

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shavuot II

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 8: Second Day of Shavuot (Pentecost), Habakuk 2:20-3:19

## The Quandary of Poetry

It would be foolish to try to deny the difficulties of this *haftarah*, its words, its poetry, how its phrases connect to each other; it's just a hard piece of text. That is a question for those who would like to study Torah, but there is a broader question to be asked. Considering that tradition assumes prophets were speaking to all generations, we could not satisfy ourselves that Habakuk was easily understood in his own times (even if that was believable).

Our problem with this *haftarah*, then, is more than a technical one of how to understand it, it is the theological one of why God would inspire a prophet to write like this. If God wants us to know God, to understand what God wants from us, what would be the reason to couch the message so inaccessibly that the vast majority of Jews, probably throughout history, have never understood it?

The question becomes even sharper given a remarkable Radak early on in this reading. Radak notes that chapter 3 of Habakuk is written in the style of Tehillim, Psalms. He knows this because Habakuk uses the words "*selah*," a word that only appears in Scripture in Tehillim and in Habakuk.

Pause for a moment to admire the knowledge he carried so lightly. In a pre-Concordance era—let alone the computer search I did to check that he was right—he could confidently assert that this word appears only here and in Tehillim.

## God is Not Simple

The comparison also reminds us how much of Scripture—at least much of Psalms, Song of Songs, Job, much of Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and much of Trei Asar-- is similarly incomprehensible without hard work and many assists from the Sages, the medieval and later rabbis, and modern editions such as Daat Mikra, and Artscroll.

Here's my answer as to why: prophets, and those just below them, put us in touch with God's Word, and God, being the Irreducibly Other, is not so easily put in terms we can understand. Modern society prefers to think that all worthwhile truths can be stated accessibly and briefly, but God doesn't work that way. So as Habakuk here tries to get across a sublime message, it is churlish of us to complain at its difficulty. Of course, that makes it odd for me to attempt to summarize his views in a few hundred words, but self-contradiction and being human go together.

## God the Ever-Present

Like many *haftarot*, this one starts at the end of a section in the traditional text, giving us only

the last verse. In our case, the verse reminds us that God is “*b'heichal kadsho*,” in His holy sanctuary, and that the whole earth either does or should be silent before Him. Granting room for nuance, the Sages, Rashi, and Radak take it as a reminder that we can see the effects of God’s presence in the world, and that they should be awe-inspiring, even when that Presence is supposedly confined to a particular location (such as the Temple).

The coming words are going to build on the idea that we can see, feel, and note God in the world around us. Rashi reads the whole chapter as Habakuk trying to atone for his earlier having spoken harshly against how God treats the Jewish people, so the chapter recaps important aspects of Jewish history, including the Giving of the Torah, but there are also verses about God punishing the generation of the Tower of Babel, of the Flood, and verses that note that God punishes the Jewish people differently, maintaining an underlying mercy even while doing so.

A phrase in that section “*Eloka M'Teiman yavo*, God from Teman will come,” is taken by the Talmud to imply that God offered the Torah to all the other nations and they rejected it, and then other phrases about God helping us conquer Israel, punishing us for when we sin, ending with Habakuk saying that he trusts and rejoices in God.

Radak adds that this prophecy is about our current exile, trying to give us hope even while it extends in length. In his reading, some of the verses also focus on Gog, the name that Scripture gives to the last world leader to try to resist the Jews’ special place in the world and the Kingdom of God. The defeat of Gog, in Scripture, ushers in the era we all hope for, when the world will accept God’s kingdom.

### **The Giving of the Torah: God is Here Even As God is Elsewhere**

Nachmanides in Exodus 2;25 suggests, as a mystical secret, that some of our verses actually mean that God’s mercy to us is in the punishment itself, not in its restraint. I see this as connected to the Talmud’s assumption that another phrase in our *haftarah*, “*ra'ah vayater goyin*, He saw and loosed the nations,” means that God saw the non-Jews’ refusal to adhere to the commandments He had given them, and therefore stopped rewarding them for when they did observe them.

To my mind, the two sources point to an essential aspect of being a religious person, the oxymoronic truth that God is both immanent and transcendent, involved in the world while yet being wholly Other. If so, punishment needs to be evaluated as how God is sending us a message, while mitzvot need to be taken as God showing us the right way to inhabit and build God’s world. Those who reject these lessons, regardless of what else they do, are missing the point of Torah (where God made that most fully clear), of punishment, and of this *haftarah*.

Megillah 28b reads a phrase from the *haftarah*, “*halichot olam lo*, the ways of the world (or eternity) are his,” to support the contention that anyone who studies pieces of Jewish law (*halachot*, a play on the word in the original) each day is guaranteed a share in the World to Come.

While the statement tempts us to take it as a simple-minded key to eternal life, the *haftarah* suggests that it means that halachah is the way we can discover and understand God’s plan for

the world, and then join forces with God in achieving those goals. (Were one to study halachot and not observe them, would we think that person would attain such a share? Certainly not; it is studying them and getting their message that works).

Binding oneself closely to the Divine Plan for the world guarantees life, and it is getting us to realize that aspect of Torah that moved and concerned Habakuk in the section we read this day.

Chag Sameach