

Haftarat Vayigash ויגש

Torah: Genesis 44:18–47:27

Haftarah: Ezekiel 37:15–28

The Return of the Lord's Presence

General Overview

In this haftarah, the prophet Ezekiel is looking centuries after his time as he utters words of hope to a shattered and broken nation. About a century and a half had transpired since the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel was scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire.

Now, in his own day, Ezekiel was among the many captives transported by the Babylonians from Judah. The descendants of Jacob had been split apart as a nation for over 200 years, since just after King Solomon died in the 10th century. The northern kingdom of Israel, often called by the name of one of its largest tribes, Ephraim, was split off from its counterparts of the southern kingdom of Israel, Judah, and Benjamin.

In this passage, Ezekiel predicts a time in the future when both kingdoms would be reunited under one king, a descendant of King David. But he does not stop with that prophecy. Ezekiel continues to predict the spiritual transformation of the children of Jacob, characterized by their wholehearted faithfulness to the Covenant of Moshe, the Torah. Finally, the prophet also describes the glorious presence of the Holy One in their midst.

Connection to the Parasha

In Parashat Vayigash, we read about the long-awaited and dramatic reunion of Joseph and his brothers. Finally, after years of animosity followed by separation, they were brought back together with joy. One of the results of this reunion was that Jacob, together with his 12 sons, their wives, and children, were happily and securely protected in Egypt as they weathered out the storm of the great famine.

The haftarah in Ezekiel perfectly parallels this story in Bereshit. Following many years of open hostility and then an extended period of separation, Ezekiel predicts a time when the two houses of Israel: Ephraim and Judah would be reunited with great joy into one kingdom. One of the many results of this unified nation would be that the people would experience great fruitfulness and protection from all external enemies.

Exposition

Although this is a relatively brief haftarah passage, there is an abundance of important material in it. The material centers on future prophecy. It is important to remember that a prophet was primarily a spokesman for God. As such, his prophecy took two different but related forms. First, the prophet spoke to the situation in his own day. This kind of prophecy was usually a message of rebuke

to the unfaithful of Israel and a message of encouragement to the faithful remnant of Israel.

Couched amidst this two-fold message were predictions of the future. This constitutes the second kind of prophecy — predictive prophecy. The predictions of future events served two purposes. First, they were warnings to the unfaithful of impending discipline (disaster) for their nation. And, second, they were messages of encouragement to the remnant, reminding them that someday they would be vindicated and there would be relief for their nation because Messiah and His kingdom would come and be established in their midst.

Our haftarah is of the second kind of prophecy, predictive prophecy. In it, we catch a glimpse of most of the major themes of predictive prophecy. Included in these predictions are the promises of the reuniting of the nation of Israel, the re-gathering of that nation to the Land of Promise, the spiritual revival of the people, the coming of the Messiah ruling in the Messianic kingdom, and the perpetual presence of God in their midst. Accordingly, our outline looks as follows:

- I. The Return of Unity 37:15–20
- II. The Return of the Exiles
- III. The Return of Righteousness
- IV. The Return of David
- V. The Return to the Torah
- VI. The Return of the Lord's Presence

In this excerpt we will look at part VI, The Return of the Lord's Presence, 37:26–28.

VI. The Return of the Lord's Presence

The last blessing that Ezekiel promises to this future, reunited Israelite kingdom is that once again, He Himself promises to dwell in their midst.

This last promise from God had particular significance to Ezekiel and the people of his generation. They were the ones who witnessed the departure of the special dwelling presence of God that was in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. In fact, Ezekiel vividly describes, in chapter 10, God's parting from the Temple. God's departure left an irreplaceable vacuum in the midst of the people. Those who were spiritually minded, the faithful remnant, undoubtedly thought that God would be gone forever from Israel. They may have thought that there was going to be a permanent separation in this divine family, the Husband leaving the unfaithful bride. The House was left hauntingly empty, devoid of the manifested glory, the physical presence of the Divine Bridegroom.

Moreover, these fears were accentuated when news spread that their captors, the Babylonians, lit up the Temple itself into flames. Everything seemed so hopeless for Israel, especially for the faithful remnant.

It is to this hopelessness that Ezekiel gave this magnificent and glorious prophecy of the existence of a future Temple where the very presence of God will once again dwell. It is God's special presence, called by the rabbis as the

shekinah, שכינה, literally, “that which is dwelling,” that will ultimately guarantee the safety and security of that future messianic age Israel.

Ezekiel will discuss more fully in chapters 40–47 the nature of this future Temple and who it will be that will reside there. But, to put it succinctly, Ezekiel indicates that it will be none other than the Messiah Himself who will be that special glorified presence of God in the future Temple.

We are told that when God will establish His sanctuary in the midst of His people, then all of the nations of the world will know that the Lord is the one who sets Israel apart. The nations of the world have been witnesses to Israel's folly and consequential national disaster. They were the witnesses to two destructions of Jerusalem and its holy Temple. Just as God's chosen remnant from Israel may have begun to doubt if God abandoned His covenantal relationship with Israel, so too the nations would be thinking the same. Thus, when the Holy One returns His sanctuary and His special presence to Jerusalem in the midst of His people, the nations will know that God, indeed, is a covenant-keeping God. It is God's way of demonstrating that He is not dead and that Israel is still His covenanted people.¹

¹ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (TOTC), 241.