

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Nitzavim-(Vayelech)

- Gidon Rothstein

Note: When Nitzavim and Vayelech are read together, this haftara is read and the Haftara for Haazinu is that of Vayelech

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Netsavim-Vayelech - Isaiah 61:10-63:9

Rich Expression Can Be Confusing

The first section of this *haftarah* is both long and difficult, although giving a generally positive tone. Some of the difficulty stems from Isaiah piling metaphors on top of each other, so that we have to make choices about how deeply to delve into each. I'm choosing three central ones, clothing, marriage, and planting.

Isaiah opens by announcing that Jerusalem (or, possibly, the Jewish people) will rejoice in God having clothed it (or them) in redemption. The verse then moves into a wedding metaphor, saying that these clothes will be a "*pe'er*," a sign of beauty or glory, like a bridegroom, or like jewels for a bride. The next verse takes us to planting, comparing the redemption to a field yielding its plants, a garden its seeds.

Later verses revisit these metaphors. 62:3 speaks of us (or Jerusalem) as a crown of glory or scarf of rulership in the hands of God. The first verses of chapter 63 focus on clothing, viewing someone (commentators debate whom, generally either the Angel of Esau or God, who was fighting on behalf of the Jews) as coming from Edom with dirtied clothing.

Verses 4 and 5 go back to marriage and planting, promising that we will no longer be called abandoned, we'll be known as "*cheftzi-bah*, my (God's) desires are in it," and the Land will be called "*be'ulah*, husbanded." Planting comes up again in verses 8-9, when God swears we'll never again have to see others eating our crops, that those who gather a harvest will eat and drink it, in God's holy places.

Clothing: Defining or Revealing

The clothing metaphor in two ways here. In the first verses, clothing seems to define the person. For example, the promise to clothe us in salvation guarantees its coming. Clothing also makes the man in the case of the priestly garments, without which a priest is considered a "stranger" to the Temple, and incurs the same liability for entering or serving as does a non-priest.

Clothing seems to reveal a person's already-existing character, such as the "*chamutz begadim*," the one wearing bloody clothes. Clothing, then, can either make the man or open him to the public, and is used in both of those ways here.

The other two metaphors, planting and marriage, express God's promise to be more involved with us in the future. We are being promised that we will once again merit the kind of attention

farmers give their plants and spouses are supposed to lavish on each other, repeated care for the health and needs of the other.

The metaphor of planting offers another fruitful insight, since the prophet compares us to both a field and a garden. As Radak notes, a field (without crop rotation) has one long growing season, while a garden combines different species, and therefore always has something coming to bloom. Translated to redemption, it suggests both a single redemptive event as well as a continuing and repeated blooming, perhaps further aspects of that redemption.

End of Verse 2: A Change of Name for Jerusalem

Verse 2 speaks of the nations seeing how God will help us and, as a result, renaming Jerusalem. This change might be a way of repairing the city's image, identifying it more fully with God, or wiping away the embarrassing reminders of her sin.

This fits well with the other metaphors we've seen. Just as God promised to re-clothe us as evidence of greater connection, just as God promised we would be like a field, securing God's greater attention, Jerusalem's name will demonstrate that as well.

Verse 6 is perhaps the best-known of the *haftarah*, where God announces the placing of guards or watchers on the walls of Jerusalem, all day and all night. Whether these watchers are angels or people, God is saying that He has assigned someone the task of continuously crying over and praying for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, of keeping that part of the world agenda in an active way.

Verses 10-12: Again, the Participation of the World

God next calls for His messengers to pass through the Land clearing away obstacles to travel, which may be a metaphor for the evil inclination. Once those stumbling blocks are gone, the messengers are to go to the ends of the earth, encouraging the nations who live there to tell the Jews that the Redemption has come, to call them the Holy Nation, the ones redeemed by God.

Note how once again other nations matter to this future redemption, because, in Isaiah's vision, God "cares" about the whole world learning the truth of Creation and of the necessity of living in relationship with our Creator. Admitting that the Jews are the nation of God and redeemed by Him is a crucial first step.

Verses 1-6 of Chapter 63 have God noting that no one else was willing to join in bringing about the necessary salvation, so He will do it Himself. Like the original Exodus, grand redemptions make a point to the entire world, explaining why it would take God's direct involvement to make it as fully and broadly as possible.

The selection ends with three verses that stress the kindnesses of God, the great goods He has done (and will do) for us. A casual look at Jewish history can make this a hard message to absorb, since we might see it as one trouble following another. Isaiah is asking us to realize that suffering is never lightly brought on us, that God only brings our sufferings in the name of a vastly more important goal.

Conclusion: Comfort Isn't a Simple Process

As the last of the seven comforting *haftarot*, this and the others stress that we cannot expect our problems to magically and instantaneously disappear. Our haftarot remind us there is a blessed time awaiting us, but the road to that time takes varying kinds of effort on our part. Even if we fail to ever make that effort, God will eventually bring it about, but we will have missed an opportunity.

The truer comfort is knowing how much we can do to hasten that day, to insure that it comes as fully and beneficially as possible. A propos of this time of year, the beginning of the High Holiday season, we are reminded that worlds of bounty await us, if we only make the first and necessary steps.

Shabbat Shalom