

Haftarot Unrolled: Re'eh

The Standard

As the third of the series of seven Haftarot of Consolation, the Haftarah of Re'eh talks about a time when the nations of the world will turn to the Jewish People for guidance and leadership.

הָטוּ אַזְנוֹכֶם וּלְכוּ אֵלַי שְׁמְעוּ וּתְחִי נַפְשְׁכֶם וְאַכְרַתְהָ לָכֶם בְּרִית עוֹלָם חֲסֵדֵי דָוִד הַנְּאֻמָּנִים: הֵן עַד לְאוּמִים
נִתְתִּיּוּ נְגִיד וּמְצֻוֶה לְאֻמִּים: הֵן גּוֹי לֹא תִדַע תִּקְרָא וְגוֹי לֹא יִדְעוּךָ אֵלֶיךָ יְרוּצוּ לְמַעַן ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ וְלִקְדוֹשׁ
יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי פֶאֶרְךָ

Lend me your ears, and come to me, listen and your souls will live! I will make with you an everlasting covenant: like that of David's steadfast loyalty. Truly, I have made him a witness to the nations, a leader and a commander of nations. Truly, you will call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you, will run to you, for the sake of Hashem, your G-d, for the Holy One of Israel, Who glorifies you! (Yeshayahu 55:3-5)

This is a reference to an earlier prophecy of Yeshayahu, which describes this era in greater detail:

וְשִׁפֹּט בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם וְהוֹכִיחַ לְעַמִּים רַבִּים וְכַתְּתוּ חַרְבוֹתָם לְאַתִּים וְחַנְיֹתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמְרוֹת לֹא יִשָּׂא
גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה
And he will judge between nations, and reprove many peoples, and they will beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning forks. Nation will not lift sword against nation, and they shall learn war no more (Yeshayahu 2:4)

In order for there to be peace among the nations, there first needs to be justice and leadership. The Tanach's gold standard against which all leaders are measured is King David. Whenever the Tanach judges his descendants, it uses what one might call a Davidic scale. For instance, his great-grandson Asa is described thus:

וַיַּעַשׂ אֲסָא הַיֵּשׁוּב בְּעֵינֵי ה' כְּדָוִד אָבִיו
Asa acted in an upright manner in the eyes of Hashem like his father David
(Melachim I 15:11)

And a later descendant, King Amatziah ben Yoash, who did not quite live up to the standard:

וַיַּעַשׂ הַיֵּשׁוּב בְּעֵינֵי ה' רַק לֹא כְּדָוִד אָבִיו
He acted in an upright manner in the eyes of Hashem, but not like his father David. (Melachim II 14:3)

Apparently, to be "like his father David", one has to "act in an upright manner in the eyes of Hashem." The parallel description of the kings in Divrei HaYamim uses a slightly different wording - a king has to be not only upright, but also good:

וַיַּעַשׂ אֲסָא הַטּוֹב וְהַיֵּשׁוּב בְּעֵינֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהָיו:
Asa acted in a good and upright manner in the eyes of Hashem, his G-d. (Divrei HaYamim II 14:1)

Parshat Re'eh uses this term as well. When Moshe tells the Jewish People what G-d expects of them, he says:

שָׁמַר וְשָׁמְעָתָּ אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוְּךָ לַמַּעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ וּלְבְנֶיךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ עַד עוֹלָם כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב וְהַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ

Observe and listen to all these things that I command you; in order that it will be good for you and your children after you forever, if you will act in a **good and upright** manner in the eyes of Hashem your G-d. (Devarim 12:28)

So, then, what is this "good and upright manner", and how does it differ from simply "observing and listening to all the commandments"? The Ramban explains the term:

והכוונה בזה, כי מתחלה אמר שתשמור חקותיו ועדותיו אשר צוּךְ, ועתה יאמר גם באשר לא צוּךְ תן דעתך לעשות הטוב והישר בעיניו, כי הוא אוהב הטוב והישר: וזה ענין גדול, לפי שאי אפשר להזכיר בתורה כל הנהגות האדם עם שכניו ורעיו וכל משאו ומתנו ותקוני הישוב והמדינות כלם, אבל אחרי שהזכיר מהם הרבה, כגון לא תלך רכיל (ויקרא יט טז), לא תקום ולא תטור (שם פסוק יח), ולא תעמוד על דם רעך (שם פסוק טז), לא תקלל חרש (שם פסוק יד), מפני שיבה תקום (שם פסוק לב), וכיוצא בהן, חזר לומר בדרך כלל שיעשה הטוב והישר בכל דבר

...The idea is that first it says to keep all the laws that He commanded, and now it says that even the things that were not commanded, one should set one's mind on acting in a good and upright manner in His eyes, because He loves what is good and upright.

This is an important concept, because it is impossible for the Torah to list all the ways a person behaves with his friends and neighbors, and all his business dealings, and all policies for running a society. However, after listing many of them, such as "do not gossip", "do not take revenge or bear a grudge", "do not stand by when your friend is in danger", "do not curse a deaf person", "stand up before the elderly", and so on, it also repeated it in a general form, that one should act in a good and upright manner in every way. (Ramban Devarim 6)

The Ramban says that it is not sufficient to scrupulously keep the commandments of the Torah. G-d expects more. He expects us to extrapolate, based on the commandments that He gave us, what He means by "good and upright", and use that as our standard of behavior.

The time of peace among the nations will come when the Jewish People are a beacon of what is good and upright in G-d's eyes, the way that King David had been, the way the Torah expects us to be. It is a very high bar to reach, but when we have done so, when our leaders are of the caliber of King David in justice and righteousness, then the nations of the world will no longer resort to war to solve their problems. Instead, they will look to Jerusalem for moral guidance and do what is good and upright in G-d's eyes.

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