

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Pesach Shabbat Chol Hamoed

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Intermediate Sabbath of Passover-- Ezekiel 37;1-14

*A note: this is an haftarah read on the Sabbath; it is placed here, though, because it occurs on a day on which we interrupt the regular Torah reading cycle.*

## **The Dry Bones**

This is a very famous prophecy, the outlines of which are broadly known. God takes the prophet Ezekiel to a valley of completely dried out bones. God tells him to call on the bones to rejuvenate, to put on sinews, limbs, skin, and breath of life. Ezekiel does the first three, and then, at God's repeat command, calls for spirit to enter the corpses, which rise to life. Once that has been accomplished, God gives Ezekiel the application of the prophecy: the Jewish people see themselves as dried out, with no hope of rejuvenation, and Ezekiel's job is to tell them that they will be taken out of their graves, brought back to life, and returned to their Land.

It is justly famous both for the beauty of its metaphor and the eternal hopefulness of its message. The text on its own raises some questions, as we can see from comparing Rashi and Radak's readings. In addition, two reasons have been offered for why we read this on the Intermediate Sabbath of Passover; we will have to see how they affect our understanding of the prophecy.

## **Event or Metaphor?**

Rashi identifies the dried bones as those members of the tribe of Ephraim who left Egypt before the Exodus, a story hinted at in I Chronicles 7. Accepting that identification suggests the prophecy was aimed at encouraging those who were despairing their current exile, who saw it as so endless they might be tempted—as were the men of Ephraim—to take rash actions. Instead, they are told to bear their sufferings, confident that God will eventually redeem them as promised.

Radak points out, however, that Rashi had adopted one of the options the Talmud offers for identifying the bones. Sanhedrin 92b has several alternatives, including the possibility that it was all a metaphor. For the rest of his commentary on this section, Radak explains the prophecy in both ways—what it would mean if it was purely a vision or if it actually happened. In both cases, the message is largely the same, that the Jews should not despair, but some of the ramifications differ.

For example: Ezekiel reports that God took him around and around the valley, when he was first shown the bones. Rashi understands that this was related to Ezekiel's being a priest, prohibited from coming into contact with parts of a corpse. Radak disagrees, pointing out that other of Ezekiel's prophecies called for him to violate the rules of priesthood; just as we interpret those as being visions rather than actions, he would do the same here.

## **Why on Passover?**

Rashi's adopting a particular one of several Talmudic options for how to understand this vision is somewhat explained by his explanation of why we read this on the holiday's Intermediath Sabbath. Megillah 31a singles out this haftarah for this Sabbath, and Ezekiel 38 for the Intermediath Sabbath of Sukkot, even though the Torah reading is the same.

There, too, Rashi identifies the "dry bones" as those of the members of Ephraim who left Egypt early and were killed by the people of Gat. In Rashi's reading, we seem to be pausing in our experience of the Yom Tov to remember another aspect of it, that there were those whose impatience led them to jump the gun; on Passover, we celebrate not only the redemption itself but also that we were included in it, that we had not allowed our doubts or fears to lead us to actions that would deny us ever participating in the Redemption.

Radak prefers the answer of R. Yitzchak ibn Ghayyat (known as Ritz Giyat). Based on R. Hai Gaon's tradition that the Resurrection of the Dead will take place during Nisan, while the war with Gog and Magog (at the End of Days) will take place in Tishrei, we read *haftarot* appropriate to each. That view does not explicitly explain why the Intermediate Sabbath should be the time to read an *haftarah* about a future event, but it provides at least some logic for the Talmudic declaration.

### **Nisan, The Month of Life**

Without minimizing the disagreement between Rashi and Radak, they do agree that the haftarah comes to remind us that God will provide salvation in the future, our worries notwithstanding. But they also agree on the basic parallel between resurrection and return to Israel created by this text. Whether the corpses were real or not, the end of the *haftarah* is clear that the point is to show that just as God can resurrect those dead, our national fortunes can and will be resurrected as well.

That connection leads us to recognize another aspect of Passover: it is not just physical or national redemption we experienced at the Exodus, it was the gift of life. Life in exile, life in servitude, life without a purpose or the ability to actualize that purpose, is not life. The Jews of Ezekiel's time, stuck in exile, viewed themselves as desiccated, lifeless, and hopeless. The Jews in Egypt—at least in Rashi's reading—saw themselves the same way, and in desperation tried to break out of their prison.

This might be a message for Nisan as a whole, since the Resurrection will take place then, but it is at least a message for the holiday itself. Just as God once resurrected us by taking us out of the dead-end life of the slave, and as God will in the distant future resurrect us in more literal terms, on Passover we celebrate our knowledge that God will also do that in national terms as well.

The only piece left to discuss is why we read it on the Intermediath Sabbath rather than one of the days of the holiday. Without any specific sources to cite, I suggest it shows how the Intermediate Days differ from the holiday days. The first and last days of Passover and Sukkot have specific themes of focus, so deep a focus that creative work must cease.

The other days of the holiday are for taking up subsidiary themes, applying the ideas of the holiday to less obviously relevant contexts. This Intermediath Sabbath, then, is the time to

consider that redemption and salvation affect us more broadly than we might otherwise realize. Indeed, it is a kind of resurrection, one we hope for daily.

Shabbat Shalom and Moadim le-Simchah