



Parsha Beha'alotcha
Zechariah 2:14-4:7
June 7, 2014 / 9 Sivan 5774

The Haftarah this week is taken from the early part of the book of Zechariah, one of the latest prophets (along with Chagai and Malachi), and requires a bit of historical context. Zechariah lived and prophesied around the time of the Jews' return to the Land of Israel after the Babylonian exile, granted to them by King Cyrus of Persia in 538 BCE. Now, 18 years later, King Darius renews the promise to the Jewish community to allow them to rebuild the Temple, a most welcome decree. It's at this point in the story that Zechariah's prophecy is recorded.

The selection for the Haftarah includes several snapshots of Zechariah's prophecies, including an image of the future high priest, Joshua, shedding his soiled garments and receiving gleaming new garments and a diadem on his head—a bright future for the entire ritual system, centered in Jerusalem. Zechariah also goes into great detail as he envisions the 7-branched menorah, which ties the Haftarah to the parasha and its command to the priests to keep the menorah in the Mishkan burning each day. The Haftarah concludes with God's famous words to the secular leader Zerubavel, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit", will the community succeed.

Although Zechariah describes a physical menorah, this religious object functions as a strong symbol of hope within the Haftarah. The Jewish community is experiencing a time of great flux: the people are returning to their Land after the destruction of the first Temple and they are engaged in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. They are searching for signs that God approves of the plan to rebuild and blesses the peoples' efforts. The golden, decorated, illuminated menorah is one such sign of approval. Zechariah takes these hopes a step further in his prophecy: he points to Zerubavel, governor of the province of Judah, as the community's anointed leader, or Messiah. Zerubavel, along with the priest Joshua, have the potential, says Zechariah, to unite the repatriated Jewish people, leading them into and through a period of peaceful sovereignty in the Land.

As we know very well, Zerubavel did not turn out to be the Messiah as Zechariah prophesied. He did, however, join forces with Joshua to encourage the rebuilding of the Temple, which was completed in 515 BCE. What is striking about Zechariah's words in this Haftarah is his tone. He is completely confident in God's plan for the Jewish people. He is filled with hope for this people who have lived through destruction and exile. To the modern Jewish ear, Zechariah's faith may seem extreme, knowing what he lived through and what would befall the Jewish people again in the year 70 CE. However, we can look to Zechariah's prophetic leadership, as well as the leadership of Joshua and Zerubavel, as examples of transformational Jewish

leadership. Some in our world lead through the spirit, others through getting things done. The Jewish community of the time needed all of these leaders, as do we today.

This week's Unraveller was written by Rabbi Ita Paskind, Assistant Rabbi at Congregation Olam Tikvah in Fairfax, Virginia. Rabbi Paskind earned a BA in Psychology from Columbia University and a BA in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary. She was ordained by JTS in May 2010, when she also received her MA in Jewish Education.