

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Vayishlach

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Vayishlach, The Book of Obadiah

## **The Tragedy of Esau, As It Plays Out in Our Day**

A reality too painful to be faced leaves two main choices, being overwhelmed by the accumulation of sadness or learning to distance oneself from events. Ideally, people find a middle road, where the tragedy penetrates their consciousness, but is taken with enough serenity to allow them to continue functioning. Doctors such as oncologists know this challenge well, as they cannot take every lost patient to heart without burning out or worse, but must also avoid become cold or inured to the sufferings with which their noble occupation confronts them.

This week's *haftarah* leads me to wonder whether the Jewish people have lost sight of that middle road in our attitude towards those who refuse to share our view of the world. Granted that we have always seen ourselves as Chosen to carry the message of God's rule to the world, our abject failure to convince the rest of the world of our status—those who accepted our message of monotheism tend to arrogate that to themselves, while others simply ignore us—carries with it ramifications we tend to either ignore or celebrate; our *haftarah* shows us that neither reaction is appropriate.

Casual readers of the *haftarah* might classify it in the triumphalist camp of prophecy, where the prophet tells us how we'll slam our enemies in future times, presumably thus lifting the spirits of an apparently bloodthirsty audience. That view ignores two important facts, first that the prophecy is addressed to Edom/Esau, and, second, that tradition saw Obadiah as a convert from Edom to the Jewish people.

## **Prophecies to Other Nations: Exercises in Futility?**

The whole question of prophecies to other nations is one that has, as far as I have seen, been insufficiently addressed. Once we note that many if not most of the prophets recorded words spoken to non-Jewish nations, the next step is to realize that the prophets apparently attached enough value to those nations' reactions to spend their time and effort on addressing them. It would seem logical that they hoped they also would heed the prophecies and improve their ways. Otherwise, why speak to them—why not just speak to the Jews about them?

This is all the more the case when we see the Sages assuming that Obadiah was an Edomite convert. While there is some debate in Jewish thought about how much a prophet's personal circumstances impact his or her prophecy, the fact of God choosing a convert to convey a message to his old people is striking and indicates that this was a prophecy to Edom, not about them.

Reading the *haftarah* with that in mind begins to peel away the layers of sadness that underlie it. The selection tells Edom of their future sufferings, how they will become the lowest of nations,

lose their power, language, continuity of kingship. In many ways, Edom will lose its status as a nation.

### **Betraying Family: The Fault of Esau**

We are not told right away why Esau is doomed to that fate, but his reaction gives us a hint. Instead of confronting his problems, the prophet envisions Esau as putting on a show, trying to portray himself as stronger than he really is. Then, we are told of Esau's choosing to support nations in the process of destroying the Jewish people. Instead of feeling brotherly love, Esau celebrated in our destruction, an act that rebounds on him.

First, it is precisely those nations whom he supported who will turn on him. Second, Obadiah informs Esau that he will lose his leadership, so there will be no one with the wisdom to show him the way out of all his troubles.

We in the twenty-first century have not seen the nation of Esau in many years, so this can seem distant, but Obadiah's message applies in many ways to the non-Jews of our times. The prophets assume as a simple truth of history that the Jews have a particular role in the world, that of announcing God's rule. Esau's refusal to accept Jacob's exceptionalism, his insistence that he was as great or as special, his celebration of every time the Jews suffered, leads directly to his eventual destruction, an outcome no one wants.

Esau loses nationhood, leadership, and wisdom because of his denial of Jacob's importance; those losses in turn lead to complete destruction. The one possible way he might have rectified all that, by agreeing that Jacob and his descendants deserved their position in the world, was closed off by his refusal to entertain it as a possibility.

### **What Is Old Is New**

We face similar situations today. Our feeling of shared humanity with those around us should not blind us to the worry of how the future will play itself out for those who consistently refuse to admit to basic truths about the world. If God directs history, and the Jews have a special role to play in that history, those who deny it are setting themselves up for the kind of end Obadiah predicts for Esau here.

It is that dilemma that leads Obadiah to include the closing verse, the most famous one in the haftarah and one that was included numerous times in the traditional liturgy. "*V'alu moshi'im b'Har Tzion lishpot et Har Esav v'hayta l'Hashem hamelucha*, and redeemers will ascend Mount Zion to judge Mount Esau, and God will have true Kingship." Those who align themselves against the Jewish people become a barrier to achieving what we should all hope for, a world in which God's rule is recognized by all. In doing so, they make their punishment a necessary part of achieving that final goal.

All of which, let me stress, was and is avoidable, if only the nations involved—in this case Esau—would change their attitude. Accepting only our special role and place, all who currently follow this path could instead become positive contributors towards bringing about God's desired future.

We can do it the easy way or the hard way; many read the prophets as if God and the Jews would celebrate doing it the hard way, but they are wrong. Obadiah, I believe, gave this prediction hoping against hope that his words would spur change. He knew, as we do, the odds against it; he knew that most likely his dire predictions would be forced to come to pass, that he and we will have to suffer a future in which those who might have been partners will instead be removed as adversaries. But I suspect he hoped otherwise, as should we.

In summary, then, the metaphor of family returns, this time in Obadiah's complaints about Esau's national neglect of that bond by rejoicing in our downfall. More broadly, the haftarah uses Esau as an example of the retribution awaiting those who reject the chosenness of the Jewish people; they are a particularly good example, since they should have accepted it as the truth of their family.

Shabbat Shalom