

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Pesach II

- Gidon Rothstein

Second Day of Passover—II Kings 23:1-9, and 21-25

The Biggest Passover Since Solomon—Background

This *haftarah* is named by Megillah 31a as the proper one for the second day of the holiday, but is defined as “Pesach Josiah,” the Passover festival celebrated by Josiah. That event comes in the second half of our haftarah, however, and we jump verses to get there—we read the first nine verses of the chapter and then skip eleven verses to get to the celebration. (This is especially interesting because we generally try to read fifteen verses on a holiday, and this haftarah has only fourteen).

Reading the verses immediately before and after the story of the Passover suggests that their subject matter was too painful to read aloud, so we chose more positive verses to read in public. Even so, once we see ourselves skipping verses, the choice to read ones from earlier in this chapter would seem to have been conscious, to suggest that the content of those verses is related to the story told later.

That earlier part is the conclusion of the story of the Book of the Law the priests had found in the Temple when cleaning it. The Sages identified that Book as Deuteronomy, and Scripture had previously told us that Josiah had been distressed by what he heard read in that book. In our selection, he calls the people together, the leaders and the masses, gathers them at the Temple, and reads the Book to them.

Bringing National Change

He then has all the people re-enter the covenant with God, undertaking to observe all the mitzvot with all their heart. Instead of being satisfied with that symbolic act, however, Josiah engages in a national cleansing so thorough that our haftarah characterizes him as the only King who returned to God with all his heart (a remarkable statement, since there were several other kings of whom Scripture seems to have a high opinion; Radak notes that, then explains the flaw in each).

In rooting out all the idol worship (and worshippers), Josiah teaches us several lessons about how to rid ourselves of corruption. First, we ought to be shocked at how pervasive idol worship was—Josiah has to remove items and vessels of that worship from the Temple itself, and he roams throughout the land, removing idols, altars, and serving priests.

Destruction was not enough, however. He takes the ashes of the altars he had burned to Beit El, to defile the altar that Jeroboam had built there to compete with the Temple. He also makes sure to turn these altars into dirty places, as Radak explains, garbage dumps, to change the people’s picture of them. That he needed to do so shows how entrenched this worship was in the eyes of the people.

Before we have gotten to the Passover at all, in other words, we are shown a society so locked into idol worship that it returns to such worship after each attempt by good kings to remove it (and, after Josiah, it will come back again). Josiah knows that enacting a covenant will not suffice—the people are good at making covenants, not so much at keeping them—and he knows that he cannot trust them to rid themselves of their idols on their own. (The Sages assumed people found ways to hide their idols from him as well, as we mention every year on Tisha B'Av). Temporary as his victory might be, Josiah does show us how thorough a change is required to rid ourselves of our deepest weaknesses.

Blemished Priests

That lesson is sharpest, perhaps, regarding the priests who had worshipped idols. The verse tells us that they were not allowed to serve in the Temple anymore (even though they had been brought back to monotheism), but were allowed to eat matsot with their fellow-priests. The Mishnah in Menachot assumes this as an halachic fact, that those who have worshipped idols and repented bear a permanent blemish, like a physical one—they cannot offer sacrifices, but can eat them.

Tosafot in Sotah 39a note that Rabbenu Gershom relied on this analysis to allow such priests to once again recite the priestly blessings and get the first aliyah of the Torah reading. The Sheiltot, an early geonic work, had assumed that priests who apostasize and return had lost their status completely, while Rabbenu Gershom and Tosafot assert that he has only lost his status as well-formed; since a priest with some kind of blemish can recite those blessings, so can a returnee.

The analogy is striking and should not be overlooked. Having once turned to gods (or religions) other than the true one, priests become permanently affected by that, even after sincere return (whether non-priests are permanently blemished by sin, even after sincere return, is an important topic, but not for here).

Menachot, Passover, and Why We Read This Haftarah

The verse tells us these priests can eat holy food by saying they can eat *matsot* (the way flour-offerings were brought) with their brother priests. Commentators assume this is just an example, but it is, conspicuously, the food of Passover. I suggest the verse was telling us that among the many holy foods they could eat, such priests should focus on *matsot*, the food that carries the lessons of Passover.

Not coincidentally, the next major event we retell is that Josiah led the people in a mass observance of Passover. The point is not subtle. Passover was the holiday of our freedom, but freedom from one kind of servitude to another, nobler kind. We used to be slaves of Pharaoh, now we serve the Holy One. The matsot remind us of that, and will, hopefully, keep such priests true to their new commitment to God.

That lesson seems to have stuck in the Jewish people's craw, since the holiday was neglected throughout the period from the entrance into the Land until the Destruction of the First Temple.

To properly observe Passover, Josiah teaches us, requires preparation, not only of the physical

cleansing kind (getting rid of all leavened bread), but of the spiritual. Having uprooted, removed, and destroyed the various barriers to a full relationship with God, the next step was to have a Passover, a holiday in which we go back to our roots, and celebrate our monogamous relationship with our King.

Chag Sameach