

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Vayikra

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## **Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Vayikra, Isaiah 43:21-44:23**

This week's *haftarah* calls our attention to the question of sacrifice, as did the Torah reading. Those who know the book of Isaiah at all are accustomed to his complaining about the Jewish people's excessive focus on sacrifice, but our selection fits better with the Torah reading, avoiding negativity about sacrifice while drawing our attention to broader underlying concerns.

### **Sacrifice, Sin, and Substitutes for God**

God opens with a complaint about the Jews' failure to call out to Him, despite His having made them His people. Making it worse, they not only do not call out to God, they do not bring their sacrifices to Him, despite God's having refrained from imposing excessive burdens of sacrifice upon them. Worse still, as opposed to bringing what they were supposed to, they have "burdened" God with their sins.

The mention of sin leads into two sections (separated by a brief break in the traditional writing of the text, indicating a separation that may yet imply some connection), in both of which the prophet speaks for God in stressing that God is the source of all punishment and forgiveness. In the first, God reminds us that our earlier ancestors sinned towards God (Radak understands that to refer to Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, who encouraged people to offer sacrifices outside the Temple, which dates this prophecy to the early years of Isaiah's career and adds a further sacrifice aspect to it), leading God to punish the Jews.

With but a brief pause, God then turns to the opposite tack, stressing the Divine concern for the Jews, the plan to forgive and purify them, bringing about a time when many Jews will return to God and once again assert their fidelity to God and to the traditions of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As we try to track the chain of reasoning (so we can know how it all hangs together), we need to remember that Isaiah started with calling out to God, which led to his mentioning sacrifices and the Jews' failures in that regard. Since much of sacrifice is brought to atone for sin (although not all—this week's Torah reading also offers examples of freewill offerings, where a person voluntarily decides to offer a sacrifice to God), at least the connection to the complaint about the Jews' sins and the assertion of God's being the source of forgiveness makes some sense.

### **A Disquisition on Idolatry**

The *haftarah* then spends fifteen verses (out of a total of thirty one) complaining about idolatry, especially its inherent contradictions. After three verses about how God, as first and last, is the only source of true forgiveness and/or salvation, the *haftarah* turns its attention to those who worship idols.

The prophet points out that people ignore the uncomfortable fact that they are the ones crafting these idols out of ordinary materials and then endowing them with divinity. In the most

pungent expression of this idea, Isaiah notes that some people chop wood, use half of it for ordinary house needs, such as fire for heat, and build an idol with the other half.

To perhaps even further stress why this issue is so distressing, the last three verses again return to the theme of our need to pay attention to God, the only real source of either forgiveness or salvation.

### **So Many Ways to Be Led Away from God**

This flow of ideas brings to the fore an important undercurrent of Jewish thought that we ought to notice more fully. The Jews of Isaiah's time allowed themselves to believe that sacrifices were how they got forgiven by God, as well as how they insured a good future. That error, which Nachmanides stresses in many places, can take several forms, since its basis lies in seeking ultimate security in some source other than God.

In the continuum of religion, one's focus on sacrifice (or lack of it) is not all that distant from idolatry. One who invests too much in the power of sacrifice is likely to neglect other of God's concerns, meaning that they are not truly worshipping God, they are using the magic of sacrifice to provide the security they crave.

So, too, one who does not bring sacrifices often enough (such as when s/he has sinned) is losing sight of God as the true and only source of forgiveness. Once God is not the source of forgiveness, the difference among the other sources one can seek to avail oneself of is fairly small, since they all share the crucial (flawed) assumption that forgiving sin is more magical than anything else. Rather than introspection and rectification, forgiveness for such people involves finding the right magic (sacrifice or idols, in this selection) to wipe away the blemish.

### **Idolatry in Our Time**

We may allow ourselves to tune out prophetic discussions of idolatry, believing such practices to be forgotten relics of the past. Whether or not that is true (there are, in the Western world today, many who have become attracted to ancient pagan practices, such as feng shui), the *haftarah* takes the discussion in a direction that is unequivocally relevant today. As opposed to limiting idolatry to the problem of believing in a deity or power other than God (although it would be interesting to consider whether believing in Nature to the exclusion of God is a form of idolatry), Isaiah is also bothered by people's trusting their own creations more than God.

That suggests that our *haftarah* is warning us that people tend to get too caught up in seeking security in ways they can control, such as idols or (to put it in relevant contemporary terms) money. The only real security, however, lies with God, just like the only real forgiveness lies in using *korbanot* (or, in their forced absence, prayer) as a way to fully repent our sins and return to God.

Shabbat Shalom