

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shabbat Chanukah I

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 19: First Sabbath of Hanukkah, Zachariah, 2:14-4:7

## Lighting the World

I thought we might this week spend a little time discussing Hanukkah's having a component of lights, based on the miracle of the cruse of oil. The essential story of the holiday, after all, could have happened without a component of lights. My question is why it was essential that it also involve this aspect.

For example, had the Hasmoneans cleaned up the Temple and found that the Syrian Greeks had defiled or blemished all the animals for sacrifice, with some miracle then providing the needed animals, there might still have been a holiday, with a slightly different character. It would have celebrated the military victory plus the miracle of the animals, in whatever way the Sages would have instituted.

It was not inherent to the holiday, in other words, that it involve a menorah miracle, although hundreds of years of Jewish experience have woven it so thoroughly into the warp and woof of the holiday that it might be hard to imagine it without.

I begin with this question because this week's *haftarah* prominently features a *Menorah*, so we might easily assume that it is that aspect that connects it to Hanukkah. Yet that *Menorah* serves a different purpose than the *menorahs* we all light this week. When Zachariah has the vision of the *Menorah*— and that vision is at the very end of the selection we read, suggesting that the rest of the passage is also important for its message— the angel explains that it is to tell the world that might and strength are not what lead to conquest, but God's Spirit.

## Following God, The Point of It All

The idea of God's Spirit productively unifies the parts of the *haftarah*, since the earlier verses had all been different examples of recognizing the necessity of following God. In the beginning, Jerusalem is told she'll be able to finally and fully rejoice (celebrate her redemption) when God resides in the city, and many nations are gathered to her. The marker of the complete redemption is getting the whole world to commit to serving God, a commitment that will apparently come from the connection between God and the Jewish people.

The next part of the *haftarah* tells of Joshua the High Priest and his "dirty" clothing, understood by the commentators to symbolize flaws in his service of God, either his own or his descendants. The persistence of flaws in one's behavior or attitude seems to stem from underlying failings in one's absorption of the belief in God, of God's Spirit pervading that person. Just like we don't test gravity, or have a problematic relationship with it, those who fully know of God's Spirit have no issue with it.

The solution advanced in the *haftarah* makes the same point, since Joshua is re-garbed and then reminded that if he follows God's ways and paths, his family will all be able to continue serving God in the Temple. Involvement with and acceptance of God's Spirit are the key components of success.

### **The Menorah As Symbol of God's Spirit**

That leaves the question of the choice of the *Menorah* as the symbol of this idea. The question has been asked many times, but I'd like to offer an answer that is risky, because it builds off a scientific insight, the issue of the absolute speed of light. . The idea goes back to the late 1800's, a fact Einstein deduced even without knowing of the Michaelson-Morley experiments that had already shown it.

In brief, most speeds are relative. If I shoot an arrow at 50 miles per hour, and it goes past a car traveling at 30 miles an hour (I know, I know, why would anyone drive only 30 miles an hour? bear with me for the sake of the example), people in the car will see the arrow as going by at 20 miles an hour.

That is not true of light, which always travels at-- you guessed it--the speed of light, no matter the placement or speed of the observer. That becomes especially interesting when we remember that it led Einstein to build his theory of special relativity, which argued that all the rest of space and time is relative. The only Absolute, in Einstein's physical world, was light.

### **Light and God, a Partial Absolute the Symbol for the True Absolute**

That nugget of scientific information melds nicely with the Torah's report that creation began with God saying "*yehi or*, let there be light." We are so accustomed to it that we may not often enough stop to wonder at why light was chosen as the first reported piece of creation, when Heaven and Earth would have been a simpler and clearer choice. If we believe that the Torah's reports about Creation reflect what happened, at least somewhat, light seems to be the essential "stuff" of the universe.

One last fact, and then the point will be made. Ancient and medieval thinkers struggled with how a completely Other God could create anything physical and came up with the idea of the creation of a *kavod nivra*, a Created Glory, a being (an angel) extremely similar to God, but one significant step closer to the physical, in that it, too, was a created rather than Absolute Being; that being created another, and another, and so on, until we got a world.

If, in that chain, light is the first physical substance, it would make sense that it contains a Godly element the rest of the physical world does not (such as by having aspects of the absolute, and perhaps also by its being able to seem to us to act as both a particle and a wave).

That would mean that the use of light as the way to demonstrate our renewed devotion to God and rededication of the Temple on Chanukkah would be no accident, but would be the most felicitous symbol out there. The light of the Chanukkah candles, and of Zachariah's *menorah*, blaze with the light of God, the light of rededicating ourselves to absorbing and involving ourselves with God's spirit.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah