



Shabbat Parah
Ezekiel 36:16-38
March 21, 2014 / 19 Adar II 5774

The special Torah reading for Shabbat Parah (Numbers 19:1-14) describes a purification ritual that an individual needs to undergo after he/she has come in contact with the dead. This ritual is necessary to cleanse them from the ritual impurity they had absorbed and to prevent it spreading to others. The vehicle for preventing this spiritual taint and that which permits those involved to return to the community is the ashes of a red heifer. The haftarah is always read prior to Passover and expands this concept from the individual or individuals to the larger community, the nation of Israel.

The haftarah was written by the prophet Ezekiel, in Babylon, in exile, shortly after the Temple had been destroyed but not solely in response to the Temple's destruction. Ezekiel was one of thousands of people who were deported from Jerusalem to a suburb of Babylon in 597 B.C.E. This morning's haftarah was written around 585, some twelve years later. During this period, his prophecies shifted from warnings of imminent destruction, if the nation didn't alter its behaviors, to those of consolation and hope in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction.

The haftarah focuses on one man's attempt to offer consolation to a nation. On some level, this view can stimulate me to look at the world and my responsibilities from a broader perspective but for the most part it's too vast. It's easier for me, when thinking about this haftarah to ask "Can I look at my life from his perspective?"

Ezekiel saw disaster approaching from a long way off. He did everything he could to avert it but failed. I suppose that it wasn't a tremendous shock when he learned of the Temple's destruction. After all, he had seen it coming.

When he learned of the destruction and second (smaller) exile to Babylon, he must have been saddened but I doubt he became distraught. By that time his view of his responsibilities had already shifted. He had moved from the prophet of warning to the prophet who consoled his people and offered them hope.

How many of us, feel similar responsibilities to our families when we foresee a crisis down the road? How many of us struggle to shift from a position that we had established to a new one that will better allow us to handle what we perceive will most likely occur? Illness, tragic circumstances, an unsuccessful child or one who has not acted in accordance with his or her parent's wishes?

When I consider these everyday elements of living, I think I understand, in my own limited way, Ezekiel's message. One final note, when we read Haftarat, when we encounter any situation, the context of that situation can provide us with the strength to shift our focus. From warnings to consolation, from fear of impending destruction to those that offer hope.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Building A Successful Volunteer Culture: Finding Meaning in Service in the Jewish Community" Jewish Lights Publishing, and the recently published "Understanding the Haftarat: An Everyperson's Guide."