

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Ki Teitzei

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat Ki Tetse, Isaiah 54:1-10

This week's *haftarah* is exceedingly brief; it is combined with the (slightly longer) haftarah for Parshat Reeh to make the haftarah of Parshat Noah. In ten verses, the haftarah focuses our attention on one aspect of the comfort of Jerusalem.

Highlighting this idea, Song of Songs Rabbah 1;1 notes that Scripture uses 10 terms of joy regarding Jews. Our verse 1 is the example of the verb *pitzhi*, whose meaning we will be defining. Rather than an overarching view of the comfort of Redemption as a whole, we are being told of a particular aspect of it, that of *pitzhi*.

Verses 1-6: Population and Its Contents, to Become the Throne of God

The basic promise of the *haftarah* is that Jerusalem will once again be filled with people, more even than the non-Jewish nations. The pressure of the population growth will lead to the city expanding far beyond where it was in Isaiah's time, to the Jews taking over other nations' land, and re-settling abandoned cities.

Verse 5 offers a reason God would see so much value in the city's growth. God will be our metaphorical husband, our redeemer, but will also become known as the God of the whole world. For Radak, the phrasing indicates that until then God will not be known that way, meaning that God's being acknowledged as the God of the world depends on our being redeemed. Along the same lines, several Midrashim connect the city's spread to its serving as a true "*kisei Hashem, Throne of God.*"

There is a connection, we are being told, between what happens to the Jewish people and the status of God in the world. That helps explain God's interest in having Jerusalem, the seat of the Temple and therefore of God's obvious presence in the world, grow and overflow its boundaries.

Humans enjoy growth because we take it is a sign of success, but that is not a motive we could ascribe to God. For God, the growth of Jerusalem only becomes "interesting" when its success has an impact that matters, such as furthering the acknowledgement of God's rule. It is in its contributing to world recognition of God that the fate of Jerusalem should matter to us.

Does God Need to Become the Ruler of the Universe?

Nachmanides suggests that the verse is speaking of a time when God will take control of the world back from the forces that currently rule lands other than Israel, a statement that dares to assume that most of the world is now ruled directly by powers other than God. Those powers are certainly subservient to God, so Nachmanides does not doubt God's being the Master of the Universe, but that mastery is not as complete as it will be once those intermediaries no longer function.

Combining these two ideas, that other nations' recognizing God is vital to God's being known as the Lord of the Whole World and that other powers are given subsidiary control over lands other than Israel, offers the surprising hypothesis that it is non-Jews' acknowledgement of God that will give them the direct rule of God in their lives. Going a step further, I wonder whether it was those nations' lack of recognition that led God to set up the system in the first place. Instead of punishing idol-worshippers, God instead removed Himself, somewhat, from those nations.

To get to the kind of direct relationship Jews have—and which God would want all humanity to have—non-Jews need only accept His rule. Unfortunately for them, the prophet sees their resistance to accepting “our” God as breaking down only when we succeed so fully they can no longer deny it.

Verses 7-8: This Is a Little Anger?

Verses 7 and 8 characterize the punishment of God as having come in a small moment, and with a minimal anger, a difficult phrasing to accept for those who know Jewish history. To explain how a punishment that has lasted for thousands of years could be termed “minimal anger,” Radak argues that that is how it will seem in retrospect, that the future good will wipe away or diminish the pain of past trials.

Radak also cites Targum Jonathan, who says that the days of anger will be small (short) in comparison to the days of redemption. This avoids the difficult idea that the good of the future erases the painful past, but assumes that Messiah will usher in a lengthy period where much has been accomplished—world recognition of God, rebuilding of the Temple—but more needs to be done before we meet the End of Days.

Sanhedrin 99a makes the same assumption, where one opinion reads our haftarah's reference to "*ki mei noach*, for as the waters of Noah", as "*kimei*", like the days, supporting the claim that the time of the Messiah will be as long as from Noah until then.

Verse 9: Just Like the Flood-Promise to Noah

The last two verses of the haftarah have God verifying this promise by saying it will be as guaranteed as the assurance that there would never be another Flood. Isaiah's singling out that promise, when God has made others that could have served equally well as benchmarks of God's Faithfulness, brings to mind two aspects of it that make it the best to use here.

First, the promise to Noah had to do with the physical world; pinning the Jews' eventual redemption on that at least implies that our redemption is intrinsically linked to the continuity of the world. Second, Noah's promise was explicitly given without regard to any evils human beings might commit; there may be the same implication here.

In verse 10, God fortifies the promise by adding that the mountains may move, but the promise is unchangeable. If the first of my reasons for the importance of Noah's promise is correct, we understand the relevance of the mountains. Just as they are a physical example of the world's steadiness, the promise is important to the world's physical well-being.

Rashi interprets the mountains as the Patriarchs; their merits may be used up and yet the redemption will still come. That view accords well with my second reason for connecting it to Noah, in that it tells us that the Redemption can come because of us or in spite of us, but it will come.

Luckily for our mood this Shabbat, that means that we can be certain of (and are perhaps already witnessing it) Jerusalem's growth, the influx of exiles to it, and its becoming a world-recognized, symbol of God's Presence. This is the future joy captured by the word "*pitzhi*".

Shabbat Shalom