

# Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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## Vayeitzei

Sefer Hoshe'a, the first book of the Trei Asar, the twelve "minor" prophets, is a collection of prophecies replete with condemnation and criticism of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Throughout its 14 p'rakim, the navi Hoshe'a focuses upon the faithlessness of "Efrayim", and her abandonment of Hashem. In order to better understand the message of this book and, therefore, this week's haftara, we should understand the specific time and the historical events that took place during this era.

Hoshe'a prophesied during the reign of Yerov'am ben Yo'ash (Yerov'am II) who ruled over the Northern Kingdom for 41 years. Like his namesake, Yerov'am angered Hashem, following the idolatrous and corrupt ways of his predecessor. Nonetheless, the text describes his military victories, through which he succeeded in restoring Israel's original northern border. Her military successes and the lengthy reign of her king, allowed Efrayim to believe that the era of stability and security was proof

enough that the prophet's claim of Hashem's anger of their corrupt behavior and devotion to false gods, was unfounded.

Our haftara opens with the nation's claim that deception and falsehood was part of our very past. The Malbim offers a unique approach to understanding the words of Hoshe'a and explains that these opening verses reflect the people's argument against the navi's criticism. Denying that they were guilty of dishonesty, they claimed that deception was part of Israel's past: Ya'akov was forced to escape to Aram due to his deception and he was then deceived by Lavan and, despite this, he still continued to "protect" the flocks he guarded. Likewise, they argued that Hoshe'a's criticism of their idolatrous worship of the "calves" (agalim) was also untrue since it was a navi who was sent by Hashem to release the nation from Egypt and a navi, who, despite their worship of the golden calf, "protected" them from punishment! Remarkably, the people were telling Hoshe'a that it was, therefore, his responsibility to defend them before G-d - not condemn them!!!

The navi rejects their arguments, reminding them that their "powerful" king had turned to idols only because of his fear that, were the people to return to worship Hashem, they

would rebel against him, joining the Southern Kingdom in their worship of Hashem in the Beit HaMikdash, just as Yerov'am I had feared, years earlier. Hoshe'a fills his message with the warnings of the coming disasters that would befall the Kingdom if they do not cease their idolatrous ways. Powerfully, the prophet also brings up their past history, reminding the nation of all the kindnesses that G-d had done for them and how they had paid back those favors by forgetting His love abandoning His worship.

Perhaps more than any other theme, Hoshe'a - throughout his sefer - calls out Israel for her lack of gratitude to G-d and appreciation for what He had done for them. He resorts to bringing up the past when speaking to the sinful nation in the hope that they would finally be able to remember what they owe their Heavenly Father and, as a result, return to Him.

The harsh words of the prophet's message do not complete his Sefer. On the contrary, the final message of the haftara - and Hoshe'a's book - is one of comfort and promise. The book - replete with warning, criticism and reproach of the nation - closes, fittingly, with a call for repentance and with the promise of G-d's eventual return to His people.

It is this "coda" that opens the haftara that precedes Yom Kippur.

Indeed, it is that cry SHUVA!, that gives the title to that Shabbat itself.

