



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

This year, Shabbat Chanukah coincides only with the parasha of Vayeishev, a rare occurrence, as it generally falls out on the Shabbat when we read Parashat Miketz, although, when there are two Shabatot Chanukah (18% of the time) Miketz is read on the second Shabbat. As a result, next week we will be reading a haftarah specifically chosen to connect to Parashat Miketz and not to Chanukah, something that happens only 10% of the time. Now, since we have learned that Chazal declared that the haftarah must connect to the theme of the Maftir reading, this week we set aside the haftarah that is usually read for Parashat Vayeishev and, instead, we select the reading taken from the navi Zecharya. The prophetic vision that closes the haftarah is known as “Neirot Zecharya” a reading that, like the Maftir, connects to the Chanukah theme, describing as it does, the navi’s description of a golden menorah.

Sefer Zecharya is both a unique and a challenging book. It is a challenging book because it is filled with the prophet’s visions whose messages are often difficult to decipher. It is a unique sefer in that it is one of only three prophetic works that

contain the prophecies delivered to the nation during the Bayit Sheni era (the books of Chaggai and Malachi being the other two). But its uniqueness can be seen in its content as well. Sefer Zecharya is a book of comforting words and encouraging messages. Very little of the book is made up of criticisms and condemnations of Israel, something which is common in almost every other work in Nevi’im Acharonim (the later prophets).

And there is a very good reason for that uniqueness.

The navi Zecharya spoke to “Shavei Tziyon”, those Jews who returned to their land after spending fifty years in the Babylonian exile. They were but a small minority who heeded the proclamation of Koresh as the bulk of the Jewish people chose to remain in the Diaspora. Led by Zerubavel and by the Kohen Gadol, Yehoshua, they arrived in Yerushalayim poor and destitute to face the numerous challenges that awaited them. They had to undertake the difficult (and expensive) task of rebuilding the Beit HaMikdash, they had to protect themselves from the neighbors who had taken over the lands surrounding Jerusalem, they were urged by their prophets to remove any foreign wives they had taken and to withstand the threats made by the foreign families of those wives. It was not a simple time.

רפואה שלמה
יהודה מאיר בן יקירה

Hashem knew well that this courageous minority was neither saintly nor sinless. But He also knew that they were the ones who suffered exile, those who lived among strangers and those who longed to return home. It was not the time for censure or condemnation. In order to face the challenges and conquer them, this small and weak community needed the encouragement that only G-d could give them. And so we read the promise of Hashem that He will speak comforting words to them (1; 13) and that He would return to Yerushalayim in kindness and rebuild the Bet HaMikdash (1; 16). He shows the navi visions of how Jerusalem would grow beyond her borders with multitudes living there (2; 8) and, as our haftarah begins, He reassures the nation that masses of people will yet return and G-d will grant them their portion in the Holy Land.

The final vision included in our haftarah, the vision of the Menorah, addresses the small remnant that had returned and that cannot imagine how their small and weak group could ever succeed in meeting the many challenges that faced them. It is a message that reflects the story of Chanukah as well, since the relatively few Maccabbim had to face the powerful Syrian/Greek forces and defeat them. And the theme of “Lo v’chayil v’lo v’choach ki im b’ruchi”, is symbolized by the seven-flamed Menorah that, as hinted to in the text itself (4; 10), represent the “eyes” of G-d that are all-seeing and stand behind the people of Israel to support them in their task.

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And yet, to me, this vision of a Second Temple prophet speaks so clearly to me. It speaks to a generation who has suffered so in in the Diaspora, whose precious few returned to build their land while the majority did not and who faced the additional challenge of protecting themselves from hostile neighbors who had settled in their promised land. It is the words of the navi of how Hashem condemns the accuser (“satan”) who looks to criticize these people and tells him “Yig’ar b’cha Hashem”, Hashem denounces you who chooses to disparage these people, after all, “Halo zeh ud mutzal me’esh”-they are SURVIVORS!!! They have survived the conflagration; they have survived the destruction; they have survived the holocaust!!! How DARE you condemn them??!!

Do you hear this message too? There are times for criticism and times for encouragement. We dare not condemn those who have chosen to return and rebuild. We must encourage and comfort. And we must help.

Can’t you hear Zecharya’s words speaking to us today? I do. ■