

Haftarat Shemot

Torah: Exodus 1:1–6:1

Haftarah: Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22–23

A Kiddush for the Awe of God

General Overview

This haftarah is in three parts, but derived from a combination of two different sections of Isaiah's prophecy. The first section of the haftarah, chapter 27, is the concluding chapter of a portion of Isaiah that prophesies concerning the eschatological Day of the Lord — a time in the future when God will unleash His judgments on earth. The second part of the haftarah is taken from the next section of Isaiah's prophecy where Isaiah ceases looking to the distant future and turns his attention to the difficulties that face him in his own day, specifically the sin of the leaders of Ephraim and Judah. Finally, the third part of this haftarah is drawn from a later passage in this same division of Isaiah. This time, in keeping with the Jewish tradition of never ending a haftarah on a note of judgment, the haftarah concludes with a note of hope, imploring Israel to stand in awe of God as Israel witnesses her children coming home.

Connection to the Parasha

The midsection of the haftarah is Isaiah chapter 28. In this section, we will see that the leaders against whom he prophesied were mocking Isaiah. They did not take him seriously when he pronounced judgment upon them and their nation.

In the same way, Pharaoh, and perhaps, many from Israel also mocked Moshe and Aaron when they stood before Pharaoh and pronounced God's judgements against him and his nation. In the end, Egypt was dealt a severe blow from the hands of an angry God. So also will be the destiny, of a sinful and hard-hearted Israel. The Egyptian deliverance revealed that Justice triumphs in God's universe; so would the men of a later age see that the hand of God moves in the destinies of men.¹

Exposition

The sages who compiled this haftarah were not paying close attention to the divisions of thought found in contents of these chapters of Isaiah. It seems as though they strung together three separate passages and attempted to unify them under one theme. We are sure that in their minds there was a continuous strain of thought expressed throughout these passages that they hung together. However, that theme must have been one that they invented, and not one that followed closely the context of Isaiah.

Nevertheless, despite the above remark, it seems that we are able to identify at least somewhat of a unified strain upon which to build a reasonable and logical commentary on this hybrid haftarah. The common theme in all three passages

that are strung together, oddly enough, is the theme of wine. We will treat this theme a little creatively by bringing in a traditional Jewish cultural practice called “kiddush.” Let us explain what we mean.

In Jewish culture, wine is often drunk for special occasions. It is drunk in the form of a toast, never for the sake of becoming inebriated. Just before a sip of wine is taken, there is a traditional blessing that is often chanted. The name for this blessing is “Kiddush.” This word is from a Hebrew root (שָׁדַשׁ) which means, “to sanctify.” It is a way to sanctify the name of God for giving us the joys of that particular occasion for which we are toasting Him.

Although the haftarah opens with Isaiah 27:6, the context really has a more logical beginning at the start of chapter 27. (In reality, the extended context goes back to chapter 24). Near the beginning of chapter 27 we read in verse two, “In that day, a vineyard of wine, sing of it!” Then, God announces that, despite the unfruitfulness and deplorable condition of His vineyard, He will remain faithful to it and cause it to bear fruit for Him some day. From this it appears that the Holy One would have the prophet introduce a toast to His faithfulness over His vineyard.

After this, in the second section of this haftarah, beginning with chapter 28, we find Isaiah apparently at a banquet where there is much drinking going on. He is, in fact, addressing a group of drunken leaders who themselves are mocking other drunken leaders. (This will be explained further later in the commentary.) Thus, in this section, we can join in the toast (in a mocking way), at the foolishness of the proud drunkards of Ephraim and Judah.

The third section of verses that constitute this haftarah indicate that in the latter days, when God will restore the people of Israel to the Land of Israel, we will all stand in awe of God. “They will sanctify My name,” says the Lord.” Here again we find that word “sanctify,” which is what the Kiddush means. We will “drink” a third cup, the cup of praise and awe of the faithfulness and grace of God.

With these thoughts about this passage in mind, we will propose the following outline to guide us through this haftarah. Based on the image of wine and sanctification, we have. . .

- I. A Kiddush for the Faithfulness of God
- II. A Kiddush for the Judgements of God
- III. A Kiddush for the Awe of God

In this excerpt from Haftarat Shemot, we will focus on the section III, A Kiddush for the Awe of God.

III. A Kiddush for the Awe of God

The final portion of this haftarah is taken from Isaiah 29:22–23. In these verses we catch a glimpse of the awe of God. In what way do we see such awe? The answer lies in what these two verses say. They indicate that all will not be lost with the people of Israel and Judah. Because of the sinfulness of their leaders,

such as we saw in chapter 28, they will have to undergo severe discipline. However, we must remember that this discipline, according to Isaiah chapter 27, will not be as severe as the judgement on the nations who sought to destroy Israel. Nevertheless, it would be a thoroughly humiliating discipline.

Unfortunately for us, the Hebrew construction of verse 23 is somewhat obscure. But the thrust of it seems to be that although Jacob would suffer the humility of being dispersed into foreign lands, (lands where idolatry would be dominant) yet, nonetheless, there would come a day when God would bring back Jacob's descendants to the Land. Moreover, when they would come back, they would come in holiness, sanctifying the Name of God.

It seems that Isaiah intended to develop a contrast between the unholy lands into which the dispersed would go and the holiness of God that would dominate the thinking of the returnees. This commentator agrees with Hertz, who concludes this portion by commenting,

These verses look back to Israel's early history; they look forward to the future as a time of restoration, when the people shall by their lives sanctify the Holy One of Jacob.²

Thus, let us now take that third cup of wine and make one last Kiddush. Let us sanctify the Name of the Holy One of Israel in advance for the mighty restoration that He will accomplish with the descendants of Jacob. For in this, we catch a glimpse of His awesome might and His covenant faithfulness in displaying the power necessary to keep His sacred promises to Israel.

¹ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, p. 225.

² Hertz, op. cit., p. 228.