

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: HaChodesh

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat haChodesh, Ezekiel 45:16-46:18

## **The Future Temple and the Month of Nisan**

The Talmud in Megillah identifies this text as the one read on the week before the beginning of the month of Nisan, the month in which Passover occurs. The text presents many difficulties, since Ezekiel seems to here envision a Temple that operates with different rules than we are used to. Some of his strayings from tradition are so obvious as to already have been grappled with by the Talmud, which doubles our goals here; we wish to both understand what Ezekiel meant in a traditional way as well as understand why the Talmud would move such a text to so prominent a position in our liturgy.

A first difference: The haftarah opens by claiming the Jewish people will donate sufficient funds for regular communal sacrifices, but that the “*nassi, nasi*” (the king or the High Priest, as Radak and Rashi interpret it) will give the communal sacrifices for the New Moons, Sabbaths, and holidays. Radak’s interpretation has the verse saying the king will replace the people in giving the money for the holiday sacrifices. Since the *haftarah* also assumes the people will be most assiduous about attendance at the Temple on holidays, Radak’s view reads Ezekiel as envisioning the people outsourcing responsibility for the sacrifices the most people will witness.

## **How Different Will That Future Temple Be? The Rededication**

Verses 18-25 of the chapter offer several more apparent discrepancies, with Rashi and Radak differing on how to handle them. Rashi tends to follow the Talmud, which strove to reconcile Ezekiel’s words with the known workings of the Temple. Radak is more comfortable reading the text as laying out a 3rd Temple that will differ from the ones that came before. Rashi’s position is more palatable from a traditional perspective, but Radak’s raises more interesting questions of where there is flexibility within what has been seen as the laws of the Temple.

We do not have room to analyze the haftarah’s challenging claims in detail—among them, the issue of when in the course of Redemption the Temple will be built and dedicated (Rashi thinks at the beginning, and in Nisan; Radak thinks it will be after much redemptive activity has already occurred); whether there will be a new sin-offering given on the seventh day of the dedication; whether the holiday sacrifices for Sukkot and Passover will change, making the two holidays, at least in their Temple service, more similar to each other and more generic. Instead, we will focus on Radak’s understanding of one of them, the role of a future Temple in the lives of the people.

## **The Future Temple and the Role of Sacrifices in Jewish Thought**

Verses 1-8 of chapter 46 speak of a special door, from the east, through which the *nasi* will enter on Sabbaths and holidays. Radak thinks the verses assume that those are the days people will generally come to the Temple.

The comment offers an in-between option to two views bandied about in the Jewish world today.

One view holds and hopes that sacrifice will return exactly as it was. Certainly the more simple view for those who accept the authority of traditional sources, the problem is only with helping moderns resonate to that hope. In our times, such ideas as animal sacrifice seem odd, foreign, and even perhaps primitive.

Giving some apparent (I stress the word) comfort to the people who are leery of animal sacrifice is the view of Maimonides in the Guide of the Perplexed, where he suggests that God instituted sacrifice because of the needs of the people of the time of the Exodus. Not ready for the ideal, sacrifice-free world, he sees God as weaning them by restricting it to one place and only certain forms.

Many have jumped from here to argue that Maimonides intended to imply that we would eventually dispense with sacrifice completely. Problematically for this view, as Prof. Twersky ז"ל noted (and R. Lichtenstein has quoted approvingly), that section of the Moreh is not so much devoted to giving the reason for the mitsvot, but a reason. Maimonides was trying to show that mitsvot are logical, not that he had captured the absolute reason for them (as he himself stresses in the Mishneh Torah, again as Prof. Twersky ז"ל demonstrated).

If so, whether or not his reason is no longer relevant, he might still have thought there would be sacrifices in a future Temple. Indeed, his having expounded the laws of sacrifice so fully, in both the Mishnah Commentary and the Mishneh Torah— laws that did not apply in his time, and were usually left out of halachic works—should prove his acceptance that they continued to be important to the religion.

What the *haftarah* does suggest—and here Maimonides might have agreed—is that the role of sacrifices and the Temple will change in the future. In the past, Jews overemphasized those rituals, seeing them as the entirety of one's relationship with God. As the prophets repeatedly railed, the people were unshakably sure that as long as the proper sacrifices were offered, God could not truly be angry with the Jews, nor punish them harshly.

The future Temple, we are being told, will be only part of the Jewish people's existence. Jews will go there on special occasions, but generally it will be staffed and attended to only by a select group of people. Sacrifice and Temple worship will take its proper place as one of many elements of our connection with God.

### **The Importance of a Leader**

The last verses discuss some rules for the nasi giving land gifts, stressing that he cannot be corrupt in either giving or taking. Our including this in the *haftarah* reminds us that the concern of the text—whatever we chose to get out of it-- was the role of the nasi in the future Temple, especially his connection to its service.

This connects well with the special Torah reading, since in both cases we are being told that the *nasi* should be our representative. In the Torah, kings had to count the years of their reign from Nisan, the first month of the Jewish people. The structure of the king's office, in other words, emphasizes lessons for the people as a whole, whether in terms of the calendar or the Temple, making him our representative in more than just the usually understood ways.

Shabbat Shalom