



Parshat Va-yishlach
Obadiah 1:1-21
November 27, 2015 / 15 Kislev 5776

The Haftarah this week was selected from the shortest book in the Bible, the book of Obadiah. It is composed of 291 words. The importance of the book's brevity is overshadowed by several unique items. First, the prophecy is not directed at the Jewish people but at the Edomites. Further, Rabbinic tradition portrays Obadiah as an Edomite who becomes Jewish even though this it is not substantiated in the text. Jacob and Esau meet in this week's Torah portion. Jacob's descendants, (Judah) meet Esau's descendants (Edom) but under different circumstances in the haftarah.

I was challenged by the fact that Obadiah, who had just received the words of the Lord, was directed to return to the people he had left and to encourage them to change their behaviors. Imagine a Jew by choice receiving a Divine message which was intended to be delivered to the people, the nation he has left, a nation that allegedly joined forces with the Babylonians to destroy the Temple in 586 B.C.E., a nation composed of distant cousins, a people descended from Esau. If that occurred today, and let's say, a member of my family found the Lord in another religious tradition and returned to my home and attempted to convince me of the errors of my ways, would I even listen to his words? I most certainly would reject them. After all hadn't I just lost a child? Wouldn't I be angry?

And the nature of Obadiah's words are not softly spoken. On the contrary, he points out that Edom will become the lowest of nations, they will suffer and lose their power, their language, and their status.

There is something extremely sad about this text. Why couldn't the Edomite leadership have heard the word of God? Why empower a person who most likely would be, and of course was, rejected? And then why build upon this political mishap to develop a bias for whomever represents the other?

The Talmud reinterprets and broadens the definition of "Edom" and uses it to describe their feelings about Rome without actually criticizing the ruling power. The Talmud replaces the word, "Rome" with "Edom." When it speaks negatively about Rome, the word, "Edom" is used. Centuries later, the term "Edom" was expanded in some circles to refer to all of Christianity.

Perhaps we should use this haftarah as a challenge to help us better understand the non-Jewish nations, (the other) and in doing so, we might be able to find a bridge to build relationships and peace.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written for the Unraveller by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Biblical Leadership After Moses," "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership."