



Parsha Kedoshim
Haftarah Amos 9:7-15
April 26, 2014 / 26 Nisan 5774

The Torah portion of Kedoshim is one of the shortest weekly Torah readings of the year but it contains more memorable expressions and exhortations than just about any other, offering a central theme for Jewish life: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy!” (Lev. 19:2) The Torah portion gives us many of the details for pursuing goodness and righteousness in our lives, from concern for the handicapped and honesty in business to respect for parents and reverence for God.

Yet after this lofty and inspiring reading, we chant the first part of the Haftarah of Kedoshim, which points not to great potential and promise, but rather to imminent disaster, and highlights not the uniqueness of the people of Israel, but rather our banality and our similarity to other nations around us. Speaking to a people whose identity emerges from a story of redemption from Egypt and resettlement to a “promised” land, the prophet Amos offers words of contempt, noting that other peoples have been moved from place to place with God’s help, and we are not, for that piece of history, any more special than any of them.

The message of Amos is that a people does not become holy because of its history or even because of its covenant with God. Holiness is a function of what we do, how we behave and what standards we affirm, from the greatest of our leaders to the most common members of society. We become special in each or in any generation if and when we follow the commandments of righteousness and justice that the Torah teaches and not because we are heirs to a dramatic narrative of ancient rescue.

If anything, says the prophet, our unique relationship with God means that we are held to a higher standard. God expects more from us, and therefore is even more disappointed by immoral behavior.

But although there will be harsh judgment and severe consequences for the moral failures of a generation and its leadership, God does promise that the people of Israel will never disappear. For the surviving remnant of the nation, there will always be an opportunity to repent and return, and there will always be hope for a better future. The closing verses of the Haftarah, which are the closing verses of the book of Amos, offer a beautiful vision of prosperity, peace and fulfillment. For those who seek justice and holiness, there is always hope for the future.

For further discussion:

- **The Haftarah refers to the “fallen booth” (i.e. Sukkah) of David, a reference that has baffled many commentators. What might it mean in Amos’s message?**
- **How does this use of the word “Sukkah” impact on our understanding of what a Sukkah is, and of other contexts in which the word is used on the holiday of Sukkot and in prayers that we say? (Note the expression: “Spread over us the Sukkah of peace...” in the evening service. Is a Sukkah always a physical structure, or might it also be something spiritual?**
- **What is the meaning of the vision: “The plowman shall meet the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who holds the bag of seed,” and what might those images have meant for a land being ravaged by invading armies?**
- **How can a vision as stern as that which is offered at the beginning of the Haftarah be reconciled with the promises of peace and prosperity that are offered at the end?**
- **Why is the promise that there will always be a surviving remnant so important in our time and how does the promise of the Haftarah reflect things we have seen in our own generation?**

This week’s haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Harold J. Berman, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Columbus, Ohio. Rabbi Berman is a graduate of Rutgers University and holds a Master’s degree and Rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York from which he was also awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. He did additional graduate study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Columbia University and Andrews University. He has also served as Rabbi of congregations in Benton Harbor, MI and Ridgefield Park, NJ.