

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Ki Tavo

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Ki Tavo, Isaiah 60:1-22

Several years ago, I gave a speech in an Orthodox synagogue (whom I would have expected to be most likely to take Scriptural promises seriously) in which I asked my listeners to imagine a time when Jerusalem would be so central to the world's economy that non-Jews would volunteer gifts to the city. To accommodate the flow of traffic in its midst, the city would be open day and night. Its citizens, meanwhile, would all be righteous and God-fearing, and the world would visibly near a time when the rule of the One God was accepted universally.

After several minutes of that description, I noted my suspicion (later confirmed) that such ideas would be taken as pure fantasy, wildly impossible, not even realistic enough to qualify as utopian. Since this week's *haftarah* asserts that all of those will happen, I wondered, then as now, what it means when even Orthodox Jews, who claim to believe that God speaks through the prophets, do not believe these prophecies will or can ever come true.

The Light of the Future and Joining with the Non-Jews: Two Important Themes

As is so often true with a prophet rich in ideas as Isaiah, there are too many points of interest to cover all or even a representative sampling. I am instead going to focus on two of the central themes, the role of light, and the importance the prophet attaches to the participation of non-Jews in our future redemption.

Verses 1-3: Why Does Our Light Require Their Dark?

The *haftarah* opens with Isaiah telling Jerusalem to arise and shine (literally, and not the literally where we mean figuratively, the literally where we mean literally), for the Glory of God will shine upon her. Verses 2 and 3 announce that our light will come at the same time as the non-Jewish nations' light disappears, leading them and their kings to follow us and our light.

I suspect many people read such statements as the triumphalism of a downtrodden people; they oppressed us all those years, part of our redemption is giving back as good as we got. Reading the verses carefully should show us that there is much more at stake here.

First, the verses link our getting light to the non-Jews losing it. The Midrash thinks that verse 1 implies that in the future, the non-Jews will be plunged in darkness. Another Midrash compares the future situation to Sinai, where we had light and they had dark. Even more explicitly, several sources, including Genesis Rabbah 6:3, Sanhedrin 99a, and the Ritva in his Haggada read verses 1-2 as telling us that the light of Jacob cannot shine when that of Esau is still around.

Those sources tell us of a connection, but give us no guidance as to why our light and theirs are inversely related. Baba Batra 75a gives us a clue in its claim that in the future, light will come from the remainder of the hide of the Leviathan. However it does so, it apparently is sensitive to the righteousness of the person using it, since the righteous get more of it than others.

Verses 19-20: Physical Light Can Also Come From the Spiritual

Skipping to where the *haftarah* next discusses light, verses 19-20 tell us that the Jews as well will no longer use the sun and moon, that God will be our light, and that our sun will therefore never again set. The cited material, and more, leads me to believe that the prophet means that following God can produce a physical light, not just a spiritual one. Leviathan is a beast that in Midrash tried to compete with God; his hide signifies his death, and the defeat of ideologies that distract from God. Seeing Leviathan that way explains why the righteous will get a whole sukkah, a whole domicile, from his hide, while others get less.

It also explains why the light of Jacob cannot shine while Esau's does—these are not alternate sources of light, they are competing ones. As long as Esau's worldview and ideology are still around and attractive, there is little chance that people will find their way to Jacob's, and thus little chance that our worldview will shine forth.

In the future, we are being promised, those other nations' light, the attractiveness of the erroneous parts of their ideologies, will wane, and the Truth (remember that in our prayers, we speak of God giving truth to Jacob) will provide spiritual and physical light to the world, as it did at Sinai and the entire time in the desert.

Verses 4-14: The Nations Play an Active Role

Isaiah also predicts that the nations will actively participate in recognizing the truth of God's rule. That participation has an element of subservience, since they are envisioned as bringing us money, gold, livestock, and more. They will also help the Jews fully return to Jerusalem, bringing our exiles back with their belongings.

This suggests, by the way, that those Jewish communities whose countries allow them to leave without any of their possessions cannot be seen as a fulfillment of this prophecy; even those nations that allow Jews to take all their possessions are still not yet helping, a crucial aspect of this text's prediction.

That the non-Jews' interest in physically rebuilding our city is connected to their recognizing the constant hand of God also explains verse 14's belief that the descendants of our oppressors will come to us with bowed heads, seeking our forgiveness. The fathers are gone, but oppression was a physical expression of their denial of God. The atonement for that lies in their returning to these Jews, hat in metaphorical hand, to admit to the Jewish version of truth. That admission also helps the rest of the world come to embrace God.

The Last Two Words: On Time Or Early?

Sanhedrin 98a cites R. Joshua b. Levi's famous inference based on the oxymoron of the last verse of the *haftarah*, where God promises to hasten the redemption at its proper time. R. Joshua sees the verse as offering two possibilities for how the redemption will come: if we merit it, it will come early; if not, at its time. That Isaiah first refers to "in its time," suggests it is unlikely we will merit the early Arrival. Let us hope that either I am wrong in reading it that way, or that we will beat the odds, and see the full Redemption speedily.

Shabbat Shalom