

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Shoftim

- Gidon Rothstein

## Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Shoftim, Isaiah 51:12-52:12

**INTRODUCTION:** Although one of the seven haftarot of comfort, this week's selection also presents a challenge, in that it makes clear that our level of comfort depends on our actions. The haftarah shows an inferior kind, less good than we might get otherwise. While better than what we have now, Isaiah is letting us know we should be reaching higher, hoping for better.

### **A Doubly Certain Vision of Comfort**

Isaiah doubles the first words of our haftarah, "*anochi, anochi, I, I,*" am the One who comforts you, says God. The prophet does this elsewhere as well, such as in "*nachamu, nachamu, be comforted, be comforted*" or "*hito'riru, hito'riru, awake*" later in this haftarah. Leviticus Rabbah points to this as an example of his greatness, a reward he got for seeing the positive side of the Jewish people and arguing for them.

The Midrash does not explain how the doubling of a word shows a higher level of prophecy, but I would guess that it is because the doubling emphasizes his greater than ordinary certainty that his visions would come to fruition. That would explain the connection between his reward and his having argued on behalf of the Jewish people—Isaiah plumbed reality to see the good in the people (sometimes a challenge), in contrast to most others, so God allowed him to see the future more clearly than most.

### **A Cold Comfort Nonetheless**

When we move from that first set of words to the actual promises, we find little to celebrate. The prophet upbraids us for fearing others, since God's promise that the Exile will not destroy us, that the Jewish nation will survive long after those other nations' passing, should have removed our fear.

The prophetic (and Midrashic) insistence that such a promise should calm our fears assumes that we only care about national survival, which is not true at all today. Most of us would fear death at the hands of a persecutor independent of any concerns for national survival. Apparently, Isaiah means to argue that personal fear should be different than fear for the nation as a whole. Knowing the nation will continue in a person's absence should shape the reaction of the individual.

I suspect Isaiah is trying to remind us that we are supposed to subsume at least some of our sense of self-worth in our membership in the broader community. Once a person sees him or herself as part of a larger and more important whole, the death of the individual is not as crushing as otherwise.

### **Verse 16: Bearers of Torah**

The Sages see our having been given Torah as advantageous independent of our special relationship with God. Different sources express the idea, one saying that Torah gives us God's

protection even when God seems most distant, another that it makes us partners in the building of Heaven and Earth, and a third that it enables us to hasten the day of the redemption. Whichever, or all three, they agree that Torah itself empowers us, if we use it properly.

### **Verses 17-23: The Unavoidable Flip Side**

The rest of the chapter calls us to awaken from our troubles, describing some of those. I do not want to expand too much upon these verses, since they really run counter to the mood of comfort and solace that these weeks are supposed to be instilling in us. I will note that the prophet predicts that these troubles will weigh so heavily on the Jewish people, we will be described as “drunk, but not from wine.”

That term led R. Elazar b. Azaryah in Eruvin 65a to assert we are all currently exempt from punishment for our lack of attentiveness to prayer, since those who are drunk cannot be expected to pray properly. While he obviously did not mean the statement literally—we have to try to pray properly—his comment suggests we think carefully about the accuracy of our perspectives on life and the world, or whether we might be reflecting the “drunkenness” brought on by our sufferings in exile. Sometimes what seems true is a function of our warped perspective.

### **Chapter 52, Verses 1-10— Redemption Despite Us, Not Because of Us**

These verses tell of a great redemption, worth longing for and anticipating. God reacts almost emotionally to exile, questioning why He’s “here,” where all day His Name is reviled. At that point, the whole world will know God’s power, the prophets will celebrate, the ruins of Jerusalem will celebrate, and God’s strong hand will be shown to all.

Yet this redemption comes for reasons other than that we deserve it. God will redeem us because He will “tire” of being there, of having the Name mistreated and unknown; Radak notes that it is only on that day that Jews will know the Name; only the prophets will celebrate at first, because only they knew the truth all along.

Sanhedrin 97b records a debate between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua about whether redemption depends on our repenting. In one version, R. Joshua argued that if the Jews fail to repent, God will send a persecution so terrible that it will necessarily elicit repentance.

### **Verses 11-12—A God-Centered Leaving**

In verse 11, God says to leave exile and not to touch anything impure. At least Radak thinks the verse means we will not be able to take anything with us from the Exile, will need to see it as completely impure. This again contrasts with current experience; perhaps those who activate their own redemption can differentiate pure from impure aspects of Exile, while those who stay mired in it until God takes them out must see all of it as impure and prohibited.

### **Summary: Comfort or Warning?**

As we have read it, several verses imply that we will not deserve our great future, and several others emphasize God’s guiding events, rendering us powerless objects of the Redemption.

Some see such passivity in the face of the Divine plan a high value, but I do not. I read this haftarah as offering a vision of how redemption will go if we fail to secure a different and more

positive one. In that sense, it is a warning that we do not have forever to shape our own redemption, that time might run out, and we will lose out on the remarkable blessings we might still reach.

Shabbat Shalom