

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Pesach VIII

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 6: Eighth Day of Passover—Isaiah 10:32-12:6

## **Senacherib's Error**

Megillah 31a specifies this reading for this day; according to Rashi, the Assyrian general's defeat occurred on Passover, which is why we read it here. A problem with his suggestion is that the tradition is that it happened on Passover, not necessarily the eighth day. Additionally, we read many verses after the story of his defeat; if all we cared about was the defeat, we could stop earlier. As usual, seeing the themes of the whole piece will offer another answer.

In the first section, the last three verses of chapter 10, the prophet speaks of Senacherib's audacity. As told in Sanhedrin 95a, his astrologers told him he could conquer Jerusalem if he attacked that day. Prior to where we start reading, the text told of ten places Senacherib passed through on that day, in his rush to Jerusalem.

When he spied Jerusalem from Nov, however, he waved his hand dismissively, so confident he decided to rest his men and wait until the next day. This Midrashic background explains why the prophecy begins with God announcing that He is going to destroy or uproot those of haughty posture, who see themselves as mighty.

## **Messiah: Lineage and Character**

The next ten verses describe Messiah and the era he will inaugurate. He is first described as an offshoot from Jesse (Note that the verse refers to King David's father, not the king himself. Radak explains that this is because the Messiah will return to the family's origins; just as Jesse produced a nearly perfect king, Messiah will be similarly perfect). He will have all the character traits we would hope for, phrased here as the "spirit of"—the spirit of God, of wisdom, insight, counsel, courage, knowledge and awe of God.

Because of all this, he will achieve a higher justice than most humans. Rather than judge only according to his physical senses, he will take on cases ordinarily neglected by courts, the lower strata of society. Justice and faith will be essential characteristics, metaphorized here as belts, either of righteousness or, in Rashi's reading, as coterie of righteous people who will surround Messiah.

## **The World Justice Creates**

The last five verses of the section are famous in their description of a time of perfect peace, symbolized by animals seeming to change their natures and live at peace with each other and with humans. Wolf and sheep, lion and lamb, our verses are the source for the commonplace that they will eventually live together at peace.

Radak, rationalist by tradition, takes up the question of what is meant. He notes some who see

this as a prediction that animals will become herbivorous, plant-eating, and therefore no longer fight with each other. He also knows of readings of the text that see it as a metaphor for human peace, that the good and evil people will no longer fight. He explicitly rejects the second view, because he sees these verses as describing something that will only happen in Israel (Verse 9 says that there will be no evil or destruction in all of God's holy mountain, Israel).

Instead, he suggests that nature will stay the same, except in Israel. There, where Messiah will have ushered in an era of peace and justice, the animals will be affected as well. Even ordinarily carnivorous animals will refrain from killing in the borders of the Land. In some sense, this is a rationalistic reading, in that it preserves the continuity of Nature. But it does accept the exceptionalism of Messiah and Israel, the former in his ability to judge and kill sinners verbally, the latter in its altering the nature of animals even as they pass through.

### **The Message Will Spread, the Exiles Will Return**

The next verse notes that Messiah's wisdom will become known throughout the world, with other nations coming to learn from him (a highly utopian aspect of the prophecy, that other nations will of their own respect and accept his worldview!).

God will at this point re-take ownership of the Land and the people, returning all of them, including the Lost Tribes, to Israel. The two Kingdoms of old, Ephraim and Judah, will fully reconcile (Rashi thinks it means the two Messiahs predicted in Jewish tradition—one the son of Joseph, one the son of David—will have no jealousy for each other), able to recognize that each has their place in God's plan.

The next step is an ingathering of all the exiles, perhaps the reason this section is read on this day. In the prophet's description, God will dry up the various rivers and seas that might pose barriers to their travel; I wonder whether, with the advent of air travel, that becomes unnecessary or whether the prophet meant that the future Ingathering will mimic the original Exodus, when there was a Splitting of the Sea.

### **Continuing Growth After the Redemption**

The most famous of the last six verses of the *haftarah* is the one we say at the conclusion of the Sabbath Rashi understands it as meaning that our praise and songs of God will merit future redemption. The paragraph as a whole declares that we will eventually thank God for the punishments that cleared away our sins and prepared us for the pure good of that future world. Another famous verse, *u'sha'avtem mayim b'sason*, you will draw water in joy, is interpreted as meaning we will achieve new understandings of Torah (often referred to as water).

Together, the verses remind us that the redemption will make our past struggles seem a worthwhile (!) sacrifice in order to earn us a world in which we will see a new ear of history, filled with blessings greater than we can currently imagine.

### **The Connection to Passover**

This *haftarah* only exists in the Diaspora (although some read it on Independence Day for the State of Israel). It speaks to Jews who may struggle with their distance from Israel, who may feel isolated from God, reminding them of Senacherib's error in belittling God or His promises. With

that background, it then restates the future for which we long, showing the process it will entail, that Messiah will come, reform Israeli society along lines of justice and righteousness, other nations will seek advice from him, and then the exiles will be gathered in. Once the process is completed, we will the greatness of God's salvation, how our continued praise of God was important to it, and to revel in our return to the state of the original redemption, anniversarized on Passover.

Chag Sameach