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Isaiah 1-39
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Isaiah: Rebellion and Promise

The first thirty nine chapters of the book of Isaiah have as one of their themes rebellion and promise. The people are called to task for their rebellion and told how things should be or could be. In a way, G-d acts as a parent does. Good parents discipline their children when they disobey. They try to keep them from harmful influences. They tell the children how to behave, and what is important. Good parents may even use "tough love" to save their children from themselves when they do something particularly self-destructive. They do this because they love their children and they want them to grow up to be good adults. HaShem is an excellent parent to Bnai Yisrael (in this case, those in Judah), his child/children, as Isaiah shows. In this paper, I will explore the historical background in which the rebellion takes place, how the people have rebelled, and the promising future, near or far depending on the people, about which Isaiah tells them.

The context in which the major events of Isaiah take place is useful. According to John Bright:

In the third quarter of the eighth century, Israel was confronted by circumstances that altered her status decisively and permanently. We have, up to this point, traced the history of two independent nations. Though they had fought with their neighbors continually, and on occasion been humiliated, they had never lost political self-determination; nor had their fortunes, although not unaffected by the current of larger world affairs, ever been dependent upon the whim of empires far away, save indirectly. The truth is that the entire history of Israel through the five hundred years of her existence as a people had been spun out in a great power vacuum; no empire had existed that had been in a position to trouble her deeply and permanently. As a result, she had never known an emergency that she had not in some way been able to master, and so to survive. After the middle of the eighth century this was never to be the case again.¹

¹ Bright, John. A History of Israel, 3d ed., Westminster aids to the study of the Scriptures. CD-ROM. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981.

When the Assyrian Empire begins to grow, Judah is threatened by her neighbors, who want her as part of an alliance against the expanding empire.

The Assyrian Empire was not your typical empire after the mould of Egypt or the latter Persian Empire. John Bright makes this clear:

The campaigns of Tiglath-pileser differed from those of his predecessors in that they were not tribute-gathering expeditions, but permanent conquests. In order to consolidate his gains, Tiglath-pileser adopted a policy which, although not wholly novel, had never been applied with such consistency before. Instead of contenting himself with receiving tribute from native princes and punishing rebellion with brutal reprisals, Tiglath-pileser, when rebellion occurred, habitually deported the offenders and incorporated their lands as provinces of the empire, hoping in this way to quench all patriotic sentiment capable of nurturing resistance. This policy, consistently followed by Tiglath-pileser and copied by all his successors, was one of which Israel would in turn learn the meaning.²

It is upon this canvas that the rebellion and promise of Isaiah are painted.

Before I begin talking of rebellion and promise, however, I have to make clear that Isaiah, no matter how broad the words appear, is not saying that every single person in Judah is doing everything for which he indicts them. It is a Jewish principle, however, that kol yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh, all Israel is responsible one for the other. Thus, the whole people is indicted for not putting a stop to the actions of a subgroup, largely people with money and power. It is as in the story of the golden calf in Exodus. Three thousand took part in the golden calf incident, as indicated by the fact that they were killed (Exodus 32:8), yet all the people are rebuked.

The first chapter of Isaiah establishes Bnai Yisrael, in particular the southern kingdom of Judah, as G-d's rebellious children. "G-d speaks through the Prophet, saying,

² Ibid

“I reared children and brought them up— And they have rebelled against Me! An ox knows its owner, An ass its master’s crib: Israel does not know, My people takes no thought.”³ (Isaiah 1:2-3) Again, Isaiah calls the people rebels in verse 28: “But rebels and sinners shall all be crushed, And those who forsake the L-rd shall perish.” In chapter 30 verse 9, the people are again brought to task: “For it is a rebellious people, Faithless children, Children who refused to heed The instruction of the L-rd.” Note the parallelism that is in this verse. The word “faithless” reinforces the word “rebellious” and the whole thing is clarified by the last hemistich, which informs us that the people are not following G-d’s instructions.

