

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Simchat Torah

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 19: Simchat Torah, Joshua 1:1-18

## God's Version of How to Succeed

Our haftarah, the very beginning of the second section of Scripture (the Prophets), tells of the beginning of Joshua's career as leader of the Jewish people, with three incidents kicking off his time at the helm of the nation.

First, God comes to remind Joshua of the tasks that face him and the tools to success. Now that Moses has died, the Jews can cross the Jordan and begin conquering the Land of Israel. God "intends" for them to win those battles without any fight or resistance of any significance. For that plan to come to fruition, however, Joshua will need to remember to follow the Torah, not to abandon it, to have it consistently in his mouth, and to think about it day and night. In doing so, he will know the right way to proceed.

Note that Joshua is here identified as Moses's "*mesharet*, servant," a title also used twice in the Torah. Radak understands this as explaining why he was selected leader after Moses's death. In serving his master rather than just studying with him, he learned aspects of the prophet/leader role ordinary students could not. Radak offers Elisha as another example, identified by Scripture as having poured water over Elijah's hands, apparently a qualification for taking one's master's place after his passing.

My interest in the comment lies in the recognition that intimates of a person, even of lesser standing, know more about that person than the closest disciples. A similar story is told in Berachot 34b, where R. Yohanan b. Zakkai asks R. Hanina b. Dosa to pray for his ill son, and comments that his own prayers could never have been as successful. When his wife wonders whether that means R. Hanina was greater than R. Yohanan b. Zakkai, he answers that R. Hanina is like a servant whereas he, R. Yohanan, is like an officer or cabinet member.

The comment shows us that knowing God is one of those qualities best transferred through intimate acquaintance, not study. Great a scholar as R. Yohanan b. Zakkai was, R. Hanina b. Dosa was more adept at eliciting a positive response to prayer. Here, too, Joshua steps into Moses's shoes because of his intimate service, not his intellect or military prowess.

## How Preoccupied with Torah?

One other aspect of God's exhortation to Joshua I want to comment on is the command that Torah not leave his mouth, that he be considering it day and night. The simplest sense of the words is that he is being told to spend all his time studying Torah, a model of Jewish life that is seen as the highest ideal in many, if not most, Orthodox circles today. A comment in Avot de-Rabi Natan citing this verse points in that direction as well, in that it warns a man who spends a great deal of time with his family that he will be faulted for neglecting his Torah study.

Yet the general tenor of the Sages' words makes it clear that they did not understand the verse that way at all. (Truthfully, the verse itself cannot mean that, since Joshua is about to go into Israel and spend seven years conquering the Land, and seven dividing it; are we supposed to assume he went to war with books in hand?).

First, the Talmud in Berachot cites a debate between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon b. Yohai as to how to understand the command (which we say daily in Shema), "*v'asafita d'ganecha*, and you shall gather your grain." R. Yishmael, the preferred position, assumes the Torah is requiring us to live our ordinary human lives, to engage in earning a livelihood in the natural way.

(R. Shimon b. Yohai disagrees; he assumes that God will provide for those who study properly. The Talmud rejects R. Shimon b. Yohai's path for the general masses.)

Further, the Talmud in Menachot understands our verses to only be prohibiting a complete neglect of Torah in any one day. As long as one learns something (even the Shema, which men are anyway obligated to recite) morning and night, this verse will have been fulfilled.

A more accurate version of the message, then, would seem to be that Joshua's involvement with Torah should a) never be interrupted for a whole day or night, and b) that all his endeavors should be infused by and with the understanding of Torah. If he does that, he will succeed. In fact, that standard of conduct is what is assumed to have earned the Patriarchs and Moses the title "*avdi*, my servant"; everything they did, even the most mundane, was for the sake of the worship of God, the actualization of Torah (broadly speaking) in the world.

### **Joshua Commands the People**

Joshua sets himself to his task, sending word for the camp to prepare "*tzeidah*, provisions," since they will be crossing the Jordan in 3 days. Rashi questions the reference to provisioning themselves, since they had manna; his question itself is striking, since Radak mentions the Talmudic tradition (which Rashi himself cites in his commentary on Exodus) that the manna stopped with Moses's passing, but the last batch lasted for more than a month. Presumably, Rashi meant that since they had manna prepared, there was no need for food-provisioning.

Joshua also reminds the two and a half tribes that they had sworn to join the rest of the people in conquering Israel. They agree, but add that they will listen to him as they had listened to Moses, that anyone who disobeys him should be punished, and close by saying "*rak chazak v'amatz*, only be strong and of good courage." These were the exact words God had twice said, an echo that cannot be coincidental (although I would not claim they knew what God had said).

Radak reads them as meaning what God did, that Joshua's success depends on his doing what God wants, following the Torah, and so on. Ralbag (Gersonides) echoes that, but also suggests they meant to encourage him to be the strong kind of leader a people needs, dealing firmly with anyone who might stand up to him.

Either way, Joshua's ears must have been ringing with the words "strength and courage," qualities we all need to succeed at the essential task of the Jew—to be always involved with

Torah, even while participating in the ordinary world.

As we finish one cycle of the Torah and begin the next, we can wish ourselves the same strength of character and success being wished Joshua.

Chag Sameach