



Parsha Noach
Haftarah for Shabbat/Rosh Chodesh
Isaiah 66:1-24
October 4, 2013 / 30 Tishrei 5774

Most of the time we read a haftarah that corresponds to the Torah portion. Sometimes an event on the calendar directs us to a special haftarah instead. That is the case this week, when parashat Noach coincides with Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan. When Rosh Chodesh (the new month) and Shabbat coincide, instead of the regular haftarah, we read Isaiah 66:1-24.

The first question that we should ask is, what is the connection between this haftarah and a Rosh Chodesh that falls on Shabbat? The answer comes in the second to last verse of the reading, (this verse is repeated at the end of the haftarah), which tells us "And new moon after new moon, and Sabbath after Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship me, said the Lord." (Isaiah 66:23) Thus since the prophet's proclamation connects Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh together, we read Isaiah's message each time these two days coincide.

The overall message of the haftarah though is not primarily tied to Rosh Chodesh or Shabbat, but rather to the theme of a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah is speaking in Babylonia, prior to the return of the Jews to the land of Israel. The Babylonians, having conquered Judaea and sent the Jewish people into exile, have in turn now been conquered by the Persians. King Cyrus the Mede is ready to send the Jews back to their homeland. Isaiah here envisions what worship will be like once they return to the land.

Isaiah deals with a contradictory message. On the one hand, God cannot be contained in a physical structure: "Where could you build a house for me? What place could serve as my abode?" (66:1) At the same time, the rebuilt Temple will not simply be a place of worship for the Jews, but rather as a place for all who recognize God as the true Supreme Being, "...gather all the nations and tongues, they shall come and behold my glory." (66:18) Isaiah does not resolve this contradiction, but rather leaves it in place to perhaps emphasize the difficulty of both feeling God's nearness and recognizing God's unlimited power and glory.

At the same time, the connections to Rosh Chodesh are still present. One of the striking aspects of this haftarah is the female imagery that is used. "Before she labored she was delivered. Before her pangs came she bore a son. Whoever heard the like? Who ever witnessed such events?...is a nation born all at once? Yet Zion travailed and at once bore her children! Shall I who bring on labor not bring on birth?...says the Lord." (66:7-9) In other words, a newborn

nation of Israel will come about with God's word, without the pain and suffering that usually accompany birth. The people will thus return to the land of Israel from their exile and rebuild the Temple, triumphant, and worship God.

This female imagery fits in well with a midrashic understanding of Rosh Chodesh as a special day for women. According to the midrash, as a reward for the women's refusal to contribute to the building of the golden calf in the dessert, God designated Rosh Chodesh as a day set aside for women. In modern times there are often women's Rosh Chodesh groups that meet monthly to study and plan special activities emphasizing the contributions of women to Jewish life. Reciting this haftarah on Shabbat Rosh Chodesh, with its female imagery, helps to emphasize this connection of women to Rosh Chodesh.

Finally, the waxing and waning of the moon and the message of Isaiah concerning God's holiness find common ground. Just as the moon increases and decreases in size throughout the month, so too does our connection to God. It is not static and cannot, like God, be contained in one space. Yet each month presents itself with a new opportunity to renew and deepen this connection, seen as we gaze out at the evening sky, grateful in anticipation of this new beginning.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Steve Kane, who has been spiritual leader of Congregation Sons of Israel, Briarcliff Manor, NY since 1993.