

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Yitro

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Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Yitro-- Isaiah 6;1-7;6, 9;5-6

The connection of the first half of this *haftarah* to our Torah reading is clear, since it is Isaiah's vision of God; just as the Jews' saw God at Sinai, Isaiah sees God here. The second half does not fit so well, either with the first half or with the Torah reading, since it takes up another incident at a different stage of Isaiah's career.

A little thought shows that the first half, too, bears further consideration. True, both readings speak of a revelation of God, but the Torah reading speaks of God's appearance at Sinai, an event on a different scale and of a different sort than Isaiah's. God appearing to an entire people and giving them the laws that form one version of the core of their religion bears little relation to an individual attaining a personal vision of God in which he volunteers for a prophetic mission. Especially since that mission consists of informing the Jews of their inadequacies, the relation to Sinai becomes tenuous.

What Does God Look Like to Isaiah?

The content of the vision offers a key to figuring out the role of the second half of the *haftarah* as well as the relationship of both halves to the Torah reading. Isaiah sees God sitting on an exalted throne, with His "bottom parts" (whatever that means when applied to God) filling the Temple. That already suggests a God who is exalted and removed even as His impact is strongly felt in the world, immanent while transcendent.

Isaiah locates his vision in the Temple, an interesting choice since so much of his book bemoans how the Jews' emphasis on ritual and sacrifice has fed a neglect of social justice. This vision reminds us that he did not mean to deny the Temple's importance, just to point out the Jews' failure to balance their Temple- focus with necessary other actions.

Placing the vision in the Temple also gives it a more national than personal tinge, since that is where God promised to relate to the people as a whole, not just individuals. Isaiah's seeing "*seraphim*, fiery angels," rather than ordinary ones, fits the content of the vision, since he then finds out that he has volunteered to tell the Jews of the trouble they are in.

The commentators disagree as to whether he is telling them that their hearts, ears, and eyes are too hardened to heed the messages that will help them avoid the coming destruction or whether he is informing them that God is going to harden their hearts, with the same result. Both readings stress the implausibility of change, again moving the experience from the personal to the national.

This complements Sinai; in the first case, God appeared to the entire people with a message of love, command, and continuing connection, while in the later vision He called on Isaiah to serve as messenger to inform the people of how far they have strayed and their inability to any longer hear from God directly.

Chapter 7, Verses 1-6: A Message of Hope

So far, the *haftarah* gives a negative counterpart to Sinai, leaving little hope. Chapter 7 balances that picture, opening the door to a more positive outcome than just death or destruction. Here, Ahaz, an evil king, is told not to fear the kings who are coming to attack him, because God will protect him from them. The two incidents, juxtaposed, show us an exquisite irony of Isaiah's career. He begins his prophecy during the time of a good king, Uziyah, and predicts doom and destruction, but is later also commissioned to tell an evil king, Ahaz, that God will save him.

In the context of Sinai, we see that Isaiah's job was to clarify aspects that might have been misunderstood by the Jews. At the beginning of his prophecy, faced with people who were in many ways good and dedicated to God, his job was to remind them that they were nonetheless neglecting vital aspects of God's service. Were that to continue, he is telling them, they would bear significant consequences.

Later on, when the people's spiritual status has declined, perhaps to the point that they can no longer imagine God's love, Isaiah is there to remind them of the other half of Sinai. Sinai embodies command, which implies reward and punishment, but also love, connection, and closeness.

God can show both in one meaning-packed event, but people need to separate the various pieces, to experience each on its own, before they can put them back together into a unified whole. Isaiah, in the *haftarah*, shows us one example of such a process.

Famous Verses

1) Yevamot 49b identifies Isaiah's referring to the Jews in Verse 5 as an "*Am tamei sefatayim*, a nation of impure lips" as the sin that made him vulnerable to being killed. The Talmud says that Menaseh, the son of Hezekiah, accused Isaiah of contradicting Moses, since he claimed to have seen God, which the Torah says is impossible for mortals.

Realizing the pointlessness of arguing, Isaiah instead hid in a tree; Menasseh ordered it chopped in pieces, and when the ax hit Isaiah's lips—the locus of his sinful denigration of the Jews-- he was killed. Note that his lips remained vulnerable despite an angel having removed his sin by placing a hot coal on his mouth.

The Talmud offers an answer to Menasseh's claim, explaining that only Moses had to worry about seeing God and living, because only he saw through an "*aspaklaria hame'ira*, a clear glass," meaning with enough accuracy that any fuller a vision might be beyond his powers to bear. For all other prophets, the issue never arose.

2) Verse 10 threatens or predicts that the Jewish people's hearts will be fattened, preventing them from repenting. As it does so, though, the verse notes that were the Jews to repent, they would be healed, teaching R. Yohanan (Rosh haShanah 17b) that, at least for a community, repentance is available even after the promulgation of a Divine decree of punishment.

3) Chapter 7 verse 3 refers to the place where Isaiah and his son should meet Ahaz as "*sadeh kovesh*," which the Talmud interprets as meaning that Ahaz was ashamed before Isaiah. That

shame saved him a share in the World to Come, so that he is not included in the list at the beginning of the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin of those who permanently lost that share.

Shabbat Shalom