



Parsha Beshalach Judges 4:4-5:31 January 10, 2014 / 9 Shevat 5774

The Purpose of Prose and Poetry

Having the distinction of being the longest Haftarah, this week's selection from the book of Judges recounts the heroism of the prophet Deborah and the bravery of Yael. Set in the mid-twelfth century B.C.E. and telling the tale of a battle between a group of Northern Israelite tribes and Canaanite armies in both prose and poetic form, the Haftarah describes the tactical advice and support that Deborah offers Barak as she convinces him to go to battle with the Canaanite army commander, Sisera. It also describes the cunning and clever actions of Yael, who lures Sisera into her tent as he is attempting to escape from the battle, and kills him while he is sleeping.

This Haftarah is read on Shabbat Shira, the Shabbat of Song, and one reason it was chosen is the parallel poetic style that is found between the Song of the Sea in the Torah and the Song of Deborah in the Haftarah. While this explains the stylistic rationale for why this particular selection was chosen, we may ask why the Ashkenazi tradition has us read both the prose and the poetry versions of the Deborah narrative. Why do we need to hear the same story told twice?

Dr. Michael Fishbane offers an answer to understanding the different messages that can be taken from the two different tellings. In his JPS commentary on the Haftarah he explains that:

The prose account consists of a prologue, setting forth the background of the event, and a description of the battle follows. The poetic version is a more variegated series of voices and reflections. Its principal concern is to praise God, the participating tribes, and the individuals who did their people proud....Placed after its historical narrative, the poetic version functions as a supplementary song of victory. (The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot, 98-100)

In other words, while the prose version of the narrative gives us a description of the events, the poetic version gives us an understanding of the purpose and meaning behind the story. The message is that when it comes to Jewish text, both the story and its broader message are needed.

It seems to me that this is an important lesson to take with us about many of our Jewish stories. When we are studying the Torah and Haftarah each week, it is important to know both what the text is saying from a narrative perspective as well as why we are being told the story. For example, it is not enough to learn the details of the creation story -- we must also understand that we are being taught about creation to discover God's role as creator, to understand that human beings are made in God's image, and remember that we have a responsibility to care for God's earth. It is not enough to understand the narrative behind the Exodus from Egypt -- we must also remember that the narrative is written to remind us about God's role in liberating our people from slavery, and our responsibility to bring freedom to all who are oppressed. It is not enough to understand the stories of Hanukkah and Purim -- we must also make sure that we understand the larger religious messages that these narratives are trying to portray.

So, the next time that you are studying a Jewish text, remember to not only ask yourself "Do I understand what this text is all about?" but also, "Why should I care? What is the deeper message that this text is trying to bring into the narrative of my life?"

Food for Thought

1. What is your favorite Jewish text or your favorite Jewish story?
2. What is the message that this text or story is trying to teach?
3. What is one way that this message applies to you your daily life?

From the Editors: Join the discussion of these questions and commentary in Mentschen, the FJMC's online forum.

The author of this week's Unraveller, Rabbi Aaron Schonbrun, has been spiritual leader of Congregation Torat El in Oakhurst, New Jersey, since 2010. He hails from San Diego, CA, and graduated from Washington University in St. Louis with degrees in Psychology and Jewish/Near Eastern Studies. Rabbi Schonbrun was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in May 2004, and from 2004 to 2010 served as one of the rabbis of Congregation Beth David in Saratoga, CA. Rabbi Schonbrun and his wife, Jane-Rachel, met in Jerusalem and were married in 2001, and they have three children.