



Va-yishlah
Obadiah 1:1-21
December 6, 2014 / 14 Kislev 5775

This week's haftarah could be called, "What goes around, comes around." The prophet blasts the nation of Edom for standing by as Jerusalem is captured and sacked by Bavel (Babylonia). Not only does Edom refuse to come to Judah's aid, the Edomites participate in the looting of the city! Playing on the ancestral link between Edom and Esau, Ovadiah sees Edom's actions as a betrayal between brothers.

This sword cuts both ways. Given Jacob's treatment of Esau, as told in Parshat Vayetze last week, the fall of Jerusalem could be seen as the ultimate payback for Jacob's treachery to Esau. While Ovadiah's revenge fantasy against Edom leaves me cold, I agree with Ovadiah that a real man helps his brother in his time of need.

Later in Jewish history, Edom becomes synonymous with the mighty and brutal Roman Empire; then the prediction that Edom will fall and be judged becomes a key image. An evil empire, for all its might, cannot defeat a people who answer to a higher authority. This truth steels the resolve and builds the morale of people everywhere who speak truth to power. Natan Sharansky, for example, stared down the cruel, devious KGB and emerged from the gulag with his soul intact. I will never forget his public appearance in Jerusalem on the very night he arrived, a free man in Israel. This is a man in full.

Ovadiah's vision of a saving remnant, the "peletah" that survives the destruction and will prevail in future time speaks to me most. Our determination to withstand destruction, setback and calamity and envision a better future explains much about the vital resiliency and durability of the Jewish people and Judaism across the ages. This same resilience and courage can help an individual survive and thrive.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one originally written for the Unraveller for December 9, 2011, by Rabbi David J. Small, The Emanuel Synagogue, West Hartford, Connecticut. A graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Yale University, he also studied in Jerusalem at The Hebrew University, Yeshivat Hamivtar, and the Shalom Hartman Institute.