

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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Va'eira

In previous essays, I have pointed out that the prophetic messages found in the weekly haftarot can be better understood by taking note of the prophecies that preceded, and/or followed, those nevuot. This certainly is true of this week's haftara, a selection taken from 29th (and the end of 28th) chapters in Sefer Yechezkel. Although the prophecy focuses on the future collapse of the Egyptian Empire, it is only the last part of an entire section of prophecies that predicts the collapse of Israel's surrounding neighbors, many of whom were adversaries, and often oppressors, of the Israelite Kingdoms.

Starting from the twenty-fifth chapter of the book, we read these "predictions of doom", frightening forecasts that are directed to the nations of Ammon, Moav, Edom, P'lishtim, Tzor and Tzidon. Rav Amnon Bazak makes note of the fact that these predictions are not set in chronological order, but rather, similar to other like-themed prophecies, were all included in this one

section. Rav Bazak also explains the logic of why this section appears only after the painful descriptions of the horrific punishments that would be meted out to Israel, including the eventual destruction of the Beit HaMikdash and the Judean Kingdom. He suggests that the prophet feared that the Jews might see the dark prophecies of their exile as a desecration of Hashem's name - i.e. Chilul HaShem - mistakenly believing that their defeat was "proof" of the power of the foreign "gods" over HaKadosh Baruch Hu. As a result, Yechezkel goes on to forecast the eventual collapse and disappearance of Israel's antagonists as well, dispelling the false belief of the exiled nation. It is at this point, after the navi reviewed the destiny of these rivals, that he dedicates three separate chapters to the fate of Egypt - the first of which, is the haftara of Parashat Va'eira.

Last week's parasha focused upon Egypt's oppression and enslavement of B'nei Yisrael and this week's parasha concentrates on Hashem's plans to free His people and, at the same time to punish the evildoers and teach them of G-d's justice. Rav Barak makes us aware of the fact that Yechezkel's prophecy directed against Par'oh, was spoken on the twelfth of Tevet in the reign of King

Tzidkiyahu (29:1) which marked a full year (and 2 days) after the Babylonians had laid siege to Yerushalayim. The harsh words directed against the Pharaoh (PAR'OH HAFRA) were the result of his failure to keep the alliance he had made with Judea and help them to repel the Babylonian onslaught.

The similarities between Egypt's sins in Yechezkel's time, and their future punishments, are what connects the haftara to the parasha. Egypt's bravado and reliance on the Nile that we read in the haftara, as well as Pharaoh's boast that he, a god, had formed the Nile, mirrors the Torah story of Pharaoh's boast that he did not "know" HaShem - and, therefore, had no reason to obey Him. The subsequent punishments that 'plagued' Egypt were G-d's response to Par'oh's denial of HaShem, as the text repeatedly explains "so he/they shall know that I am Hashem." Indeed, many of the plagues targeted the revered gods of Egypt: the Nile (blood and frogs), the animals (pestilence), the crops (locusts, hail) and the first-born. Chazal may have also seen in Yechezkel's declaration that Hashem promised that Egypt would become SH'MAMA, a desolate land, for forty years, as another connections to Israel's experience, as it brings to mind the forty years that

Israel spent in the desolate desert in their escape from Egypt.

In summation, the rabbinic decision to have this nevu'a read for this specific parasha reflects our belief that HaShem remembers, rewards and punishes, even after many generations. Immoral actions that are passed on from generation to generation mirrors a basic flaw in the basic belief of a corrupt culture. Such behavior, must be repaired.

Or HaShem will "repair" it as only He can. ✨