

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Parah

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Parah, Ezekiel 36:16-38

Becoming Impure As a Nation

The *haftarah* relates to this week's special Torah reading, in which we are told of the ceremony of the *parah adumah*, the red heifer whose ashes were mixed with water. That solution was then sprinkled on those rendered ritually impure by virtue of contact with a corpse; two sprinklings of that water four days apart (as long as the first of them was three or more days after contact) removed the ritual status and allowed the person to enter the Temple.

Our translating “*tumah*” as ritual impurity points us in the direction of central questions that underlie our *haftarah* as well. When the Torah assigns what we call impurity to a person, Jewish sources differ as to how to understand the phenomenon. Some see the Torah's rules as reflecting some metaphysical reality of contamination (or other negative status), while others assume the Torah saw these experiences as making entry into the Temple inappropriate, but that are not otherwise negative.

While my sympathies lie with the second position, our *haftarah* is most easily explained by following the first. The *haftarah* speaks of the Jews as having defiled the Land with their sins, seeing them as having introduced a type of *niddah*-impurity to the Land (*niddah* is most commonly used in terms of a woman who is menstruating, but it can connote anyone who needs to be excluded from regular contact for some reason). Here, the status may have come because the Jews were committing murder, which is often called shedding of blood (as it is here). Although that would offer a “blood” aspect to this situation, it seems easier to explain the reference to being a *niddah* as the prophet telling us that the Jews have defiled the Land, much as a *niddah*'s blood conveys a status upon her.

The comparison of ritual impurity to sin is the source for a famous Mishnah at the end of Yoma, in which R. Akiva celebrates our having the right/ability to be cleansed by God. R. Akiva notes two verses that speak of God this way, in one of which God is referred to as our Mikvah, the other in our *haftarah*, where God promises to throw upon us purifying water.

Passive Cleansing

The image in our *haftarah* sees us as passive recipients of purity, bestowed upon us by God. That idea matches the predictions we see in the *haftarah* and explains why the prophet takes little pleasure in informing us about that cleansing.

The prophet stresses that God will do all this only because our continued exile and servitude is an embarrassment to Him (as it were); having linked His Name with us as a people, our abject and continuing failure to meet God's expectations for us necessarily affects how God is seen in the world.

There is some positive in that statement, namely that our people is so eternally linked with God's

Name that our times of trouble are, as it were, so problematic for God that He will “need” to end our exile before we perhaps deserve it. That is outweighed, it seems to me, by Ezekiel’s assumption that we will never actually learn the lessons God has been trying to teach us. Whenever the end of history comes, for Ezekiel, we will still have failed to rid ourselves of our sinful ways!

Becoming Purified, Becoming Changed

When the Jews come back, in this version, the Return is purely geographical, without any change of their internal workings or religiosity. Ezekiel’s vision also does not tell us how soon after the Return we will be purified, nor how that purification will look.

If we see the metaphor of the red heifer process as more than just a literary device, it would seem that Ezekiel is predicting an extended period of time until our purification is completed. The water took a week, since sprinkling occurred on the fourth and seventh day, and had two stages. The same might be true of the future Ezekiel envisions.

Connecting Spiritual Change to Economic

However it will happen, God then says, in the same verse, that He will save us from our impurities and call out to the grain, so that we no longer have famine. Aside from reminding us how prevalent famine was in the prophet’s time (a blessing of our own time, at least in the Western world, that we should always appreciate), the prophet assumes a fact we should well know from our recitation of *Shema*, that the quality of our service of God affects our financial circumstances, at least in the Land of Israel. Sin is a problem not only because of how it damages us spiritually, but also because it complicates our ordinary physical lives.

A Meritless Teshuvah

The verse only refers to the Jews as remembering and being embarrassed of their sins after they have been returned from exile and purified. In contrast to many other ways in which repentance can occur, this repentance depends almost wholly on outside circumstances. As a result of being brought back from exile, of being externally changed and purified, of experiencing the economic goods that come out of a properly lived life, the Jews will look back on their sins with embarrassment.

The prophet’s immediately saying that God will not bring any of this about for our merits stresses that this kind of contrition has little merit to it. The person becomes more religious, a good result, but garners no reward for that change, since the change had none of his or her input. Salvation can come without our either earning it or even gaining reward from having been part of it.

Our minimal contribution to this version of redemption—and other prophets offer other pictures; perhaps they are different possibilities, or perhaps the final redemption will incorporate pieces of them all-- perhaps also explains God’s referring to us as sheep in the last two verses, sheep of sacrifice.

Sheep contribute to the Temple service passively; so do the Jews of this *haftarah*. The *haftarah* thus tells us that we can and ought to use this week’s Torah reading to remind ourselves that, just

like ritual corpse-impurity, the cleansing prior to Redemption might be taken out of our hands. Implied, I think, is the hope that we will use the vision as a spur to act well enough to avoid being in that group of people, meriting instead a Redemption where we can be active participants in inaugurating a world that recognizes the true Kingdom of God.

Shabbat Shalom