

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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HACHODESH

In the first two p'sukim of this week's haftara (according to the Ashkenazi minhag), the navi Yechezkel depicts the required gifts that the nation would give to the NASI - the king - and the required offerings that the king was required to bring on the holidays and on the Shabbatot as an atonement for the people. The remainder of the reading tells of the sacrifices to be offered and the rituals that would be followed from the beginning of the month of Nisan. Clearly, the bulk of the haftara connects quite well to the Shabbat before the month of Nisan. But it is difficult to understand why Ashkenazi practice includes the introductory verses that have little or no connection to the month of Nisan. Once again, we turn to the preceding p'sukim to help illuminate the message of the navi.

The final section of Sefer Yechezkel is one of comfort and consolation in which the prophet focuses on the future rites and rituals that would be followed in the final Beit HaMikdash.

In specifying the exact Temple areas reserved for the Kohanim, the Leviyim and the Nasi, - as well as their limits. In this 45th perek, Yechezkel takes the opportunity to recall the past trespasses of the different kings who often overstepped their bounds, frequently stealing and pilfering from the common people. In the future, he adds, there will be an end to such behavior, it would be a time of fair weights and measures in the land as well as in the Beit HaMikdash.

It is at this juncture that our haftara begins, with the navi sharing with the people what they would give to the nasi and the many responsibilities that the leader had to do for the people - including his duties to bring atonement to the nation. The addition of these few p'sukim, when properly understood, helps us better understand the message of Yechezkel - and extends the prophet's lesson to all his visions of the future of Divine service. Indeed, this introduction, and its previous verses, are not only meant for the coming month of Nisan and the holiday of Pesach, as we will see, but for the entire Messianic Era.

The prophet Yechezkel's visions of Israel's glorious future includes the rebirth of Israel's land, the resur-

gence of the nation's seemingly "dry bones", the reunification of the tribes and the final war of Gog and Magog (chapters 36-39). The navi then turns to detail the renewed service in the rebuilt Beit HaMikdash, including blueprinting the design and dimensions of the holy site, all of which would bring G-d's presence back to the Temple (40-43). In these latter chapters (44-46), Yechezkel describes the functions of the different segments of the people in the Mikdash, including the divisions of the Kohanim and Leviyim as well as the responsibilities of the King. The navi closes his book in the 47th and 48th chapters with a description of the future boundaries of the Land, its partition to the tribes and the new boundaries of Yerushalayim herself.

But the prophet's vision of the future life of Israel seems to focus primarily on the material: the practical workings of the divine service, the physical division of the land and the detailed depiction of the new Beit Mikdash. Where are the essential demands of all our prophets for MISHPAT UTZDAKA - justice and righteousness? Are these not indispensable values and vital requisites for fulfillment of the prophetic hope for an improved future? So where are they?

They are actually right in front of us or, more correctly, before us. The five verses that precede the opening of our haftara are replete with Hashem's demand to "set aside lawlessness... and do MISHPAT UTZDAKA - justice and righteousness". These were the demands that Yechezkel used to introduce the depiction of the great material successes and the religious advances.

There could be none of these without justice, without compassion, without righteousness. It might well have been the goal of the Ashkenazi scholars to open this haftara with the responsibilities of the future leaders to the nation in order to remind us that the idyllic future described by Yechezkel could only be realized when MISHPAT UTZDAKA is practiced one to another.

And we need such reminders today as well! ✨