

Haftarah

'I reared children...and they have rebelled'



*Cease to do evil,
learn to do good,
seek justice; relieve the oppressed.
Uphold the orphan's rights;
take up the widow's cause.
Come now, says the Eternal One,
let us reason together:
though your sins be scarlet,
they can become as white as snow...*
Isaiah 1:17-18

Connection

The Torah portion *Devarim* (Deut. 1:1-3:22) and the Haftarah (Isaiah 1:1-27) have no connecting themes. Rather, this Haftarah is always read on the Shabbat before *Tisha B'Av*, a major fast day in the Jewish calendar commemorating the destruction of the Temple. This Haftarah is one of a series of three read over the three weeks leading up to *Tisha B'Av*. Together they are known as the 'three [haftarot] of affliction'.

Background

According to the opening verse of Isaiah, the prophet's ministry coincided with the reign of a number of Judean kings in the latter half of the 8th century BCE. These were politically tumultuous times with repeated threats from foreign powers. Isaiah forecasts dark days and destruction for the people whom he accuses of infidelity to God and disregard for God's paths of justice. In fact Jerusalem was not conquered by the Babylonians until well after Isaiah's lifetime, however the prophet's lament came to symbolize the tragedy of the later destruction and was chosen as a suitable Haftarah reading to precede the *Tisha B'Av* fast.

Ponder

Our Haftarah is comprised of three speeches:

- **Isaiah 1:2-9.** The prophet's critique is devastating: *'Brood of evildoers!'* (4); *'The whole head is sick, the whole heart is ill'* (v.5). An ass has more respect for its master than Israel for its divine sovereign (see v.3). The condemnation of Israel appears absolute, irrevocable.
- **Isaiah 1:10-20.** This second speech is more of an instruction than a doomsday prophecy. The people have a chance to redeem themselves by turning away from sin and following God's ways of right living (see quotation at left). Of particular concern is the abuse of institutional religion, the emptiness of temple sacrifices when unaccompanied by ethical lifestyle. *'I cannot endure festivities along with evil'* (v.13).
- **Isaiah 1:21-27.** The third speech continues the themes of the second, adding a lament over the doomed fate of Zion. Divine purgation will take place, however it is not the last word. The Haftarah ends of note of hope: *'Zion will be redeemed by justice, and its repentant people by righteousness'* (v.27).

Discuss

'The way to loving God is through loving God's children' (a Hasidic saying). For Isaiah, and for the Torah itself, ritual worship of God is inseparable from loving others and the creation of a just society. Talk about the challenges of living this vision in the life of your own faith community today.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarat* (Philadelphia, 2002). Scripture quotations: Plaut.