Bnai Yisrael are as children gone astray. This is a theme that pervades much of the Tanach. The Tanach refers to Israel as G-d's child, children, and son in many places. This theme starts in the Torah. Exodus 4:22-23 says "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the L-RD: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you, "Let My son go, that he may worship Me...'. Deuteronomy 1:31 says "and in the wilderness, where you saw how the L-RD your G-d carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place." It seems that during the time of the wanderings, Bnai Yisrael was seen as a small child, which is what he was spiritually, having just received G-d's Torah. Deuteronomy 8:5-6, which is very pertinent in the discussion of Isaiah, says "Bear in mind that the L-RD your G-d disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son. Therefore keep the commandments of the L-RD your G-d: walk in His ways and revere Him." Additionally, Deuteronomy 14:1-2 reinforces and expands

³ All quotes from the Tanakh taken from the following source unless otherwise stated: Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. CD-ROM. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997

upon this: "You are children of the L-rd your G-d. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead. For you are a people consecrated to the L-rd your G-d: the L-rd your G-d chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people." The prophets, including Isaiah, pick up this theme of Bnai Yisrael as G-d's children and G-d as a parent who disciplines His children. That is not to say that the prophet Isaiah continually says "my children, Israel" or a similar phrase, but that, after saying in several places that Bnai Yisrael are G-d's children, he continually shows the parental behavior of G-d.

The question is, in what ways has Judah, the portion of Bnai Yisrael to which Isaiah is speaking, rebelled against G-d? They have, among other things, become a "sinful nation! People laden with iniquity! Brood of evildoers! Depraved children! They have forsaken the L-RD, spurned the Holy One of Israel, turned their backs [on Him]. Why do you seek further beatings, that you continue to offend?..." (Isaiah 1:4-5). This is but one of the many chastisements of the people by G-d. Here, G-d is portrayed as very much like a parent, criticizing His children, while at the same time wondering why they continue to disobey. He wants and expects a certain kind of behavior from His children (see also Jeremiah 3:14), not simply sweet words or gifts (sacrifices), and He tells Israel so through Isaiah (Isaiah 1:11-15). It is not that sweet words and gifts are offensive to G-d, it is that His children have been disobeying Him by being unjust, while continuing to talk sweetly and bring gifts. It is very much the actions of a rebellious adolescent child, who goes out of the house and disobeys his or her parents, while saying to them at home "You know, you are the best parents, here, I brought you something," in an effort to cover-up his or her misdeeds. G-d, seeing everything, knows exactly what His children

are doing when they are not "acting" sweet to His "face."

One of the ways they have been rebelling is in how they treat others. They are wronging the widow, the orphan, and the poor (Isaiah 1:17 and other places) They are also murderers (Isaiah 1: 21), thieves (Isaiah 1:23), judges who take bribes (Isaiah 1:23), and haughty, proud, and arrogant (Isaiah 2:11-12). They stray after false gods, following the ways of their neighbors, instead of listening to their own Father's advice. He tells His children that they will be shamed "because of the terebinths you desired" (Isaiah 1:29). A terebinth is a type of tree, but in this context, it is likely linked to the worship of the pagan deity Asherah. This is also mentioned as a problem in Isaiah 17:8, which the new JPS translates as "sacred posts," even though the Hebrew says "Asherim," plural for Asherah. Additionally, they stray by looking to other nations for help, be it Assyria or Egypt (as, for example, in chapter 18). Isaiah 30:1 is another example of G-d calling His people to task for their actions: "Woe to the rebellious children (Heb. Banim), said the L-RD, who take counsel, but not from me; and who prepare a plan, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin." Verse 9 enumerates one more way in which they sin: "...this is a rebellious people, lying children (Heb. Banim), children who will not hear the Torah of the L-RD."

Having chastised Israel, His children, He tells them again what He expects of them. "Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from My sight." (Isaiah 1:16). This does not mean that Israel should try and do their evil in secret, since there is nothing that is secret from G-d, but that, as the verse continues, they should "Cease to do evil; learn to do good" (Isaiah 1:16-17). G-d then goes on to give some specifics, reminding them what He requires of His children: "Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged.

Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow." (Isaiah 1:18).

G-d then offers His children hope, if only they change their ways. "Come, let us reach an understanding, -- says the L-RD. Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white; be they red as dyed wool. they can become like fleece." (Isaiah 1:18). If Israel changes and does what their Father tells them, they will be forgiven and given a fresh start. Isaiah, seeming to speak for himself as well as G-d, says to his fellow children of Israel, "O House of Jacob! Come, let us walk by the light of the L-RD." (Isaiah 2:5), encouraging them to do what is right. Parents don't want to give up on their children, to just turn them away without any hope. Most children genuinely want to please their parents deep down. G-d is offering His children hope. He also offers them a reward for good behavior. Like a good parent, punishment alone is not used, rewards are also used to reinforce and encourage good behavior. Isaiah 1:19 starts, "if, then, you agree and give heed, you will eat of the good things of the earth...". It is a bit like saying, "If you make your bed and quite hanging out with those bad kids, I will get you pizza and ice cream".

This promise of reward is, of course, followed by a warning of what will happen if the bad, disobedient behavior continues: "But if you refuse and disobey, you will be devoured [by] the sword..." (Isaiah 1:20). Dr. Brauner has said that "it is well to remember that reward and punishment are also [an] essential feature of brit/Covenant."⁴ This does not mean that Israel will disappear from the face of the world, as it is later made clear, but that some the people, elsewhere described as G-d's children, will be punished and some kicked out of the house so they do not influence the remaining Jews

⁴ Dr. Ron Brauner, personal communication, April 28, 2008

adversely. This interpretation is born out by a number of passages, including "Zion shall be saved in the judgment; her repentant ones, in the retribution, but rebels and sinners shall all be crushed, and those who forsake the L-RD shall perish." (Isaiah 1:27-28). The Jewish people that are left will be pure and good as Isaiah 1:25 says, "I will turn My hand against you, and smelt out your dross as with lye, and remove all your slag". The Jewish people will emerge from G-d's punishment without the dross, the evil. Afterwards, G-d says, "you shall be called City of Righteousness, Faithful City." (Isaiah 1:26).

The future for the Jewish people (G-d's children) as a whole is full of promise and will be bright, says G-d, who knows His people well. Isaiah paints a picture in chapter 2 of Israel as a light unto the peoples of the world: "And the many peoples shall go and say: 'Come, let us go up to the Mount of the L-RD, to the House of the G-d of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.' For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the L-RD from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:3). This is similar to Zechariah 8:23, which says "Thus said the L-RD of Hosts: In those days, ten men from nations of every tongue will take hold -- they will take hold of every Jew by a corner of his cloak and say, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that G-d is with you.' " That is not to say, as Blenkinsopp might, that Bnai Yisrael are supposed to dominate the world, nor does it mean that all people are to become Jews. Rather, the Jewish people will be an example to the world. The people of the world will want to know about G-d and will, according to the Rabbis, follow the Noachide laws. G-d knows that there is a bright future ahead for those of His children who remain faithful or repent, and for the rest of the nations of the world as well.

Additionally, there is promise, as discussed in class, of a return to the world as it

should be, that is, the world of Genesis chapter one. It is a world which could have come to pass in the time of Hezekiah, but was deferred to the future since it did not occur. It is a world for which we hope, in which:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard lie down with the kid; The calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, With a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, Their young shall lie down together; And the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. A babe shall play Over a viper's hole, And an infant pass his hand Over an adder's den. In all of My sacred mount Nothing evil or vile shall be done; For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord As water covers the sea. In that day, The stock of Jesse that has remained standing Shall become a standard to peoples— Nations shall seek his counsel And his abode shall be honored. (Isaiah 11:6-10)

This promise does not, of course, mean that animals will literally change their diets, but rather that peace will occur and a just world will prevail. As it says in Isaiah 2:4: “Thus He will judge among the nations And arbitrate for the many peoples, And they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up Sword against nation; They shall never again know war.” Additionally, all nations will yearn for instruction from G-d on how they are to live, something the Rabbis later would take to mean the Noachide laws. “And the many peoples shall go and say: ‘Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the L-rd, To the House of the G-d of Jacob; That He may instruct us in His ways, And that we may walk in His paths.’ For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of the L-rd from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

As I said at the beginning of the paper, Bnai Yisrael are G-d's children. G-d loves Israel, and Israel is supposed to love G-d (though love of a parent is not legislated in Torah, and love of G-d, that is ahava or unswerving loyalty, is legislated) and do what G-d demands. Failure to do so results in consequences. Repentance and following G-d's will

results in forgiveness. G-d's chastisement purifies Israel, just as a parents' chastisement is supposed to improve their child. In the end, G-d knows that Israel, His first-born, will return to Him, and become an example for all the other younger children in the family, that is, to all the other peoples of the world. That is our promise, if we would just cease from rebellion.

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