



Haftarah for Hanukkah Zechariah 2:14-4:7 December 20, 2014 / 28 Kislev 5775

Seeing the Light

The haftarah for Shabbat Hanukkah has an odd structure. The beginning and end, starting with our joy at God's return to Zion and the Jewish people and concluding with a vision of a brightly lit menorah, fit the mood of the holiday perfectly. But in the middle section, the prophet Zechariah relates a very strange vision:

He further showed me Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the LORD, and the Accuser standing at his right to accuse him. But [the angel of] the LORD said to the Accuser, "The LORD rebuke you, O Accuser; may the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! For this is a brand plucked from the fire." Now Joshua was clothed in filthy garments when he stood before the angel. The latter spoke up and said to his attendants, "Take the filthy garments off him!" And he said to him, "See, I have removed your guilt from you, and you shall be clothed in [priestly] robes." Then he gave the order, "Let a pure diadem [crown] be placed on his head." And they placed the pure diadem on his head and clothed him in [priestly] garments, as the angel of the LORD stood by. (Zechariah 3:1-5).

What does this strange vision mean, and what does it have to do with Hanukkah? Dr. Michael Kochman, an Israeli Bible scholar, notes that "filthy garments" appear as a recurring symbol of sin in the prophetic writings; here, where the "filthy garments" appear only after the angel has rebuked the Accuser, Dr. Kochman sees a promise of God's compassion for Israel - no matter what we may have done, God will not pay attention to our sins and only notices our stains in passing, while purifying the Jewish people (Olam HaTanakh, Zechariah 3:3).

We can further understand the connection to Hanukkah by way of a story told about the Hasidic master Reb Shlomo of Karlin (Belarus, 1738-1792): There was a certain man whose faith was shaken, who was plagued by doubts about God and Judaism, and who was beset with terrible nightmares. He traveled to all of the great Holy Men, but none of them could solve his problems. Finally, one rabbi suggested that this man visit Reb Shlomo of Karlin, and that the holy Reb Shlomo might help resolve his doubts.

The man traveled to Karlin, and arrived one evening during Hanukkah. It was Reb Shlomo's custom, after lighting the Hanukkah candles and reciting the blessings, to sing various Psalms by the light of the menorah. The troubled man stood beside Reb Shlomo as he sang, and when

Reb Shlomo reached the verse [The LORD] rescued us from our enemies, [God's] steadfast love is eternal (Psalm 136:24), he put his arm around the man and hugged him close. When they had finished singing, Reb Shlomo turned to him and asked: "Do you believe that Blessed God can redeem and rescue us from all of our enemies, even from the ones within?" And with that all of the man's haunting visions left him, and he felt as if he was reborn.

Hanukkah is not merely a commemoration of historical events, but an ongoing redemption from the "enemies" within us. When we recite the blessing, she-assah nissim l'avoteynu, ba-yamim ha-hem ba-zman ha-zeh, "The One who performed miracles for our ancestors, in those days at this time," we should instead hear the blessing as "The One who performed miracles for our ancestors, in those days and also in this time." For as Reb Shlomo of Karlin teaches us, [God's] steadfast love is eternal; no matter what we believe to be our shortcomings, the Master of the World looks only toward our purification, to rescue and redeem us from self-doubt and inspire us to strengthen our commitment to walk in God's ways.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one originally written for the Unraveller for December 23, 2011 by Rabbi Abe Friedman, Anshe Emet, Chicago, IL. Growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, Rabbi Abe Friedman developed his deep love of Judaism and the Conservative movement through the nurturing and intellectually stimulating communities of his synagogue, Solomon Schechter day school, USY, Camp Ramah, and Nativ. These experiences led Rabbi Abe to the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, California where he also received an MBA in Nonprofit Management.