



Haftarat Parshat Vayigash: Joining the Branches

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At the heart of the Haftarah this week is unity. Yechezkel, in his prophecies of consolation, is instructed by God to take two branches in his hands and hold them together, symbolizing the eventual joining together of the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judea.

Central to his vision of the ultimate redemption is a reunification of the Jewish people, who had been split into the northern and southern kingdoms many years before. This ancient prophecy of reconciliation resonates with renewed urgency in our own time, as we grapple with bitter divisions today.

It would be difficult not to be moved by the poignant imagery in the haftarah, as Yechezkel dreams of the entirety of the Jewish people joining together under a single banner.

What's striking, though, is that the prophet doesn't dwell on the differences between the two kingdoms – they are simply two halves of a whole to be put back together. In reality, though, the northern tribes and the southern tribes diverged greatly, even regarding their faith in and worship of God.

While Yechezkel envisions a national recommitment to God and the Torah in the wake of the reunification, that doesn't mean, per se, that the 'branch of Yosef and the 'branch of Yehuda' are destined to become identical.

We can think back to Yosef and Yehuda themselves, whom we encounter once again in this week's parsha. The two brothers aren't carbon copies of one another; they have entirely different personalities and complementary strengths.

Yosef is perseverant in moments of trouble, strategic in his economic planning for Pharaoh in the face of impending famine, and dreamy about what the future holds. Yehuda is assertive in the face of crisis, contrite when he makes mistakes, and a spokesperson on behalf of his brothers.

Despite their differences, at the climactic moment of encounter in our parsha, they are able to make amends.

This theme of distinct yet complementary roles is revisited in the rabbinic notion of the two messiahs: Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David. Mashiach ben Yosef, introduced to us in the Talmud (Sukkah 52a), serves as a precursor to the ultimate messiah.



Though traditions about this character are limited, it is said that this preliminary messianic figure from the house of Yosef will focus, like his namesake, primarily on the administrative and economic groundwork.

Meanwhile, the Mashiach ben David will usher in the spiritual reawakening that will accompany the ultimate redemption. These two figures play different roles, yet both are indispensable to the Jewish people's redemption.

Rav Kook embraced this framing in his 1904 eulogy for Theodor Herzl. Secular Zionists, maintaining Rav Kook, functioned in a manner akin to that of Mashiach ben Yosef, setting the stage administratively, economically and politically for the eventual redemption.

Both political and spiritual tasks are required in order to bring about the redemption, and those fulfilling each of those tasks must see the other as critically important, parallel partners, rather than opponents.

The joining of forces of the kingdom of Judah and the kingdom of Joseph is not about creating uniformity, but rather creating productive partnerships in pursuit of common goals.

Here lies our challenge today, as it has been continually throughout our history. How can we unite our various branches, while maintaining our distinct and complementary characteristics? What does it take to hold together differing tribes as we pursue our shared destiny?

Our haftarah does not provide the blueprint, but it offers us something more valuable: the vision and mandate. Our people can and must unite in the face of difference, enabling the universal recognition of God and indeed helping to reveal God's visible presence in the world.