

Haftarah

'David was afraid of the LORD that day'



When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God.

2 Samuel 6:6-7

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading, 2 Samuel 6:1—7:17, accompanies the Torah portion *Shemini*: Lev. 9:1—11:47.
- Each reading describes a magnificent and joyous religious ceremony which is suddenly interrupted by a tragic event which is difficult to explain. In the Torah reading, the consecration of the Tabernacle is marred by the deaths of Aaron's sons Adab and Abihu, perhaps due to a ritual transgression. In the Haftarah reading, the triumphant procession as the Ark enters Jerusalem is marred by the death of Uzzah who reaches out to touch the Ark in order to steady it when the cart is destabilized.

Background comment

There are times when all the interpretation in the world seems unable to produce a completely satisfying explanation as to why the Torah presents a particular story the way it does. The fate of Uzzah is one such puzzle. And we can readily admit that in life experience, sometimes people die for no clear reason. Yet this does not prevent the Jewish sages from wrestling with the text, holding it to the light, turning it this way and that in search of that precious insight into the relationship between God and human beings. While some interpretations find stronger support in the text than other, we can marvel at the creativity of the sages over generations of Torah study; we can be inspired to fully engage with the mystery and power of God's Word.

Ponder

Torah scholar W. Gunther Plaut¹ discusses some of the diverse interpretations of Uzzah's death found in Jewish tradition:

- A comment by Rashi suggests that Uzzah did not trust in divine help; he thought *he* had to save the Ark (a kind of 'savior' complex).
- Rabbi Jochanan, while critical of Uzzah's action, expresses confidence that Uzzah would enjoy eternal life, because the Ark is eternal.
- Rabbi Eliezer reads the Hebrew word *shal* (6:5) as *nashal* ('to throw out/down'). From a very earthy view he says that Uzzah needed to relieve himself and unfortunately did so right next to the Ark! Thus he showed disrespect for its holy status (B. Sota 35a).
- Another tradition blames David for the whole incident. If he had instructed the priests to carry the Ark instead of transporting it in a cart, none of this would have happened. (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* VII 4:2)

Reflect

- Plaut points out that God's ways, life and death itself, are often beyond human comprehension. Perhaps the story of Uzzah serves the purpose of reminding us of our mortal limits, and encouraging humility and awe before the unfathomable mystery of God, Creator and Redeemer. Discuss.

1. Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996, 2002). Scripture quotations: NRSV.