

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Sukkot I

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 14: First Day Sukkot—Zachariah 14: 1-21

## **Verse 1-5, The War With Gog**

The last prophecy of the prophet Zachariah speaks of a future war in Jerusalem, which will unfold in two parts. During the first, the Jews will be vanquished, their houses destroyed, women raped, and half the city will go into exile. Rashi assumes we will suffer to help God prove the evil intentions of the non-Jewish nations in this war. In modern terms, it would be as if the nations of the world attacked Jerusalem under the pretext they were there to protect the Arabs, or the holy sites, or some such. Their rampage, taking half the populace into exile, will lay bare their true motives.

Radak thinks we will be the target of the lesson. Zachariah earlier predicted that two thirds of the Jews will not make it to the times of the Messiah (it is an interesting number, as one third of world Jewry was killed in the Holocaust, and another third has since been lost to assimilation and intermarriage), but Radak assumes even the remnant will need purification, rededication to God's goals. This last war's trials will smelt the remaining Jews of their impurities.

Either way, Zachariah seems to be assuming a painful end to history, a pain necessitated only by segments of humanity continuing to deny truths of the world. This aspect of the prophecy should produce not only sadness at our stubborn insistence on denying simple truths laid out so long ago, but also trepidation at what our failure to accept those truths dooms us to bear.

Ratifying this point, Song of Songs Rabbah asserts that the verse's reference to "God's holy ones" joining this war means the many prophets whose words were not recorded. Relevant only to their generation, their specific words did not need to be saved and treasured throughout history. Had their message only been heeded, that final war might not have been necessary. These prophets standing at God's side will remind us all that none of these disasters had to occur.

## **Verse 6-9: The True World Revealed Ushering In A Unified Kingdom of God**

Verse 6 literally predicts that in that time there will be no clear light or absolute darkness, a claim the Talmud and Midrash read as saying that people will learn a truer version of what Torah means, what parts to focus on, and whom to respect. Verse 7 continues the focus on light, saying that the light will only come towards evening of the day of the battle. As a metaphor, this seems to mean that God's victory will only clarify towards evening, the end of the battle.

Commentators take verse 8's reference to two rivers extending from Jerusalem literally, but I would read it is a metaphor as well, that "waters of life" (Torah or truth, if there's a difference) will extend from Jerusalem at that time.

Once all is in place, Zachariah can speak of God and the Name being One, the verse we use to

close Aleinu. Pesachim 50a notes God is not yet One both in how people react to good news and bad (we easily accept that the good is from God, not so much the not good), and in our reading of God's Names. In the future, when God's full Unity is understood, both these bifurcations will be removed.

### **Verses 10-15—The Aftermath**

The verses have already mentioned some of how the war will end well for the Jews; verse 10 continues that, telling us how Jerusalem and its surroundings will be repopulated. The non-Jews who fought against the city will not fare well, as verse 12 describes their flesh melting as they stand (verse 15 extends that to their animals), reminiscent of the climactic scene of Raiders of the Lost Ark.

### **Verses 16-21—The Holiday of Sukkot as Reaffirmation of Faith in God**

The rest of the haftarah is the part that links to the holiday, in that Zachariah envisions the non-Jewish survivors of this war coming to Jerusalem yearly, on Sukkot, to reaffirm their faith and acceptance of God's rule. Moreover, those nations who do not come, and here Egypt is singled out, will not get rain that year.

Radak's technical explanation that Sukkot is chosen because it will be the anniversary of the war fails to satisfy, for two reasons. First, it simply pushes back the question to the next level, why the war will take place then. More to the point, tradition identifies Sukkot as the time we are judged on whether we get rain. That the verse sees the nations in the same situation seems to extend the judgment of Sukkot to them, over and above any anniversary aspect.

Rather, it seems to me that Sukkot here serves as a symbol of the hidden Providence of God. Rain can be seen as a natural phenomenon, part of the way the world works, sometimes even susceptible to human control. Maimonides thinks much of Avodah Zarah, idol worship, was the result of human attempts to gain control over how they got this precious resource. Egypt, which has the Nile as a constant source of water, is a perfect metaphor for a nation that comes to see itself as self-sufficient.

The War of Gog and Magog will provide the flashy kind of proof lazy people always say would finally get them to accept God and His discipline. Zachariah is letting us know that the test is in our ability to maintain our faith in God's day-to-day control over our lives. Those who refuse to accept that will be punished by not enjoying the bounty God provides in those unseen ways.

### **The Final Battle Sets Up a Challenge, Not Takes It Away**

This view explains how Sukkot is an appropriate end for two cycles of the Jewish calendar, the major holidays (Passover and Shavuot) as well as the High Holidays (Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur). In each case, Sukkot represents a return to the normal from a time spent in the metaphysical. Coming out of Egypt, we celebrate the leaving itself, the Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea, and the giving of the Torah. The High Holidays are times to experience the Heavenly Court in all its otherworldly glory.

Sukkot is the return to the mundane. We celebrate day to day manifestations of God's presence, not one time events. We are also being judged about our day to day life will go, not the broad

sweep of our futures.

If so, timing the battle with Gog then becomes more understandable. Those nations will deny God, in general and in particular. God will find a way to prove them wrong in large terms, but will leave to them the need to keep that lesson alive in the simplest aspects of life, like rain. Those who do so will enjoy God's bounty; those who do not...

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Sukkot