

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shekalim (2)

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Shekalim, II Kings 11;17-12;17

This week's *haftarah* is read on the Sabbath of or just before the first of Adar, the month in which Purim occurs. This is in memory of the practice, in Temple times, for the courts to make public announcements at this time of year, reminding Jews to offer their yearly half-*shekel* to support the Temple upkeep.

A Misleading Similarity

Since the selection tells of Jehoash changing the established system for how to maintain the Temple, the connection to the special Torah reading, which tells of men's obligation to give a half-*shekel* a year to the Tabernacle/Temple, might seem clear. A first flaw in that claim is that the Mishnah sees the half-*shekels* as primarily for daily communal sacrifices, not regular maintenance. If so, the collection of money described by the prophet was not the same as in the Torah reading. Further, the half-*shekels* were compulsory whereas the prophet discusses voluntary contributions.

One more question stems from the different starting points for the haftarah in the Sefardic and Ashkenazic communities. While Ashkenazic Jews understandably start with Jehoash's ascent to rule- since he is the one who changes the system- Sefardic Jews start with the last four verses of the previous chapter. In those verses, Jehojada, the High Priest who saved Jehoash as a child and then placed him on the throne, makes a covenant between the nation, king, and God, and then between the nation and the king. The people then destroy the House and altar of *Baal*, kill its priest, place Jehoash on the throne, and kill Ataliah.

In the part that the Ashkenazic Jews also read, we learn that Jehoash fully followed God's Will as long as Jehojada was alive. His dependence on his mentor for adhering to proper values dovetails with issues we will see below, so I mention it here.

Try the Old System First

When Jehoash takes over, the system had priests privately collecting (or raising, according to Rashi in II Chronicles 24;25) donations for the maintenance of the Temple. Rashi in Gittin 30a points out that priests expected gifts from their friends. The system flourished on networking; each priest built a base of supporters for his endeavors, including the Temple. It would be somewhat akin to choosing to support a yeshiva because you know the head of it or a teacher there.

One problem with that system is the lack of institutional safeguards; for example, I wonder whether the priests who collected more would also have more of a say in how the upkeep should be handled.

After 22 years, Yehoash sees the system is not working, and devises a new one. The text seems to blame the priests for the failure, meaning the money was there, and they did not do their jobs. Yehoash's solution also indicates that the problem was in applying the money to the Temple's needs, not in raising it.

Unless the priests were corrupt—collecting money for one purpose and then keeping it—or evil, it would seem their failure had to do with a flaw in their system. I suggest that it was their failure to assign responsibilities. In the absence of clearly defined tasks, the system fell apart. It was akin, perhaps, to the experiments that show that bystanders at an accident are more likely to help if someone takes charge, giving specific jobs to people.

Specific Tasks for Specific People

Yehoash's new system, which the priests seem to have welcomed, addresses that problem. Instead of a diffuse obligation to see to the Temple's upkeep, the “accountants” of the system, the king's scribe and the High Priest, were given the job of assigning money to the craftsmen who would actually fix the Temple.

The king's trust of the craftsmen—the prophet tells us that they were not called to account for their work—contrasts with his experience of the priests, who could not handle an honor system. Perhaps the greater specificity of the job eased the woodworker or metalworker's ability (who was in any case thrilled with his government contract) to produce the necessary results.

The Introduction to the *Haftarah* and the Connection to *Shekalim*

The priests' failure suggests a reason for starting the *haftarah* where Sefardic Jews do. Jehojada's covenant was supposed to inaugurate a time when people would take care of communal needs without needing exact guidance, not just one instance of freeing themselves of Baal or Atalyah. The priests' falling short thus mirrors what happened in the rest of the society.

In a mature society, members take care of social needs even without being told they have to; that was supposed to be how the upkeep of the Temple worked, it was what Jehojada was trying to teach the people, and it might be the point of the half-*shekel* in the Torah reading. The money itself is fairly negligible, since halachah assumes all Jews could afford it. Perhaps it was at least as much a symbol as an actual financial need, a yearly reminder that each male Jew is obligated to insure that communal institutions run well and properly.

Accepting that idea turns the first of Adar into a time when Jews would be reminded of their overall responsibilities. That connects *Shekalim* to Purim more meaningfully than otherwise as well, since one part of the Purim story is Esther's being told by Mordechai that she must step forward to do what she can to save the Jews. His sharp words — *revach v'hatzala ya'amod laYehudim mimakom acher*, salvation will come to the Jews from elsewhere—tell her that it is her job if it needs to get done, regardless of whether someone else could also do it.

Which suggests that we might use this Shabbat to rededicate ourselves to helping advance the cause of service of God not only in the ways specifically defined by God and tradition, but in other ways as well, the ones that are clear to us as being necessary but not taken up by anybody in particular.

Shabbat Shalom