

Words of Comfort

Rabbi Melanie Aron

August 24, 2019

Most of us are aware that there are things not to say when someone has suffered a loss, things such as:

They're in a better place.

She would have wanted it this way.

Why are you upset? So-and-so died even younger.

Similarly, when someone is ill, we know that certain phrases do not bring the comfort we are hoping to convey, phrases such as:

I know someone who once had something like that.

God gives you only as much as you can handle.

Why aren't you doing. . . ?

Or even, How are you?

We seem to know what *not* to say, but figuring out what *to* say is much harder.

For the seven weeks after Tisha B'av, we have special Haftarot of Comfort. In addition, we know that the rabbis went out of their way to make sure that every Haftarah ends on a note of comfort. So for this morning, I looked at the last verses of all the Haftarot for the weekly portions and for special holidays. I wondered what the rabbis considered comforting and whether these words would still be considered words of comfort for us today.

Many of the Haftarah portions end with reassurance that the relationship between God and the Jewish people is an enduring one. For one reason or another, the people might suppose that God has abandoned them or is unable to help, but, as in our Haftarah this morning, the people are assured that abandonment by God is just not possible. "God will save Israel" is the theme of more than 20 Haftarot, another half dozen end by reminding the people that God will save the righteous, and a handful conclude that God will punish the wicked. Typical of these Haftarah endings are the words from the Haftarah for *Kedoshim*:

"I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel. They shall rebuild the desolate cities and dwell in them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their soil, never to be uprooted from the soil that I have given them, says the Eternal One your God."

A large number of Haftarot, almost 20, stress that God has helped or saved individuals or groups of people in the past and so can be counted on for the future. The words of God's prophets are proven to be true, as in the Haftarah for *Metzora* in which the prophet predicts a fall in the price of barley and flour. Other promises of continuity include the appointment of new leaders to serve in the future, whether that leader is Solomon or later leaders such as Elisha.

Narrative Haftarot often end with proof that the words of the prophets are fulfilled; therefore, other promises as yet unrealized can be trusted. In some, the prophets also perform wondrous acts. In those Haftarot in which punishment of

Israel is alluded to, it is always with the promise that such punishment will be proportional and limited.

One of the more interesting endings is from the Haftarah for *Tazria*, in which the text concludes with the words of Elisha to the foreign general Naaman, “Go in peace.” This follows Naaman’s acknowledgment that once he gets home, his practice will have to include bowing to the God Rimmon when accompanying his master to bring sacrifices. Elisha assures him that his best is good enough.

Another outstanding Haftarah ends with the words;

“It has been told you O Mortal what is good and what God requires of you, only to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

This is in response to the people’s fears that what God requires is too much for them to offer: too many sacrifices, including the sacrifice of their children. In general, the relationship between God and Israel is affirmed, and that constitutes reassurance.

It is interesting to remember that though these Haftarot come from Biblical times, they were actually chosen as Haftarah readings much later. They all come from the section of the *Tanach* called “The Prophets,” which includes the super-prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as well as the prophets from whom we have less material, a dozen in all, as well as the historical books; but their selection for use as Haftarot was designated in later times. In that we sometimes have Ashkenazi and Sephardi choices that differ, usually just in length but

sometimes in their entirety, we know that the choice of Haftarot remained somewhat fluid. Therefore, we can surmise that these chosen passages and their chosen conclusions come from a time well after the end of Israelite independence when the Jewish people's circumstances were likely to be difficult. Reading these texts in the Diaspora, when times of quiet were often followed by troubled times, the Haftarah could not promise a direct resolution of current difficulties or imminent deliverance. It is interesting to me that what seems to have been sought was not so much an end to the present suffering, what we might think of as "a cure," but the assurance that the suffering was part of a world which could still have meaning---something we sometimes talk about as "healing."

So what does all of this mean for us as we seek the words to comfort the grieving and the ill? I have only some preliminary conclusions.

Maybe, it reminds us not to promise what we can't control. As much as we want to say, "Everything will be okay," especially in close relationships, that may ring hollow. More important may be the assurance that we are with them, that we will not abandon them or reject them because of a new status, either as a widow or widower for example, or as someone who is chronically or severely ill. Both loss and poor health are isolating, and so the disproportional stress on relationship in the Haftarah conclusions, may come to remind us that this is what we can offer: "I will be there for you, not just today but also tomorrow---if things get better, and even if they do not."

It was interesting for me to review and try to sort out the rabbis' choices of words of comfort from the prophets' word, but I am not sure I have fully explored this resource. What else do you feel we can learn from them?