



Parsha Sh'mot

Haftarah for Ashkenazim: Isaiah 27:6 - 28:13; 29:22 - 29:23

Haftarah for Sephardim: Jeremiah 1:1 - 2:3

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You may have noticed that on occasion Sephardim and Ashkenazim recite different haftarot. Such is the case this Shabbat for parashat Sh'mot, when Ashkenazim read from Isaiah 27-29 while Sephardim are covering the first chapter plus three verses from the prophet Jeremiah. Clearly different communities got to make their own decisions concerning what to read as the haftarah, and the split between Ashkenazim and Sephardim that was put in place by the division of the world between Christian and Muslim empires fixed those different decisions in place. The amazing thing is how often the two communities agree on the same prophetic passage.

So what about this week's difference of opinion? If the idea is for the haftarah to have some thematic connection to the Torah reading for that week, it would seem that the Sephardim have the most obvious candidate for a close match. The beginning of the book of Jeremiah describes the prophet's call to prophecy, his commissioning as a messenger of G-d to the people. That description almost exactly parallels the call that Moses gets in our Torah reading. In contrast, the Ashkenazi haftarah gives us Isaiah blasting the people for ignoring G-d and G-d's word and ripping into G-d's prophets and priests for deserting G-d amidst their drunken debauchery. To uncover a link between the passage from Isaiah and the Torah reading, one has to connect the word "ha-ba'im" that appears in the first verse of both the Torah reading and the haftarah and the word "b'kirbo" at the end of the haftarah with the same word in the middle of the Torah reading. (See Dr. Fishbane's wonderful commentary on the haftarah in Humash Etz Hayim.) Seems to me to be a real stretch.

So why didn't the Ashkenazi rabbis just go with the Jeremiah passage? Personally I would like to think that their reason has to do with the same verses in Isaiah that caught my eye when I was preparing this haftarah for my Bar Mitzvah, verses that I insisted be included in my speech, which, in my congregation back then (my grandchildren are convinced that my Bar Mitzvah was so long ago that a stegosaurus was invited to my ceremony) was written by the rabbi. "Tzav l'tzav, tzav l'tzav, kav l'kav, kav l'kav, z'eir sham, z'eir sham" proclaims the prophet, not once but twice!

In context all of the commentators, both medieval and modern, are convinced that Isaiah is alluding to the people's mocking of G-d's commands as childish mumblings - the JPS translation goes "Mutter upon mutter, murmur upon murmur, now here, now there.". But the 13-year-old

Bar Mitzvah student saw in this verse an allusion to the way he - living in a home not attuned to observance or to G-d - could bring G-d and observance into his life. Intuiting the word "tzav" from the same root as "mitzvah" and the word "kav" as referring to "tikvah", "hope", he saw the building of a G-d-centered life as created one mitzvah at a time, mitzvah following mitzvah, one hope after another, hope leading to more hope, little by little, a little at a time. The prophet was telling him that it was not necessary to do everything at once, that turning 13 did not mean he had to follow every halakhic requirement in our tradition at that very moment, that he could assimilate one thing at a time while aspiring to add yet another mitzvah in the near future and yet another following that one. And so he did.

I would love to think that those Ashkenazi authorities determining the choice of haftarah for this Shabbat saw the same hidden message as well. It is a message that that child, now become a rabbi, believes is crucial for the spiritual life of many Jews today, whether that was Isaiah's intent or not. It's not all or nothing. It's one mitzvah at a time, with the hope that soon another can be added, and another after that. A little at a time, just a little at a time. And soon enough observance of G-d's expectations will become a way of life.

Food for Thought (from the Editors)

1. What are some ways that you have brought G-d and observance into your life that differed from the home in which you grew up?
2. How have you added mitzvot to your observance, and what prompted you to add them?
3. If you were to give guidance to a non-observant member of the tribe, which mitzvot would you suggest they adopt to begin this process?

From the Editors: Add your answer to the questions raised in this week's Unraveller. Join the discussion of these questions and the commentary in Mentschen, the FJMC's online forum.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Joel Schwab. Rabbi Schwab has served as the religious leader of Temple Sinai in Middletown, NY for 28 years. He co-founded and served as the first chair of the Jewish Family Service of Orange County and is on the Board of the Jewish Federation of Orange County. He was the first rabbi to serve as the president of the Middletown Interfaith Council, has remained active on the council and is now the chair of the Interfaith Clergy Group. As the senior rabbi in the county, Rabbi Schwab is the convening chair of the county Klei Kodesh, the organization of rabbis and cantors in the area.