

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

Author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)

Bamidbar - MACHAR CHODESH

VAYOMER LO YEHONATAN 'MACHAR CHODESH'...

The opening words of this week's haftara, now a commonly used phrase for Shabbat Erev Rosh Chodesh, are actually only the middle of a conversation between David and Yehonatan - his dear friend and brother-in-law. The story encapsulated in the haftara (Shmuel Alef 20: 18-42) is one that is familiar to most of us, as this selection is commonly read once a year, less often twice, and rarely thrice or not at all.

To quickly recap the story, David, fearing that his father-in-law, King Shaul, had plans to kill him, arranges a signal with Yehonatan to inform David whether or not he could safely return to the palace. While David remained hiding in the field, Yehonatan went back to the palace in time for the Rosh Chodesh repast. When the King expressed his anger at David's absence on the second day and accused David of being a rebel, in effect, condemning him to death, Yehonatan returns to his friend and,

using the agreed upon signal, warns him to flee for his life.

The story is simple enough. But, as is true of so many haftarot, much can be learned by scanning the psukim that precede the haftara itself. We should ask, therefore, what was the conversation between David and Yonatan that led to the plan that would be carried out of the morrow, Rosh Chodesh?

But, before we do so, we should, perhaps, consider the future actions of David and wonder why, despite Sha'uls numerous attempts to kill him and despite the many opportunities available to him, David refuses to harm his pursuer. David certainly had reason to do so. One is permitted -perhaps even commanded - to save himself from one who tries to kill him, even by taking his pursuers life! Given that truth, why does David avoid killing Sha'ul, even prohibiting his officers from doing so? Why?

That is why we must read the verses (starting from pasuk 14) that precede the haftara. There we reveal a remarkable covenant/oath that is made between the two heroes. Yonatan agrees to uncover whether or nor his father (Sha'ul) plans to harm David and promises that he would divulge the truth to his friend. After asserting his belief that David

would succeed in his struggles against his opponents ("...when Hashem destroys all of David's enemies..."), David takes an oath never to harm Yonatan or to destroy his royal family ("...nor remove your kindness from my family forever").

The story of David HaMelech begins in the 16th perek of Sefer Shmuel but the haftara of "Machar Chodesh" is the only one taken from the final 16 chapters on the book. And that is unfortunate. For the result of that fact is that those who rely on the haftara chant alone do not get to know the real story of David. How fortunate we are, then, that this episode is read often enough to allow us to get a "sense" of this remarkable personality.

So we shall repeat the questions we asked before - but his time with the knowledge of the answer:

Why does David refuse to kill Sha'ul who pursued him?

Why does he prohibit his officers from doing so - even in order to save his own life??

Why does he not attempt to remove Sha'ul's son from the throne of Israel once he was crowned?

Why does he put to death those who assassinated Sha'ul's son?

Because he made an oath to his

friend. And we can now better understand and appreciate the greatness of the man.

And, when we do, and see the model he set for generations, we also realize why... DAVID, MELECH YISRAEL, CHAI V'KAYAM

He lives today because the ethical standards he taught inspire us until today.

And all we had to do is read a few p'sukim before the haftara! ✨