

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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Shabbat Shuva

The haftara for Shabbat Shuva is taken from three (some have the minhag of reading from two or even one) different books of Trei Asar, the Minor Prophets, with each selection focusing on the theme of t'shuva. The opening cry of the first of the "minor" prophets, Hoshe'a, "Shuva Yisra'el", lends its name to the Shabbat itself (Shabbat Shuva) and sets the tone for the entire selection. In the haftara, the prophet even seems to suggest the necessary steps for repentance by first saying K'CHU IMACHEM D'VARIM, start the return process with D'VARIM, with words, i.e. by confessing your sins. He then continues V'SHUVU AD HASHEM, and return to G-d, draw nearer to Him by changing your ways and avoiding sin. After calling for repentance, the prophet then goes on to describe the reward for returning to G-d as He will cease His anger and be as revitalizing dew, causing Israel to take root and blossom.

The second selection from the navi Yoel (the second book of Trei Asar)

also describes the rewards awaiting Israel upon her return to G-d and calls for the people to assemble in prayer and public fast - a call that reminds us of the upcoming day of Yom Kippur. But a look into the previous chapter of Yoel will afford us a different perspective on this message of the navi.

It was in the days of this prophet that G-d had brought an unprecedented plague of locusts that destroyed the crops of Israel and threw the nation into an economic crisis. In the first perek of Sefer Yoel, the navi calls out to the people to fast and to cry out to G-d in the hope that the Hashem would remove the locusts and save the land. In the second perek Yoel addresses the nation after the plague had already decimated the land (according to the Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel and Malbim) and calls out for a national return to G-d - in effect, a communal t'shuva campaign, not to prevent any approaching calamity but rather one meant to bring us closer to our Creator. It is THIS chapter that makes up the bulk of our haftara - and rightfully so. The t'shuva that we seek during this time of year is not one brought upon by a fear of punishment but one caused by a thirst for the Divine.

During these days of return it is

important for us to reflect upon our own relationship with Hashem. We must consider whether we regard Him merely as a judge Who might punish us, or as a Heavenly Father Whom we love and Whom yearn to please.

It is this type of repentance that will serve us well throughout the year. ✨