



Haftarah for Hanukkah Zechariah 2:14-4:7 Dec 11, 2015 / 29 Kislev 5775

With help from Debbie Friedman (z'l), one verse of the Haftarah we read this Shabbat Hanukkah stands out as most familiar: "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit said the LORD of Hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). While the association of the theme of the Haftarah, a prophetic vision of the menorah, makes for a natural connection with Hanukkah, the Rabbis make a calculated decision in selecting this passage for this special Shabbat. As Professor Michael Fishbane wrote in the JPS Haftarah Commentary (p. 225), "By giving Zechariah's prophecy the proclamatory ending "not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit," the Rabbis transformed the text into a divine warning. Groups wishing to "force the end" through military might, or support projects promising restoration of the Temple, are given divine notice of the futility of their plans."

Such a decision about the Biblical readings is consistent with the Rabbinic view of the meaning of Hanukkah in virtually all realms. As children, we learn the two interrelated miracles of Hanukkah the military victory of the Maccabees is one, the surprising extended use of a limited supply of oil is the second. The Rabbis sharply downgrade the role of the Maccabees in the relatively brief discussion of Hanukkah in the Babylonian Talmud (said brief attention thereby also downgrading the significance of the Festival entirely!). The story we learned puts the military and spiritual miracles on virtually equal footing; as we saw above from Fishbane, the message of the Rabbis' choice of this haftarah is that not only is the flexing of military muscle of diminished importance, it's downright futile!

Yes, it's true, we say Al Hanissim on Hanukkah, a passage that celebrates the victory of our few over their many, our righteous over their wicked, and so on. But in the prayer, the addressee is God for God is the sole source of victory. As we consider the Rabbis' Hanukkah agenda, consider the other times of the year that we say 'Al Hanissim Purim and Yom Ha'atzma'ut, Israel Independence Day. In both Hanukkah and 1948, military success is a crucial component of the story. The Maccabees and the nascent IDF, though vastly outnumbered by their enemies, exercised their power to achieve victory. As people of faith, we attribute our success to God, but we had to take up arms in order to benefit from God's guidance.

What about Purim? What power did we exercise in that story? The Shalom Hartman Institute's Engaging Israel curriculum explores this very question. As the Megillah's narrative unfolds (pun intended), Haman manipulates the king into condemning the Jews, who are in no position whatsoever to defend themselves. Yes, we have a woman on the inside, but she's just one in

the king's stable of wives. Mordecai implores Esther to do bring her People's plight to the king's attention, but she hasn't even identified publicly as part of this People! She and we are at the mercy of the king's interest when she enters the royal chamber uninvited. If he wasn't happy to see her, that would be the end of her, the end of our chance to infiltrate the seat of power, the end of us. And then again, if the king had been able to sleep that night, he wouldn't have called for the royal archives to be read, and wouldn't have learned that Mordecai played a leading role in saving him from assassination. It took a great deal of luck for the story to take a redemptive turn. In the absence of that luck, we are exterminated. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman says in reflecting on the Purim story, "There is no nobility in powerlessness."

The Rabbis, by choosing this haftarah for Shabbat Hanukkah, were trying to stifle an active expression of Jewish power, at least military power. Zechariah's prophecy is a beautiful text, but how does it sit with you? I, for one, need both elements of the miraculous God's role and ours in concert to make meaning of Hanukkah. Powerlessness isn't an option, but neither is an absence of the sense of the spiritual.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written in 2012 by Rabbi David Wise. Rabbi Wise has served the Hollis Hills Jewish Center in Queens, NY, since 2005. A 1996 graduate of JTS, he spent nine years in New Jersey as the rabbi of Temple Beth El of Somerset. He has served on the executive council of the Rabbinical Assembly and on its Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. A native of Toronto, Rabbi Wise is a product of United Synagogue Day Schools, USY, and Camp Ramah. He spends his summer vacation teaching at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires. He met his wife, Judy Krinitz, when they were both USY Israel Pilgrimage Staff, and together they are proud parents of Jordana and Elie. A believer in hopeless causes, Rabbi Wise remains a loyal fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs, as indicated by his e-mail address, lastcup67@aol.com.