

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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This week's haftara echoes the message of the prophecy issued by Yechezkel, the one we read in last week's haftara. Like his younger contemporary, Yirmiyahu also prophesies the downfall of the Egyptian empire, a theme that connects the haftara to the defeat of Mitzrayim, i.e. the plagues that Egypt suffered leading to Israel's successful departure. However, Yirmiyahu also focuses upon Egypt's eventual recovery from her defeat, albeit a partial recovery, and only a limited restoration of her power. It is this theme of defeat and restoration that HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch sees as a message to the soon-to-be exiled Jewish community.

Rav Hirsch focuses on the fourth pasuk in the haftara (Yirmiyahu 26:17) and presents a unique explanation to the difficult verse. In that text, the navi states that a call went out to Par'oh saying: HEH-EVIR HA-MO'ED - "The appointed time has passed!" - a most difficult phrase to understand. R. Hirsch points to the events that were taking place at that time and

argues that the Par'oh Necho had tacit agreement with the northern Assyrian kingdom and had made his way north in order to assist them from the besieging Babylonians. By doing so, he felt that he could also catch the powerful Babylonian force and defeat them.

Ironically, his march northward was delayed by the confrontation with the Judean army Megido, a battle in which the righteous king Yoshiyahu, fell. But this encounter undermined the plan of the boastful king. Unbeknownst to Par'oh, Nineveh had already fallen to the Babylonians army. The Egyptians were "late"; "The appointed time has passed!" And so, when he reached the Euphrates River, he was met by the victorious Babylonian forces and was routed by them. The defeated Egyptian army fled back to Egypt. So devastating was the defeat at the Euphrates, that it seen by the surrounding nations as the beginning of the total collapse of Egypt's power, a collapse that was completed by the Babylonians at the battle at Carchemish.

So what does that have to do with the Jews?

Rav Hirsch argues that the story of the punishments that would be meted out to Egypt by Hashem, the

limited recovery that the once-great empire would see, the defeat of the powerful Assyrian Empire were ALL the will of G-d Who rules the fate of nations. To the Judean nation that would soon fall into the hands of the Babylonians and would be exiled from their land, this message was vital. Despite the oppression they might experience, despite the subjugation, the repression and the cruelty they might suffer, their knowledge that G-d rules the fate of all nations - even the most powerful empires - would help them survive the difficult exile. Let them learn that, while nations rise and nations fall, Hashem's power remains eternally.

And that, writes R. Hirsch, is what leads us to the most important teaching found in the final psukim of the haftarah. Yirmiyahu opens both of these last two verses with the words: "Al tirah, avdi Ya'akov," "Fear not My servant, Jacob." Hashem guarantees His people that He would release them from the Diaspora, return them back to their land, where they will live in safety and security. Hashem speaks of Israel as "My servant" and, as a result, He will obliterate her oppressors but never destroy her.

It was these encouraging words that the Yirmiyahu leaves with his nation

before they are scattered into exile: words of hope, words of consolation, words to remember. ✨