

For the Sake of Jerusalem, Be Silent... Sometimes

The classic story tells of Eliezer ben Yehuda, the father of the modern Hebrew language, moving to Jerusalem as the tangible fulfillment of his life's work. When he took up residence in our eternal capital, he turned to his wife and said, "From this day forward you will no longer speak to me in Russian. You will speak to me only in Hebrew." "But," replied his wife in Russian, "I do not speak Hebrew." "Then," said ben Yehuda, "you will be silent in Hebrew."

Though the treatment of his wife may leave something to be desired, ben Yehuda, who was not a particularly observant Jew, understood two things.

First, that the experience of Jerusalem was so overwhelming that only a spiritually dead Jew could live there without being profoundly affected by the experience. So impactful was the city that not just one's emotions but also one's behavior needed to express the impact. In that regard, even an appropriate silence that showed appreciation for the city would be far superior to communication that suggested that the location had no impact.

Second, and it is this that I will focus on, ben Yehuda seems to sense that somehow Jerusalem would be violated or offended or disturbed in some way by the use of a language other than Hebrew. Without specific reference to the question of whether use of a particular dialect constitutes an actual insult, it is interesting that ben Yehuda seems to have sensed a quality that Jerusalem does indeed possess. Saying the wrong thing in regard to Jerusalem does cause offense.

Chapter 22 of Ezekiel begins, "You, son of man, shall you judge thy bloody city (Jerusalem) and make known its abominations." The Talmud then discusses whether this section may be read publicly in the synagogue as a Haftorah, or whether offending Jerusalem in this way is inappropriate. The Gemara seems to conclude that one may read the section and in fact it can be found in many Chumashim (particularly those of older vintage) as the Haftorah to Parshat Kedoshim. This despite a story which we will return to below, told in the Talmud, that forcefully expresses Rabbi Eliezer's objection to the practice.

Despite the Talmud's permissive stance, our current practice all but removes the practice of saying the section from Ezekiel. In most years, Acharei Mot, the parsha before Kedoshim, joins with it to form the reading of the Shabbat on which it falls. Normally, when we read two parshiyot, we recite the Haftorah of the second portion, which should mean that our chapter would be read.

Nonetheless, the Ramoh tells us to read the Haftorah of Acharei Mot when the two are together, and the Mishnah Berurah explains that it is because of our reluctance to read publicly of the "abominations of Jerusalem," and thus offend the city.

And it doesn't stop here. Says the Mishnah Berurah, "If the two parshiyot are separate and the Haftorah of Acharei Mot is pre-empted because the Shabbat falls on the day before Rosh Chodesh (the new moon) and the special Haftorah Machar Chodesh (tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh) is read, then the Haftorah of Acharei Mot is moved to the next week and serves as the Haftorah of Kedoshim, pre-empting Ezekiel's criticism of Jerusalem for that year.

Further, in other years in which Acharei Mot is read separately, it falls on shabbat Hagadol (the Shabbat before Passover), which also has its own Haftorah that pre-empt the normal selection. Again, there are some who move the Haftorah of Acharei Mot to the week of Kedoshim and avoid offending Jerusalem.

Finally, in years when the parshiyot are separate and Acharei Mot does not fall on the day before Rosh Chodesh, Kedoshim may fall on Rosh Chodesh, thus pre-empting the chapter again. In fact, in the last 20 years, there has not been a single reading cycle in which one finds Acharei Mot and Kedoshim separate and unencumbered, in which case those wishing to avoid this Haftorah would essentially never need to say it. It is probably for this reason that many contemporary printings of the Chumash have moved the Haftorah of Acharei Mot so that it appears after Kedoshim, while the controversial Haftorah of Kedoshim appears after Acharei Mot, where it is never used.

The clincher comes in a statement reported to me as originating with Rav Soloveitchik, z"tl, that even if one encounters a year in which the two parshiyot are separate and unencumbered, one should not recite Ezekiel Chapter 22 on either week. Rather, the Haftorah of Acharei Mot should be recited twice-- once on each of the Shabbatot.

I detect what seems to be a similar concern in the choice of Torah reading for the extra day of Yom Tov that we celebrate outside of Israel. On the eighth day of Passover, the second day of Shavuot, and the eighth day of Sukkot, we read the section from Deuteronomy 15-16. The section tells us to celebrate the holidays "in the place which the Lord your G-d has chosen," meaning Jerusalem, of course, five times-- in contrast to Leviticus 23 or Numbers 28, the other two discussions of the holidays in the Five Books of Moses, which do not mention the holy city at all.

The reading is, therefore, a very surprising choice. The second day of Shavuot, the eighth day of Pesach, and the eighth day of Sukkot are alike not only in the Torah portion that is read. They are alike in that, if one were to visit Jerusalem on those days, it would not be Pesach, Shavuot, or Sukkot.

Why, then, read this section? Perhaps it is to protect ourselves against the charge that we are creating a holiday, particularly a part of one of the pilgrimage festivals when we were required to visit Jerusalem, independent of Jerusalem.

Our problems with the calendar in the Diaspora force us to add another day and to celebrate a holiday when Jerusalem is not celebrating. But our Torah reading evokes Jerusalem five times, so that we avoid, G-d forbid, offending the city that is meant to be the center of our holiday observance.

We return finally to the story of R. Eliezer mentioned above. R. Eliezer did not want Ezekiel Chapter 22 to be read publicly. We know his opinion from the following incident. A certain man was reading the chapter in question while standing above R. Eliezer's location. When he spoke of the abominations of Jerusalem, R. Eliezer said to him, "Before you examine the abominations of Jerusalem, go and examine the abominations of your mother."

They investigated him and found a taint of familial disqualification.

This source explains the concern for Jerusalem's sensibilities by equating Jerusalem with one's mother. She is our spiritual mother, after all. She nurtures our faith, she gives sustenance and form to our religious hopes and dreams, and she is the symbol of the modern rebirth of our people. The barren mother of the prophets, who represented the desolation of the ravaged city, has now brought forth all of us as her children. We all recognize that connection and know it as part of our core identity.

And as anyone who has ever played on the streets or playgrounds of New York knows: No offense is so bad, no violation so egregious, as hearing an insult of one's mother. On a very different plane, from R. Eliezer through our Torah and Haftorah readings, protecting our geographic mother is part of our spiritual concern.

May she survive and thrive free of any insult or abuse to the end of time.