

HAFTARA - PARSHAT BALAK

From a poignant statement made by the prophet Micha in this week's Haftara, it would seem that God finds little value in the offering of "korbanot". Why then are we going to spend the next 'three weeks' lamenting the destruction of the Bet Ha'Mikdash?

As we study this week's Haftara, we will attempt to answer this question.

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately for most of us, our only study of Nviim Acharonim [the later prophets] is from a few select chapters from various Haftarot. And even then, the Haftarot are usually only 'read' but rarely 'studied'. The reason why is simple. Imagine picking up a novel ['I'havdil'], randomly opening up to some page in the middle, and try to figure out what's going on.

For a similar reason, it is difficult to appreciate a Haftara without taking into consideration its setting within the Sefer. Therefore, we begin our shiur with a quick overview of Micha and his time period.

THE 'BIG FOUR'

Micha is one of the four prophets referred to by Chazal as the "arba nviim" - Hoshea, Amos, Yeshayahu, and Micha. All four prophesied during the same time period, i.e. during the reigns of Kings Uziyahu, Yotam, Achaz, & Chizkiyahu (of the first Temple period/ approx. 8th century BCE).

It is not coincidental that we find so many prophets during this time period. To understand why, we will use what we like to refer to as 'the sine-wave model' to explain the 'ups & downs' of the first Temple period [= "bayit rishon"] and its special opportunities.

BAYIT RISHON / UP's & DOWN's - the SINE-WAVE

In our shiur, we use the 'sine-wave model' to describe a 'roller coaster' type graph with several 'highs & lows'. The highest point on the graph is reached when the overall state of the country is best; i.e. in regard to its economic strength, prosperity, unity, security, and peace with neighbors etc. In contrast, the lowest point on the graph reflects a situation where the state of affairs is lousy, i.e. poverty, civil war, a state of war with neighboring countries, famine, etc.

If you are familiar with the history of the first Temple period, you'll understand why the chart of the four hundred years of Bayit Rishon would look something like a sine-wave, as we will now explain below.

The establishment of the monarchy in the time of King David is indeed the first 'high point' on our graph. The country was united, its borders secure and its economy strong. Even the religious level of the people was at a high, as reflected in the construction of the first Bet Ha'Mikdash by Shlomo ha'melech.

Unfortunately, only one generation later, the monarchy split between YEHUDA (Rechavam) and YISRAEL (King Yerovam), causing the country to basically 'fall apart'. Egypt attacked Yehuda and plundered the Mikdash. The ten tribes were plagued with internal strife. Not only did security and prosperity suffer, so too did the religious level of the people. Hence, this time period is marked by a 'low point' on the graph.

About one hundred years later, during the time period of Yehoshafat (King of Yehuda) and Achav (King of Yisrael), the country unified once again (the second 'high point') and began to thrive. However this prosperity was short-lived. Despite the efforts of Eliyahu & Elisha, the ten tribes did not return to worship God properly. God's anger was reflected by the revolt of Yehu, the fall of Achav's dynasty, and once again civil war between Yehuda & Yisrael (the second 'low point').

It was only several generations later, during the reign of YEROVAM ben Yoash, King of Israel, and UZIYAHU, King of Yehuda, that harmony, prosperity and security finally returned (see II Melachim 14:23-28 & II Divrei Ha'yamim 3:1-15) - and yet another 'high point' was reached. Avodat Asheyra & Baal was no longer a sanctioned religion in Israel and the people in Yehuda respected their Temple in Jerusalem (even though there remained BAMOT in Yehuda).

THE BIG OPPORTUNITY

During this prosperous time of the united kingdom of UZIYAHU and YEROVAM, the prophets had high hopes for Am Yisrael to return to God. Finally, after several hundred years, the potential existed for a return to the glorious days of Shlomo ha'melech (King Solomon). It is during this time period that the "arba nviim" prophesied. This time, God did not want this 'golden opportunity' to slip by.

This potential is reflected in one the opening prophesies of Yeshayahu (recall that his n'vuot begin in the time period of Uziyahu (see 1:1-3]):

"The words of Yeshayahu concerning Yehuda and YERUSHALAIM:

In the days to come the Temple Mount shall stand firm above all mountains and tower above all hills; and all the nations shall flock to it saying: Come let us go up to the Temple Mount to the house of the God of Yaakov, that He may teach us His ways, and that we may walk in His paths... nation shall not lift sword against nation... (2:1-4)
[See also inscription outside the United Nations]

Yeshayahu, in the time period of Uziyahu, foresees the unfolding of a messianic era, when Am Yisrael can realize its biblical destiny to become a source of guidance for all mankind. It is BECAUSE Yehuda and Yisrael have achieved the status of a 'superpower', and BECAUSE the Temple & Jerusalem have become its national and religious center, that Yeshayahu anticipates this potential fulfillment.

It was God's hope that Am Yisrael would utilize its newfound prosperity towards achieving this messianic goal - the ultimate 'high point' on the sine wave. After all, it was for that purpose that He had blessed Israel with wealth and security. The prophets of this time first try to help Am Yisrael reach this goal. Upon their failure, they explain God's anger with His nation, for they failed to listen.

ENTER MICHA

Micha, a contemporary of Yeshayahu, delivers a very similar prophecy in chapter 4 [compare Yeshayahu 2:1-5 to Micha 4:1-5], reflecting this same hope. However, by then (the time period of Yotam & Achaz), both Micha & Yeshayahu had realized that the people were far from worthy for the prosperity that God had granted them. They both foresee yet another 'low' before this messianic 'high' would finally materialize. They also both explain HOW and WHY this would come about:

Yeshayahu explains that Ashur will come and punish both Yisrael & Yehuda (see 7:18 & 10:4-11); Shomron will be totally destroyed, while in Yehuda only Yerushalayim will be spared, and at the last moment and only in merit of a king who will act righteously (see 10:20->11:9). [See also Hoshea chapter 1.]

Micha's opening prophecy foresees a similar fate, however he describes Am Yisrael's fall to their enemies as though God Himself is leaving His Temple to punish His nation for their sins (see Micha 1:1->11).

However, most important is the reason both nviim give for Bnei Yisrael's forthcoming punishment. Both Yeshayahu and Micha focus their rebuke on social injustice, corruption, dishonesty, etc. It is hard to cite one example for there are so many, simply read from Micha chapters 2->3 & Yeshayahu chapters 2->5. Note their call for "tzedeq u'mishpat". [Even though "avodah zarah" is mentioned, it does not appear to be their primary sin.]

We will quote however one short section from Micha, for not only does it reflect this 'corrupt' society, but moreso the people's

haughty feeling that 'nothing is wrong'; all is fine; God is on 'our side':

"Hear this, you rulers of Yaakov... who detest justice and crooked look straight, who build Zion with crime, Jerusalem with iniquity! Her rulers judge for gifts, Her priests [i.e. rabbis] give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay, YET they RELY UPON GOD saying: HASHEM IS WITH - nothing bad will happen! - Therefore: because of you - Zion will be plowed as a field and Yerushalyim will become a heaps of ruins, and the Temple Mount a shrine of woods." (3:9-12)

This prophecy of Micha implies that even though the people are corrupt, THEY think that they are fine - because everyone is 'frum' -they are sure that God is with them. After all, all of them frequent the Bet Ha'Mikdash - they all offer their necessary korbanot.

Nonetheless, they had become affluent and haughty. It is this hypocrisy that so angers God that He decides that the Mikdash must be destroyed.

This topic emerges as the primary thrust of the first three chapters of Micha. After this terrible prediction, chapter four provides us with some hope as Micha reminds Bnei Yisrael that one day ["b'acharit ha'yammim"] a true redemption will take place - the remnant will return, but only when Bnei Yisrael will become truly deserving (see 4:1-7).

Afterward, Micha speaks about how Israel will one day counter and defeats its enemies (4:8->5:5) - even Ashur!

At this point our Haftara begins (5:6). Micha speaks of this 'remnant' whom will no longer be dependant on any other nation, only on God (5:6-7).

[Note the textual parallel to "shirat ha'azinu" (Devarim 32:1-2/ "tal", "rvivim" etc.). There are numerous parallels to Shirat ha'azinu in both Yeshayahu & Micha, most probably because God's impending punishment and later redemption of Am Yisrael during this time period reflects the principles which 'shirat ha'azinu' discusses. Note especially the aspect of affluence and indulgence after God had granted prosperity (32:13-15), and how God will punish (32:16-22!).

Note also how God will finally redeem His nation (32:36). [Compare 32:19-21 with Micha 3:1-4!]

Micha continues in 5:9-14 to describe how (at this ideal time) after their victory, Am Yisrael will no longer need their arms and fortified cities, nor any type of 'future-tellers'

In chapter 6, Micha returns to his own generation, explaining to them WHY God is so angry. Again he reminds them that all that God asks from them is to follow the ways of "tzedeq u'mishpat". However, it is interesting to note how the navi refers to this as a "riv: - a 'quarrel' [see 6:1-8].

When two sides quarrel, usually BOTH sides think that they are right. Again, Micha's description reflects their understanding that things aren't so bad, and if they do sin, why offering a korban can 'fix' any transgression.

This can explain Micha's rhetorical question:

"With what can I approach God - to pay Him homage - Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings? With calves a year old?

Would not God be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my TRANSGRESSION, the fruit of my body for my sins?" (see 6:6-7)

This question reflects the people's understanding that no matter how they act, no matter what they may do wrong, to appease God they need only bring a 'korban'.

According to the navi - this attitude reflects a total misunderstanding of korbanot [& in fact most any type of ritual]. If God has allowed us to offer korbanot, it is not simply to counter

balance any bad deed or behavior. Rather, the primary purpose of korbanot (and the Bet Ha'Mikdash) was to serve as a vehicle through which Am Yisrael can perfect their relationship with God. But when the essentials of Judiasm are missing, if there is no "tzedeq u'mishpat" - then korbanot become a farce and even counterproductive. If man allows himself to become slack in his behavior towards his neighbor thinking that he can balance his flaw simply by offering God some extra korbanot - then he has totally misunderstood what korbanot are all about.

Therefore, Micha concludes this section [and this week's Haftara] with his famous statement concerning what God truly wants from man:

"He has told you what is good and what God requires of man:
Only to do JUSTICE [mishpat],
and to love KINDNESS [chesed],
and to walk modestly with your God" (6:8)

SO WHY BILAM?

So why (in the middle of all this) does Micha mention Bilam. Why does he remind Am Yisrael to:

"...Remember what Balak plotted against you, and how Bilam responded to him..." (see 6:5)

Recall Bilam's 'protocol' of building a mizbayach and offering korbanot before each attempt to curse Bnei Yisrael. It certainly seems as though Balak assumes that a few choice korbanot can appease God in such a manner that He would actually allow Bilam to curse Bnei Yisrael.

Here again, we find a similar misunderstanding of korbanot. Bilam sees God as working in a 'mechanical' manner. You can achieve any result you wish with God, as long as you 'pump in' enough korbanot [sort of like how money works with man]. Bilam understands that God is PRIMARILY interested in korbanot, and hence - for enough korbanot - God would be willing to 'bend a few rules'.

During the time period of Micha, Am Yisrael suffered from a similar misunderstanding, thinking that by offering korbanot they could 'counterbalance' their haughty behavior.

Micha's conclusion is not to abolish the concept of korbanot altogether (note 4:1-5). Rather, he wants to make sure that they are understood properly. After all, what good are korbanot if they hinder the perfection of a relationship rather than enhancing it?

THE FAST DAYS

The same is true in relation to our mourning for Jerusalem today. Do we pray for the Bet HaMikdash to be rebuilt so that we gain yet another avenue for 'instant spirituality'? Are we looking for the 'easy life'? - Or are we looking for an avenue to perfect a relationship built on solid pillars of "tzedeq u'mishpat"? If we can answer that question properly, then hopefully God will answer our prayers properly.

shabbat shalom,
menachem