

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shabbat Shuva

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 8: Shabbat Shuvah, Hosea 14:2-10, Yoel 2:11-27; Micah 7:18-20

Verse 2: The Famous Call to Teshuvah, and Its Implications

This being *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath between Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur, when Jews are busily trying to repent all their sins so as to avert the judgment of pure justice, the haftarah opens with Hosea's call for the Jews to return (the literal meaning of *shuva*; *teshuvah*, repentance, could be translated as returning to God).

Pesikta Rabbati 44 suggests Hosea's reprimands in the earlier chapters of his work lay the groundwork for this one. Without those, the Jews of his time would not have seen why they needed to repent, an implicit lesson about our possible blindness to our sins. Rashi thinks Hosea is telling Judah (the Southern Kingdom) to realize its sin(s) before it meets the same fate as the Northern Kingdom. *Shuva*, then, means now, before it's too late, both in terms of avoiding exile, but also, when God is still acting with the Attribute of Mercy.

Yoma 86b cites Resh Lakish, who notes our verse's speaking of returning "*ad*, until" God, implying some remaining distance after doing so. Other verses speak of a return that makes our sins into merits; Resh Lakish suggests Hosea was speaking of repentance out of fear, which does not restore our relationship with God as fully as does repentance out of love.

Verse 3: The Effectiveness of Words

Verse 3 famously calls for us to use our words to return to God, closing with the phrase, *uneshalma parim sefateinu*, and our lips will make up for the bulls. Aside from this verse providing a source for the belief that prayer can partially substitute for our lost sacrifices, Yoma 86b says that God takes our verbal repentance as a favor; in return, He allows it to replace sacrifices. The image of God "longing" for our repentance, taking it as a favor (helping Him not have to punish us) is a useful counterbalance to the (also appropriate) focus on God as punishing, even harshly, when necessary.

The rest of the section gives us a sense of the underlying nature of all repentance, the awareness that we are dependent on God for salvation or sustenance. Were we only to realize that fully, Hosea implies, sin would be a long-forgotten part of our past.

Verses 9-10: Exasperation Helps

Verse 9 has Hosea saying in the name of God, and now, Ephraim, what am I doing amidst all this idol worship? Verse 10 comments that the ways of God are "straight," meaning good and proper, the righteous thrive in them, while sinners stumble. The statement is inherently difficult, seemingly dooming sinners to stumble even further, but its connection to verse 9 is also problematic.

Ran, in the sixth of his famous Derashot, says Hosea is singling out the ease of repentance as the factor that helps the good and trips up evildoers. By rights, repentance should involve making exact amends for each sin (such as tracking down and apologizing to all those whom one slandered, for one example).

Were that to have been the regimen, those who fail to repent could at least hide behind its difficulty. When God instead asks only for a sincere admission of sin, regret, and resolve not to return to it in the future, that refuge falls away, leaving those who fail to repent without any excuse. That also explains how verse 10 follows from 9--God is impatient at still being in a realm of idolatry and stubborn sin, when the ticket out is so simple.

Yoel 2; 11-27—Combining Physical and Spiritual in a Complete Teshuvah

There are three parts to this rich section, which has many famous verses that could sustain their own essays. First, the text picks up in the middle of predicting a time of great disaster by saying that God is warning about it ahead of time because we can avoid it. Rashi and Radak agree, for example, that the verse "*v'kir'u levavchem v'ak bigdeichem*", tear your hearts and not your clothing, means we can avoid having to tear clothing (a sign of mourning) by tearing our hearts (repenting).

The method of doing so comes next, a nationwide and heartfelt fast. The verses delineate the various groups of society who are to be included in the fast in another famous verse, "*chatan me'chedro v'kallah me'chupatah*", the groom from his room and the bride from her wedding canopy. Properly engaged, the fast can forestall the predicted tragedy.

God goes a step further, promising not only averting tragedy, but garnering great blessing. God here says that the locusts (earlier predicted as a vehicle of punishment) will be removed from the land, the famine will be replaced by plenty, and even the losses of earlier years will be recouped). Interestingly, it is here, when God is showering blessings upon us, that the verse says it will be clear to all that God resides among us. While punishment points to God's Hand, blessing does so better and more effectively. All lies in the power of repentance.

This is obviously a sketchy presentation, and it does not quite capture its most striking aspect, its concern with the internal experience of repentance (tear your hearts, not your clothes) and yet its continued insistence on external actions (fasting, blowing the shofar). Both external and internal components are necessary for repentance.

Micah 7: 18-20: The Forgiving Side of God

Until now, the *haftarah* has spoken of what repentance can produce, but we now turn to a third prophet (a rarity in *haftarot*) reminding us of the other side of the coin, God's willingness to forgive beyond the measure of what we deserve. This forgiveness stems from God refusing to hold on to His anger, as it were, because God prefers/wants to act kindly. These last three verses, then, echo the end of the selection from Yoel.

One last point is that this promise is only made to *she'arit nachalato*, the remnants of the people, which, as Rosh haShanah 17a-b notes and Radak mentions, assumes that only a remnant of the people will merit seeing that future redemption, the time when God's kindness can show itself fully in the world. Shabbat Shuvah calls for us to take the steps necessary to be included in that

remnant, to hope and long for that day.

Shabbat Shalom and Gemar Hatimah Tova, may we be sealed for good tidings