



Parsha Ekev
Isaiah 49:14-51:3
2nd Consolation
August 16, 2014 / 20 Av 5774

Background:

We assume the seven haftarot of consolation were placed in their current positions sometime in the 4th and 5th centuries. But we haven't considered what motivated the rabbinic authorities to make this decision and to disrupt the normal haftarah/torah portion relationship. It is possible that the three special haftarot leading up to the Ninth of Av were fixed centuries earlier and the rabbis linked these haftarot to the Ninth of Av in order to preserve the significance of the Temple and to maintain a longing for return to Zion. The Bar Kokba rebellion could have seemed like a distant memory to our ancestors living in a prosperous relatively free Roman society one hundred plus years later.

We know very little about what transpired during the fourth and fifth centuries in Europe, Anatolia, and the Middle East, but we do know that these centuries were marked by the fragmenting and weakening of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity. Is it possible that the seven weeks of consolation leading up to rebirth and renewal that occur on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were a reaction to larger events occurring in the ancient world?

Consider the following: in the period between 321 and 383 the Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Eastern Church from Nocomedia (Anatolia) to Byzantium which came to be called Constantinople and Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. The early church or churches, since there were many, became more theologically formalized while variant traditions were slowly eliminated. Just as this was a period of physical growth for the early church it was also one of theological growth.

Developing sacraments, such as Baptism, began to be formalized. Baptism which appeared quite early in Hebrew/Christian practice changed from a ceremony that required complete immersion, like mikvah, into one of submersion or partial submersion. This was accompanied by public and private fasting in order to remove one, or a community, from sin. Not unlike the Deuteronomic theology suggested by the prophets prior to the destruction of the first Temple, the non-Jewish world continued to believe that fasting and prayer were vehicles to avert a historical dilemma or a severe decree.

Theological authority trumped secular power and in 452 C.E. it was the Pope not the Emperor who negotiated with Attila the Hun in order to prevent the destruction of Rome.

From the 4th century to the 15th Church theology, which advocated, piety, fasting, penance and prayer in order to achieve salvation, dominated the ancient world. It is possible that the increased piety which is emphasized in each of the seven Isaiah haftarah were inserted into our liturgy in order to guide our people spiritually from the destruction of the Temple into a world where God will remember us, renew us, and restore us as in days of old. The increased emphasis on piety in the early Church could have been parallel in the Jewish world by the repetitive requests for comfort, renewal and return.

The Haftarah:

Zion, (the nation) moans that she has been forsaken and God responds that this could never be the case. Just like a mother cannot forget a child; so God will always remember and love his nation. God will never divorce himself from Israel. They are eternally married. Last week Isaiah told a nation in exile that God will provide them with comfort and the opportunity to be restored. This week, Israel, Zion, wallows in self pity not truly believing that this possibility exists.

How many times have we had these types of discussions with loved ones who aren't yet prepared to change their ways, or accept a new reality? How many times have we attempted to provide comfort and finally after repeated attempts realized that one can only offer and attempt to provide comfort for a specific amount of time; after that the person grieving needs to take responsibility. The message of Isaiah calls to us in a number of ways. It asks "when will you stop feeling sorry for yourself?" It offers guidance and says, "Take a step forward and trust." And finally, it re-enforces week by week the need for increased national and personal piety as we lay the groundwork for a new beginning as we prepare to become engaged on the High Holy Days.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one written for the Unraveller on July 31, 2010 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide".