources share a conviction that some actions are not inherently good or bad, but depend on

the use to which they are put. As a close to the book of Hosea and of our *haftarah*, it reminds us, soberingly, that our internal righteousness necessarily affects our external experience of religion and the impact it has on us.

In summary, then, Hoshea uses the metaphor of marriage and faithfulness to bemoan the Jews' betrayals of God. God, on the other hand, is portrayed as punishing, but continually involved. The implication seems to be that we are being warned of punishment, are called on to match Jacob's faithfulness to Rachel.

Shabbat Shalom