

Haftarot Unrolled: Kedoshim

Like Any Other Nation

The Haftarah begins with the following question:

הֲלוֹא כְּבָנֵי כְּשִׁיִּים אַתֶּם לִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נֹאֵם ה'

"Aren't you like the sons of the Nubians¹ to me, sons of Israel?" says Hashem. (Amos 9:7)

It appears that G-d is implying that the Jewish People are just like anyone else, and that exotic foreign nations at the edge of civilization have as much claim on Him as we do. The Haftarah then goes on to say how Israel will be destroyed for its sins, and the Jewish People exiled and dispersed throughout the world.

It is not unusual for the Tanach criticize the Jewish People. But after reading the Parsha of Kedoshim, which lists dozens and dozens of commandments of morality unique to the Jewish People, and sets very high standards for our actions, to then read, "Eh, you might as well be Nubian for all I care," is a little harsh.

However, this Haftarah is technically not the Haftarah of Kedoshim. It is actually the Haftarah read for the combined Parsha of Acharei-Mot/Kedoshim². The Haftarah tells us to look at the two Parshot as a single unit. Doing so creates a different picture, one that correlates much better with the Haftarah.

Chapter 18 in Acharei-Mot and Chapter 20 in Kedoshim have very similar structure and content. They each contain a list of forbidden incestuous relations, and each ends with a warning that it was this type of immorality that caused the previous inhabitants of the Land of Israel to lose their right to live there. Acharei Mot and Kedoshim use similar phrases to refer to the nations that had lived in the land, and the reaction of the land to their behavior:

Acharei-Mot:

- (כד) אֵל תִּטְמָאוּ בְּכָל אֵלֶּה כִּי בְּכָל אֵלֶּה נִטְמָאוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵשַׁלֵּחַ מִפְּנֵיכֶם
(כה) וְתִטְמָא הָאָרֶץ וְאֶפְקֹד עֲוֹנָהָ עָלֶיהָ וְתִקָּא הָאָרֶץ אֶת יִשְׁבֵּיהָ:
(כו) וּשְׁמִרְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ מִכָּל הַתּוֹעֵבֹת הָאֵלֶּה הָאֲזָרָח וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם
- 24) Do not defile through all of these, **since the nations that I am throwing out before you** defiled themselves through these.
- 25) The land became defiled, and I commanded that its sin be paid; **thus the land spewed out its inhabitants.**
- 26) **You must keep My laws and My commandments**, and not do any of these disgusting things; citizen and resident among you. (VaYikra 18)

Kedoshim:

- (כב) וּשְׁמִרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת כָּל מִשְׁפָּטַי וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תִקָּא אֹתְכֶם הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֹתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לְשִׁכְתָּ בָּהּ:
(כג) וְלֹא תִלְכוּ בְּחֻקֹּת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵשַׁלֵּחַ מִפְּנֵיכֶם כִּי אֵת כָּל אֵלֶּה עָשׂוּ וְאֶקְרָא בָּם:
(כד) וְאָמַר לָכֵן אַתֶּם תִּירָשׁוּ אֶת אֲדֹמְתָם וְאֲנִי אֶתְנַנֶּה לָכֵם לְרִשְׁתָּ אֹתָהּ אֶרֶץ זִבְתָּ חֶלֶב וְדִבְשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הִבְדַּלְתִּי אֹתְכֶם מִן הָעַמִּים:

¹ The word, "Nubians" in the Tanach and Midrash means: "exotic people with distinctively dark skin."

² Technically, it is the Haftarah of Acharei-Mot. Unlike all other combined Parshot, when we read the Haftarah of the second Parsha, for Acharei-Mot/Kedoshim, we read the Haftarah of the first. If Acharei-Mot is read independently but a different Haftarah such as Shabbat HaGadol is read that week instead, this Haftarah is read the following week for Kedoshim. Being that it is almost never the case that both Acharei-Mot and Kedoshim can be read, most Chumashim just list this one as the Haftarah of Kedoshim.

- 22) **You must keep all My laws and all My commandments**, and do them; then **the land** that I am bringing you to live there **will not spew you out**.
- 23) And you will not follow the laws of the **nation which I am throwing out before you**; for they did all of these things and I rejected them.
- 24) I said do you, you will inherit their land, and I will give it to you to inherit, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Hashem your G-d, who separated you from all other nations.
(Vayikra 20)

Based on these verses which appear both Parshot, we have the following information:

- The nations that lived in the Land of Israel before us behaved in a way that G-d found unacceptable. In particular, their concept of incest was not consistent with G-d's intentions for His world.
- The Land of Israel, as an almost sentient entity, cannot tolerate this particular behavior. It cannot allow a society that acts in this manner to exist within its borders, and must "spew them out".
- G-d has set apart the Jewish People and given us a set of laws that is different from those of the previous inhabitants in the Land. Our continued presence in the land is contingent upon us following these laws.

The message of Acharei-Mot/Kedoshim is that our uniqueness has a purpose. G-d chose us and gave us His Torah so that our actions would be different from those of other nations. Therefore, if we repeat what they have done, then we have no claim on a special relationship with G-d, and no claim on the Land of Israel. As the Haftarah puts it, "you might as well be Nubians."

The converse is also true:

וכי כושיים שמן? והלא ישראל שמן! אלא: מה כושי משונה בעורו - אף ישראל משונן במעשיהן מכל האומות.
"You are Nubians to Me" - What, their name is "Nubian"? No, their name is "Israel". So why are they called "Nubian"? Just as an Nubian has distinctive skin, so too, Israel's actions are distinctive from all other nations. (Talmud Mo'ed Katan 16b)

This Midrash does not read the verse, "You are Nubians to Me," as a sarcastic dismissal of the Jewish People. Instead, it sees it as an affirmation of the source of our uniqueness. The distinctiveness of the Jewish People is found in our actions, in the way we structure our society. Our values are not based on the mores of the corrupt cultures that surround us, they are based on G-d's Torah.

The Haftarah, too, ends on a positive note, describing our land overflowing with abundance:

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נֹאֵם ה' ... וְהִטִּיפוּ הַהָרִים עֲסִיס וְכָל הַגְּבָעוֹת תִּתְמוּגְגְּנָה: וְשָׁבְתִי אֶת שָׁבוֹת עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָבוּ עָרִים וְנִשְׁמֹת וְיָשְׁבוּ.... וְנִטְעַנְתִּים עַל אֲדָמָתָם וְלֹא יִנְתְּשׁוּ עוֹד מֵעַל אֲדָמָתָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ.
Now the days are coming, says Hashem... the mountains will drip with juice, and all the hills will be lush.... I will return the remnant of My people, Israel, and they will build desolate cities and live in them... I will plant them in their land, and they will never again be uprooted from their land that I have given them, says Hashem ... (Amos 9:13-15)

The Haftarah tells us that the Jewish People are capable of living up to the standards set in Acharei-Mot/Kedoshim. Ultimately, we will be worthy of living in the "land flowing with milk and honey."

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל