

Haftarot Unrolled: Eikev

Impossible Hope

In the second of the series of seven Haftarot of Consolation, the Haftarah of Eikev begins by airing a specific fear of the Jewish People:

וְתֹאמַר צִיּוֹן עָזַבְנִי ה'

Tzion said, "Hashem has abandoned me (Yeshayahu 49:14)

The Jewish People feel that the endless exile and the desolation of the Land of Israel is a clear sign that G-d no longer cares about them. In order to give them faith and hope that they will resettle and rebuild Jerusalem, the prophet reminds them of their forebears, Avraham and Sarah:

הַבִּיטוּ אֶל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִיכֶם וְאֶל שָׂרָה תְּחוּלְלֵכֶם כִּי אֶחָד קָרָאתִיו וְאַבְרָכָהּ וְאַרְבֵּהוּ

Look to Avraham your father, and to Sarah, your founder.

For he was alone when I called him, I blessed him and multiplied him.

(Yeshayahu 51:2)

How are Avraham and Sarah relevant to the Jewish People's fear of abandonment? The Midrash explains:

כשם שנתיאשו ממנה האומות שלא נבנית והיא תבנה שנאמר האומר לירושלים תושב... אם תמהים אתם הביטו אל אברהם אביכם ואל שרה תחוללכם (ישעיה נא) כשם שעשיתי לאברהם ולשרה כך אעשה לירושלים.

It'll be just as the nations will have given up on her that she will ever be rebuilt, and she will be rebuilt...If you are incredulous, "look at Avraham your father and Sarah your creator" (Yeshaya 51) – just as I did it for Avraham and Sarah, so I will do for Jerusalem. (Midrash Tanchuma VaYeira 16)

The Midrash says that in order to keep up our hope that Jerusalem will be rebuilt, and not to give up in despair, we should consider what G-d did for Avraham and Sarah. Avraham and Sarah had been barren for years, and G-d promised them that they would be the founders of nations. The years passed, and they were still barren. The Midrash explains just how impossible their hope for children actually was:

אמר רב נחמן אמר רבה בר אבוה : שרה אמנו אילונית היתה שנאמר : +בראשית י"א+ ותהי שרי עקרה אין לה ולד אפי' בית ולד אין לה.

R' Nachman said in the name of Rava bar Avuha: Our mother Sarah was sterile, as it says, "Sarai was barren; she had no child" (Breishit 11) – she did not even have the organs for childbirth. (Talmud Bavli Yevamot 64a)

Avraham and Sarah knew that what they were asking for was close to impossible, but G-d had promised, so they kept praying and kept hoping.

Why did G-d create this situation? Of all the people in the world whom He might have picked to be the father and mother of His nation, why did G-d pick someone who lacked the physical ability to be the father and mother of anyone at all?

א"ר יצחק: מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים? מפני שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים
R' Yitzchak said: Why were our forefathers barren? Because G-d desires the prayer of the righteous. (Talmud Bavli Yevamot 64a)

If they could have had children without G-d's help, then they would not have needed to ask for His help. Their prayers, over decades, filled with increasing desperation and the ebb and flow of hope, created a deep relationship with G-d.

In Parshat Eikev, we learn that the same dynamic is present in G-d's choice of the Land of Israel. Instead of giving us a land like Egypt that requires minimal effort to provide water for crops, G-d gave us a land which depends on rain from the Heavens. The reason for this is stated explicitly: to deepen our relationship with G-d.

(י) כִּי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָּא שָׂמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא כְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הוּא אֲשֶׁר יְצַאֲתֶם מִשָּׁם אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע אֶת זְרַעְךָ וְהִשְׁקִיתָ בְּרִגְלְךָ כְּגַן הַגֶּזֶק: (יא) וְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׂמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶרֶץ הָרִים וּבְקָעֹת לְמִטְרַת הַשָּׁמַיִם תִּשְׁתֶּה מַּיִם: (יב) אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ תִּמְיֵד עֵינֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ בְּהַ מְרֻשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרֵית שָׁנָה:

(10) For the land that you are coming to inherit, is not like the land of Egypt, that you have left, where you would plant your seeds, and irrigate on foot like a vegetable garden. (11) The land that you are crossing to inherit, is a land of hills and valleys. By the rain of the heavens you will drink water. (12) The land that Hashem your G-d scrutinizes; the eyes of Hashem your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year, until the end of the year.

The land that G-d had promised to give to the descendents of Avraham and Sarah requires constant prayer. We can never take it for granted that there will be water, and we rely on G-d for our very survival, year by year. The flip side of this is that G-d's attention is always upon this land, year by year. Whatever happens here, for better or for worse, is because G-d means for it to happen, and is a direct reflection of our relationship with Him.

Avraham and Sarah had an impossible dream; it took years of prayer and hope and waiting, but ultimately they were answered and were blessed with all the bounty they had been promised. The dream of the Jewish People, to return to their land and rebuild it, had seemed just as impossible, and the wait seemed interminable. But the act of waiting, the prayers and the hoping was not a sign that G-d has abandoned us, but quite the contrary. It has always been a sign of our relationship with Him, and of our faith that everything He does for us has meaning and purpose.

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