

The Voice of the Prophet

BRINGING THE WEEKLY HAFTARAH TO LIFE



Sixth Haftarah of Consolation

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In the sixth haftarah of consolation, Isaiah draws heavily on the metaphor of light and darkness, and the repair and redemption is imagined as individuals' and society's embodiment of divine light. When God's presence truly shines upon a person or nation, that person or nation is in turn able to bring light to others. This light—which may be understood as moral guidance and instruction, truth, compassion, justice, unification, love—is the true source of power and honor, the “wealth” of which the prophet speaks.

By implication, when the path to power, honor, or wealth brings darkness to the world—resting on oppression or degradation of others, engendering division, hatred, or violence—one can be sure that one is not walking with God. Moreover, such “wealth” is temporary, and pales in comparison to the “riches and royalty” that a life in God's presence offers; it is copper to divine gold, and iron to divine silver.

Food for thought:

- Have you ever felt a sense of God's presence, or felt you were able to bring God's presence to others? How would you describe the experience?
- What marked it for you as “true”?
- In contrast, when have you thought you were acting from pure motives or even religious conviction, but in retrospect you now see the impact of your “dark side” (the *yetzer hara*, or negative impulse)?
- Are the things you can do to recognize the influence of the *yetzer hara* sooner?

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Ki Tavo 5778

כי תבא תשע"ח



First Fruits, New Thoughts: A Pilgrim Reflects on the First Fruits Ritual

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I announce today to the Lord your God that I have entered (באתי) the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us . . . An Aramean astray, my ancestor; he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few-in-number, but he became there a nation, great, mighty and many. Now the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us with hard servitude. We cried out to God, the God of our fathers, and God hearkened to our voice. He saw our affliction, and our strain, and our oppression. And God took us out from Egypt, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great awe-inspiring acts, and with signs and portents. And he brought us (ויביאנו) to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now—here, I have brought (הבאתי) the premier-part of the fruits of the soil that you have given me, O Lord!

—Deuteronomy 26:3b, 5b–10a, the declaration that accompanies the bringing of the first fruits (transl. Everett Fox)

Peace be with you, friend! My name is Micah; I hail from Anav. And you? Shemaryahu, from Jericho, you say; a Benjaminite, then. Well, if you don't mind sharing the road with a Judahite let's walk together.

I can tell from the contents of your basket that you're a date grower, and who in Jericho isn't? On the other hand, almost anyone living in Anav is bound to have a vineyard, and I'm no exception; hence my burden, a cask of wine. My vineyard's not a large one. Still, my grapes are the finest and my wine is always in demand. Pardon me if that sounds like a boast, but I'm only telling you what's true.

You don't have to be a prophet to discern that the both of us are on the way to the Temple to bring our first fruits. I'm not free of faults, I'll admit, but I never fail to make this pilgrimage.

And of course, it's the same every year—placing our offering in front of the priest and reciting the declaration. I don't know it by heart—few do, though maybe you are more learned than I—so the priest will recite the words and I'll repeat them after him.

The year before last I got to thinking: What do the words mean? Don't get me wrong—though I'm neither scribe nor scholar, I understand the words. What I mean is: Why the long speech? Why not just bring the offering, place it before the priest, and head back home? This past year I decided to listen carefully to the words of the declaration, and it changed how I regard this whole first fruits business—because I've got to tell you, part of me has always felt that it was just an excuse for the priests to take yet another cut of the fruits—so to speak—of our labor.

Do you remember how the declaration begins? “I've entered the Land that we were promised by God,” or words to that effect—I can't repeat it word for word, mind you. Then there's something about our ancestor having been a wandering Aramean—Abraham, I think, or maybe Jacob; I would have asked the priest to set me straight, but there was a long line behind me. In any case, Jacob went down to Egypt to be with his son Joseph; that's how the trouble started, as I'm sure you know.

The declaration continues: When we first settled in Egypt we were just a clan, but of course everyone had many children—my wife and I have six, God bless them—and in a few generations, we were more like a nation than a family. I guess that made the Egyptians uneasy, a large group descended from immigrants. As happens too often, fear turned into hostility, and before we knew it we were slaves. And we're not talking serving dinner and running errands; it was back-breaking labor, building cities for the pharaohs.

It took Him some time, but eventually God began paying attention to our desperate situation, and after bringing plagues upon the Egyptians the pharaoh relented and we left Egypt. (By the way, I'm adding that part about the plagues and the pharaoh. None of that is in the declaration, which keeps things short—unlike me, I'm afraid.) Finally—here's where the historical review ends—our God brought us to Canaan, which is described as a land of milk and honey—and luscious grapes, one might add.

Only after all this do you announce that you've brought the first fruits. Good thing you're allowed to put down the basket before making the speech!

I can see that you are losing interest, so let me get to my main point. Going over the declaration in my mind, it occurred to me that all my life I've thought of my plot of land as mine by right. I inherited it from my father as he did from his; for how many generations it has belonged to my family, no one knows. But the declaration reminded me that at some point in the distant past, ancestors of mine, who had lived for years as nomads in the wilderness, arrived in Canaan. What a sense of wonder must have overcome them upon seeing, after all those years in the wilderness, a land full of trees and fields, vineyards, olive groves, sheep and cattle! Oh, and date palms.

Matters were not so simple, however. After our people entered Canaan, there was the long struggle to take possession of the Land we had been promised. At some point, though, my ancestors were able to build a home and plant a vineyard. What joy and gratitude they must have felt after the first harvest! And wouldn't they have thanked our God for taking their grandparents out of Egypt and making it possible for them to live a simple, peaceful life in a place they could call their own?

Here's my real point. When my ancestors came to the Land and settled it, they were preparing the way for their children and their children's children and so on—for me. So you could say that when they entered the Land, I entered with them. When they settled here, I settled with them. And it all began with the miracle of our God taking us out of Egypt. The miracles performed for my ancestors when they left Egypt were performed for me as well.

And all of this is in the declaration: I will be saying that I—I myself—have reached the land of Canaan—בְּאֶתִי; and that's because our God brought us to the land—וַיְבִיאֵנוּ; and as a result, I'm now able to bring the first fruits—הֵנָּה הַבְּאֵתִי.

It's no small thing that I can grow my grapes and produce my wine, enjoy the life my wife and I have made together, and watch our children grow. It's not a bad thing to remember this once in a while, to remember Who made it all possible, and to be thankful.

I've talked long enough. Are you stopping here for the night or do you plan to push on until sunset? You're continuing your journey? Well, you're young and I'm not; I need some rest. God bless you and safe travels, my friend! And who knows? Maybe we'll meet again in Jerusalem; if not this year, then next.