



Parashat Beha'alotcha
Zechariah 2:14-4:7
June 6, 2015 / 19 Sivan 5775

The haftarah emphasizes God's return to Zion and the renewal of the Temple service. Most scholars date this to around 520 B.C.E., the reign of Darius, who continued Cyrus' policies. This is interesting because the end of the haftarah mentions Zerubabel. Actually, it appears that it could be either Zerubabel or Zechariah who is telling the story.

I find this particularly interesting because Zerubabel was an actual person. He was the grandson of King Jeconiah, was born in either 605 or 615, was king in Jerusalem for about three months and then was exiled in 597 to Babylon. So the haftarah, which allegedly was written with the intent of foretelling a new future, in 520 B.C.E. employed personalities who lived one hundred years earlier.

It's possible, actually very likely, that at the time when Jerusalem was about to fall, a great need existed for a guiding, spiritual clergy and a leader who was committed to the ways of the Lord. It is also possible that Zechariah, looking back at the past, envisioned a better future.

But I think what we have here is something a bit different. This haftarah was most likely incorporated into our liturgy roughly six hundred years later. Think 2nd -3rd century C.E. Roman times, but not just Roman, Parthian. My question is: why would the rabbis living so many hundreds of years later select this haftarah to be read today?

And so we need to ask, "How was the Jewish people being governed at the time the Haftarat were in the process of being linked to the Torah portion?"

Two major communities existed at the time. The Parthians were the successor to Medes and the Persians in Babylon. The Jewish community in Babylon was guided by a leader called the Exilarch. The Exilarch was, among other things, the voice of the Jewish people to the Babylonian empire. He was a descendant of King David.

The other major Jewish community at the time, though not as sophisticated, was, of course, Palestine. It was governed by another person of Davidic descendant. He was called the Patriarch or the Nasi.

The Palestinian rabbis tended to have a stronger commitment for the reinstatement of the priesthood, while the Babylonians, living in one of the most urban international cities of the era, desired a strong, tolerant and just government. I'm obviously oversimplifying this

These two groups, didn't always work well together but it might be possible that an uncorrupted clergy and a just government could have been the desired comprise in their time as well as in ours.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of numerous books, including "Understanding the Haftarah: An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership". [Both of these books are available in the FJMC on-line store]