

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shavuot I

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 7: First Day of Shavuot (Pentecost)—Ezekiel 1:1-28, 3:12

## Reading the Wrong *Haftarah*

Just about everything about this *haftarah* surprises. As only the first anomaly, Megillah 31a names the piece from Habakuk that Diaspora Jews read on the 2nd day of this holiday as the proper *haftarah* for the first day. The Talmud adds that now that we have two days, we read this one as well, and that we reverse the order.

Granted that a second day allows for one more selection, why would it then move into the first slot (and, for Jews in Israel, replace the reading from Habakuk entirely)? Rashi suggests that since God appeared at Sinai in a fashion similar to that recorded by Ezekiel, we read his vision on the first day, the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah on Sinai.

One problem with Rashi's idea is that the first day of Shavuot is not so clearly always the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah. One opinion in the Talmud holds the Torah was given on the seventh, the second day of the holiday. In addition, when the calendar was set by witnesses' sightings of the New Moon, the holiday could fall on the fifth, sixth, or seventh of the month. Leaving that aside, Rashi's answer is too good—if he is right, why did the Mishnah mention Habakuk for the first day?

It seems that whatever message this *haftarah* yields was one we did not necessarily insist on conveying to people. Given only one chance to read a piece of Scripture in public on this holiday, we would have gone with Habakkuk. With the luxury of two days, this text made our list, and then took the first slot. Our goal here will be to identify a message that might have gone unsaid, but that fits best with the first day once it has made our list of ideas to read aloud.

## Esotericism in Jewish Tradition

Luckily, the first Mishnah in the second chapter of Hagigah points us in exactly that direction. It lists three parts of Torah that should only be studied in small groups, because of the ease with which they can lead to false or wrong impressions. One of those is *ma'aseh merkavah*, the Work of the Chariot, commonly understood as the piece from Ezekiel we are now discussing.

That means that Megillah 31a tells us to read this section, while Hagigah warns against expounding it. We apparently want Jews to know of this text, but not too intensely. Only once a student has achieved a certain age, level of righteousness, and wisdom can a more advanced initiate guide that person towards fuller understanding.

These verses from Ezekiel, in other words, are an esoteric text, to be fully understood only by a select group. The idea that some texts should not be widely shared was common until recently in many cultures; only with democracy have we assumed that anyone can understand anything if

they just study it a bit. Esotericists claim instead that some topics require readiness beyond the technical or intellectual.

Reading a text like that in public sends a double-edged message. It reminds the community that certain topics and ideas, important as they are, are beyond ordinary people's capabilities or level of preparedness. Reading the Work of the Chariot on the day of the Giving of the Torah teaches that while much of Torah is available to all, parts of it are reserved for those who put in extraordinary time and effort.

Even then, according to the Talmud, the teacher can only offer "chapter headings," hints that will guide the student as he discovers the knowledge himself. Esoteric knowledge cannot be given; it must be earned, both by self-improvement, and by insight that is necessarily personal, even as it is aided by wiser teachers.

### **The Nature of the Work of the Chariot**

The Talmud's discussion explains why I am saying so little about the haftarah itself. The story it tells is fairly simple: Ezekiel is standing in exile, when the Heavens open, and he has a detailed vision of the Chariot of God. Maimonides and kabbalists agree that Ezekiel was sharing his insight into how a God Who has no physicality can relate to and interact with a physical universe. The Chariot is the set of intermediaries that bridge that infinite gap, and a full understanding of this vision would mean we knew exactly how God relates to the world.

Maimonides spends the introduction to the third part of the Guide defending his decision to record his views. Throughout the Guide, in truth, Maimonides tries to balance writing about esoteric topics with maintaining their hiddenness; his solution was to offer his ideas in flashes and hints—and this tendency is even more pronounced in the first part of the third section, where he elucidates these texts in Ezekiel.

As the centuries-old debate about what Maimonides "really" meant shows, he was either totally successful, his message only getting across to those prepared for it, or a failure, since no one can prove what he meant on almost any topic. In this topic, his use of the physics of his time makes his comments less than fully interesting.

Maharsha takes that Talmudic discussion as an opportunity to denigrate the study of Kabbalah. He notes that the Talmud does not mention it, and that the Talmud tells stories of scholars who allowed opportunities to study Merkavah to slip through their fingers, suggesting it was not absolutely essential to their lives as Jews). That is all the more so for *Kabbalah*, which is why he urges stopping those who teach it in public.

Perhaps along the same lines, Mishnah Berurah records a tradition to only have a person of great wisdom read the *haftarah* for the first day of Shavuot, since no one else would have a meaningful understanding of it.

Sum total, the texts show that this *haftarah* contains information Scripture chose to include, but to hide. The selection from Habakkuk more directly refers to the Giving of the Torah, and is therefore more obviously appropriate to Shavuot. Given the opportunity, though, the Talmud

decided it was worthwhile to make all Jews aware of his balance between the hidden and revealed within Torah.

I close without much detail, then, both because I make no claims to much insight into this text and also because I could not share it widely even if I had it. I believe I can suggest that the place to start is at the “lowest” parts of the Chariot, the parts closest to Earth, since the jump from the physical to the metaphysical is likely to be the most similar to human experience, and therefore most amenable to human intellect.

Chag Sameach