

Haftarot Unrolled: Mas'ei

Defiling the Land

Regardless of the way the calendar comes out, the second Haftarah of the Three Weeks of mourning the destruction of Jerusalem always falls out on Parshat Mas'ei. In order to understand the message of this Haftarah, we must look at its intersection with the Parsha.

The Haftarah accuses the Jewish People of having defiled the Land of Israel with their actions:

וַאֲבִיָּא אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶרֶץ הַפְּרִמָּה לֶאֱכֹל פְּרִיָּהּ וְטוֹבָהּ וַתָּבֹאוּ וַתְּטַמְּאוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ צִי וְנִחַלְתִּי שְׁמִתְכֶם לְתוֹעֵבָה :
I brought you to the land of plenty to eat her fruit and her goodness; you came **and you defiled My land**, you have made loathsome. (Yirmiyahu 2:7)

Parshat Mas'ei contains the following verse, which uses the same terms:

וְלֹא תִטְמָא אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שֹׂכֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ כִּי אֲנִי ה' שֹׂכֵן בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
And **you must not defile the land** in which you are living, within which I dwell,
for I, Hashem, dwell within B'nei Yisrael (Bamidbar 35:34)

We might have thought that what defiles the land is idolatry, or perhaps sexual immorality. That is also true, but the Parsha is talking about a different matter. This verse appears at the conclusion of the laws of the City of Refuge. Those laws mandate that a person who kills someone by accident must run away to a designated city¹, and the family of the victim may not avenge his death, at least not until he has his day in court. If he is in fact innocent of murder and it was not intentional, he must live in this city until the Cohen Gadol (High Priest) dies. Murder, even accidental murder, must be punished. It is in the context of these laws that the Torah tells us, "Do not defile the land."

The Midrash makes this explicit:

וְלֹא תִטְמָא אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ, מִגִּיד הַכְּתוּב שֶׁשְּׁפִיכַת דָּמִים מִטְמָא הָאָרֶץ
וּמִסִּלְקַת אֶת הַשְּׂכִינָה וּמִפְּנֵי שְׁפִיכַת דָּמִים חָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ

"And you must not defile the land in which you are living": the Torah tells us that murder defiles the land, and banished the Divine Presence, and it is because of murder that the Beit HaMikdash, the Temple, was destroyed. (Midrash Sifri Bamidbar Mas'ei 161)

According to this Midrash, the First Temple was destroyed because of murder. This refers to the purges of King Menashe's reign, when he tried to forcibly institutionalize the worship of the pagan god Ba'al. Those who tried to maintain their loyalty to G-d - such as the elderly prophet Yeshayahu - were executed. When later kings attempted to revive the worship of Hashem, the prophets told them that the sins of Menashe cannot be erased. The impact of

¹ Kedesh Naftali near the Kinneret, Shechem in the Center, and Chevron in the South.

Menashe's reign on the Jewish People affected not only their religious beliefs, but also their perception of the sanctity of life. Once murder is part of society, once it is conceivable that a person can kill another and get away with it, or worse yet, when the state can execute people for political reasons, there is no going back. You can't make it inconceivable again.

The Midrash tells us that the Divine Presence refuses to be part of that kind of society. Murder "defiled" their land, destroyed their civilization, and the only way to fix it was to tear it down and start over.

Unfortunately, the second time around wasn't much better. The Midrash continues with a particularly disturbing story that took place at the time of the Second Temple.

מעשה בשני כהנים שהיו שוין ורצין ועולין בכבש וקדם אחד מהם לחבירו בתוך ארבע אמות נטל סכין ותקעה לו בלבו בא רבי צדוק ועמד על מעלות האולם ואמר שמעוני אחינו בית ישראל הרי הוא אומר כי ימצא חלל באדמה וגו' (שם /דברים כ"א/ א) בואו ונמדוד על מי ראוי להביא את העגלה על ההיכל או על העזרות געו כל ישראל בבכייה ואח"כ בא אביו של תינוק [ומצאו מפרפר] אמר להם אחינו הריני כפרתכם עדיין בני מפרפר וסכין לא נטמאת ללמדך שטומאת סכינים חביבה להם יותר משפיכות דמים

There was the story of two Cohanim who were racing up the ramp of the altar, and one of them passed the other, so he took a knife and stabbed him in the heart.

R' Tzadok came and stood on the stairs of the hall of the Temple and said, "Listen to me, my brothers, the House of Israel! It says in the Torah that if a dead body is found, the nearest community must take responsibility. Let us come and measure, who should bring the atonement, the sanctuary or the temple courtyards?" Everyone present burst into tears.

But then the father of the boy came and realized that he was still breathing. He said to them, "Brothers, I swear, my son is still alive, that means that the knife has not been defiled!"

This tells us that the ritual status of the knives was more important to them than murder. (Midrash Sifri Bamidbar Mas'ei 161)

The Parsha tells us that even an accidental murder must be punished, even when the murderer bore no malice toward the victim. R' Tzadok quoted a related commandment, where a city must take responsibility for an unsolved murder that took place outside its walls. So what is there to say about two Cohanim who stab each other because they lost a race to be the first one up the ramp of the altar? What is there to say about the father of the victim, who cares more about the ritual purity of the knife than about his son's life?

When people stab each other in anger and the society looks the other way, because it has other priorities, it does not matter what those priorities are, the Divine Presence wants no part of it. G-d will not tolerate a defiled society where murder is an option.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל