

## Torah Table Talk

### You are My Witnesses

#### Parshat Vayikra

Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26/ Isaiah 43:21 – 44:23



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt  
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.  
"He was the perfect child."*

Sometime toward the middle of the sixth century BCE, a prophet began to prophesy to the Jewish exiles that were living in Babylonia. He reassured the people that though they had been punished for 'troubling' God, the Holy One would forgive them and bring them back to the land of their ancestors. The world was changing and for this exilic prophet, this was a sure sign of God's all-mighty hand in the universe. The last half of the book of Isaiah includes the prophecies of this man. In today's *Haftorah*, Isaiah II, as he is sometimes called, tells the Jewish people that they are the chosen nation of God. He chastises all those who foolishly worship idols made of the same materials that people burn to cook their food. Israel, writes the prophet of the exile, has a unique role in the world – they shall be witnesses of God's presence in the Universe. Today's Haftorah was chosen as the prophetic portion for *Parshat Vayikra* because of its opening verses in which the prophet speaks of the various offerings that Israel brought to God. In the end what God truly values is not sacrifices but faith and good deeds.

#### **Isaiah, 44:6 – 8**

Thus said the Lord, the King of Israel, their redeemer, the Lord of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last, and there is no god but Me. Who like Me can announce, can foretell it and match Me thereby? Even as I told the future to an ancient people, so let him foretell coming events to them. Do not be frightened, do not be shaken! Have I not from of old predicted to you? I foretold and you are My witnesses. Is there any God like Me? There is no rock; I know none!

#### **Baylonian Talmud Shabbat 55a**

R. Hanina said: The seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is *emet* [spelled 'mt'], "truth." In explaining the significance of the letters in this word, Resh Lakish said: The first letter, *alef*, is the first letter of the alphabet; the second letter, *mem*, is in the middle, and the third letter, *tav*, is the last letter, thus signifying, "I am the first, and I am the last, and beside Me there is no God" (Isa. 44:6). "I am the first"- I did not receive My kingdom from anyone else. "And beside Me there is no God--I have no partner. "And with the last I am the same" (Isa. 41:4)--I am not destined to turn over My kingdom to anyone else.

#### **Rashi 44:8**

You are my witnesses: (At the Sinai revelation) I opened the seven levels of the heavenly firmament and showed you that there is no other (God). You are my witnesses in this matter that there is no God beside me.

#### **Sifre Deut., #34**

"This is my God, and I will glorify Him" (Exod. 15:2). When I acknowledge Him, God -- if one dare say such a thing--is glorified, but when I do not acknowledge Him, He is glorified merely in name.

Similarly, you say, "Ye are My witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God" (Isa. 43:12). When you are My witnesses, I am God, but when you are not My witnesses, I am not God. Similarly, you say, "Unto Thee I lift up mine eyes, O Thou that art my enthroned one in the heavens" (Ps. 123:1). But for me, You would not be sitting in the heavens.

### **Deuteronomy 6:4**

"*Shema, Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is echad one.*" (The last letter of the word *Shema*, hear, and the last letter of the word *echad*, one, are written larger than all the other letters in the Torah scroll. When we put these two letters together they spell *eyd*. *Eyd* means witness. When we recite the *shema* we bear witness to the unity of God in the Universe.)

### **W. G. Plaut The Haftarah Commentary**

The idea that Israel is to be a witness to God's reality and goodness is closely related to the task of being a light unto the nations. For how was this noble goal to be achieved? Not by missionary effort but only by Israel being true to the covenant and becoming an example to gentiles. Jews who themselves live up to the high ideals of Judaism will encourage others to follow the path of Torah and thus move humanity closer to the messianic age.....with religious convictions weakening, many Jews have become uncomfortable with the idea that they were singled out to be a model for others. Many, if not most Modern Jews rarely refer to themselves as chosen or being "God's witnesses"....

### **Around the Table**

1. In what way does Second Isaiah understand the notion that the people of Israel are witnesses for God? What is the connection between prophecy and the reality of God in the verse from this week's Haftarah?
2. Why did it become so important for the people of Israel to serve as witnesses to the divine during the time of the exile from the Promised Land? How do you think this changed the way the Jewish people saw themselves?
3. According to Rashi, what is the basis of our ability to bear witness to the existence of God? To what are we bearing witness? Do you think his notion of bearing witness is different from that of Isaiah?
4. Do you think of yourself as God's witness in the world today? If so, in what way? What unique insights, understanding or truths (if any do we Jews have to teach the world? Is it arrogant for a person to presume that he/she is a witness on behalf of God?
5. What does it say about God to suggest that we must bear witness for God? In what ways is God in need of our testimony?
6. How do you feel about Plaut's comments? Are you uncomfortable referring to yourself as God's witness? How would you respond to his comment?

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**Torah Table Talk** is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to [Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org](mailto:Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org). To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to [tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org](mailto:tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org). To see an archive of Rabbi Greenspan's sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>.

*"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*

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