

No, It's Not All About Yitzchak

Haftara - 21 p'sukim - Mal-achi 1:1-2:7

Last week's parasha of Chaye Sara portrayed the final years of Avraham and closed the portion by summarizing the future descendants of Yishma'el. It is only logical, therefore, that this week's parasha of To-l'dot would focus upon the life of Avraham and Sarah's only son, Yitzchak Avinu -and, indeed, it does.

Beginning with the birth of his twin sons, the parasha also includes Hashem's charge for Yitzchak to remain in Eretz Yisrael despite its ongoing famine, the reward he is given in agricultural success and chronicles Yitzchak's relationship with the Philistine King, Avimelech. In fact, the text even makes a point of mentioning the disputes Yitzchak had with the Philistine shepherds, which he was eventually able to resolve peacefully.

But our haftara does not concentrate on the successes of Yitzchak or of Rivka, nor on the story of the Yitzchak's brachot given to his sons - and not even on the 'strained' relationship between Eisav and Ya'akov! Curiously, the haftara centers upon the unsuitable behavior shown by the kohanim during the years of the navi, Mal-achi. And, although Mal-achi's prophecy does begin with the mention of Hashem's preference of Ya'akov over Eisav, the bulk of the haftara focuses on the improper - and even profane - manner in which the kohanim conducted the sacred services in the Beit HaMikdash. Now, we would certainly understand the navi's reproach of the inappropriate avoda that was taking place the holiest of places during his time... but why did Chazal see this nevu'a as a proper haftara for Parashat To-l'dot?

Rav Soloveitchik submits that the connection Chazal saw in this haftara to the parasha itself is found in the opening events of the Torah reading, where Eisav rejects his B'CHORA, his birthright. Beyond a simple rejection, the Torah describes Eisav's reaction by using the word VAYIVEZ, he "despised" the B'chora. Given the fact that Chazal saw this rejection as Eisav's complete dismissal of any service to G-d, of any responsibility of 'kehuna'.

It is this connection, therefore, that our sages saw in Mal-achi's censure

of the Kohanim of his time. The disregard and disrespect that the kohanim displayed is detailed in the prophet's condemnation is found in our haftara as the navi charges the Kohanim of sacrificing the sickly and weak animals as offering to Hashem and, as such, 'polluting' G-d's table. Even worse, the outraged prophet accuses the kohanim of regarding the entire service to Hashem as being 'wearisome' [MATLA'A], and, as a result, accepting even stolen animals to be offered to G-d.

The Rav later continues by sharing with us the very depth of these grave sins and why Mal-achi's harsh reprimand connect so close to our parasha. Rav Soloveitchik follows the view of Chazal, based upon the Torah's statement that, even before the nation of Israel was formed, there was a 'Kohen' - an individual who served G-d. His name was Malki-tzedek, and the text states V'HU KOHEIN L'KEIL ELYON, "he was a Kohen to the Most High G-d" (B'reishit 14:18). It was Yitzchak, who, years later, assumed this responsi-bility (as a result of the Akeida), and it passed down to his oldest son, Eisav (through his B'chora). That respon-sibility fell to Ya'akov - after Eisav rejected it - and then to the b'chorim (the first born) of Israel. Eventually, Hashem removed that position from the firstborn gave it to the Kohanim (through the tribe of Levi) [Bamidbar 3:12].

Clearly, our sages saw the inheritance of the kehuna as a subtle theme of parasha itself, thereby emphasizing the essential truth that the divine service must always continue. And, as Mal-achi taught, that service must always be carried on in reverence, purity and holiness.