



Parashot Acharei Mot + Kedoshim

Amos 9:7-15

May 2, 2015 / 13 Iyyar 5775

The haftarah for the combined portions of Acharei Mot and Kedoshim is one of the most popular haftarot of the entire year for Bnai Mitzvah. This is not because of the powerful message in the haftarah from the book of Amos but rather because it is short, nine verses in length, making it much easier to learn.

In this short haftarah of the last nine verse of the book of Amos, the prophet challenges our notions of chosenness and predicts dire consequences for a people that takes its status as God's Chosen People for granted. Amos specifically predicts punishment for the leaders of the people, with whom he clashed. King Jereboam II had led the land to significant economic growth and vastly expanded the territory of his kingdom. When he heard of the prophecies of Amos, he threatened Amos' life.

Amos is concerned with the effect that economic growth has had on the spiritual state of the people, since those who have economically succeeded have forgotten about their poorer brothers. Earlier in the book of Amos, the prophet scolds the people who are "eating the fattest of sheep and cattle from the stalls who drink from wine bowls,but are not concerned about the ruin of Joseph." It should be noted that Amos himself was not poor. Thus, his railing against the rich was not simply a case of class envy.

Amos begins this haftarah by wondering if the people of Israel have become no different from all the other peoples of the region, such as the Cushites, Philistines or Arameans. He wonders if their exalted status of "chosen" is something that they took for granted and were not willing to uphold. Amos reminds them that the fact that they act like all the other nations may cause them to lose their chosen status.

The concern with chosenness is a reflection of the theme of the Torah portion of Kedoshim wherein Gods states that "I have set you apart from other nations to be mine" (Leviticus 20:26). But while God is now ready to wipe out a portion of his people, he is not going to destroy the entire people. He will spare those who follow his ways and further reward them for their loyalty in the face of a large segment of the Israelite populace that has forgotten its roots. Amos uses the metaphor of a sieve to indicate that God will sift through the people to find those worthy of continuing the thread of the chosen people that begins with the exodus from Egypt.

Amos' prophecy appears to be not only concerned with those who are sinning against God, but also about the influence of the sinners on those who have not yet been contaminated. The

destruction of the sinners will stop further contamination much like the removal of a cancerous tumor to prevent further spread of a pernicious disease.

In this way, the prophet is teaching us some important lessons about how to handle the relationships in our lives. The relationship with God, just like the relationships with spouses, family members and friends, is one that needs to be tended to thrive. Taking of any of those relationships for granted risks the loss of that relationship.

In addition to the lesson about relationships, the prophet is also reminding us that there are some relationships not worth having, relationships from which we must distance ourselves. While in this haftarah God is prepared to remove the evil influence from our lives, even though that influence comes from our own people, it is up to each of us to remove the evil influences from our own lives. It is up to us to recognize that some relationships, even if we benefit economically and socially, eventually undermine our spirit and ethical center. So that while the haftarah reminds us that with wealth comes responsibility to our people, the accumulation of wealth does not justify entering into relationships that are toxic to our spiritual core.

And while Amos is critical in his prophecy, he does end with a positive message guaranteeing redemption and prosperity to those who follow God's ways. Therefore, wealth, in and of itself, is not evil. It can be a gift from God. What we do to get that wealth or what we fail to do once we do get it is that which can be objectionable to God.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Yaier Lehrer, spiritual leader of Adat Shalom Congregation in the Pittsburgh area.