

Bringing the Prophets to Life

**Weekly insights into the Haftara
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Vayeitzei

The final chapters of the Book of Hoshei'a from which our haftara is taken, reflect the basic theme of the entire book, that of teshuva, which explains why the last verses are included in the haftarot of both Shabbat Shuva and Yom Kippur. Although Hoshei'a, a contemporary of the navi Yishayahu, addresses his words to the soon-to-be-exiled Northern Kingdom, the region in which he himself lived, he has choice words of admonition for the Southern Kingdom of Yehuda as well.

Hoshei'a opens his words by bringing us back to the era of the forefathers and to the events recorded in our sedra. He reminds the nation that Ya'akov worked and protected - SHAMAR - Lavan's sheep in order to take in his beloved intended, Rachel, to his home. Using that same root word, the prophet reminds Israel that Hashem, through His prophet, also "worked" by protecting - NISHMAR - His beloved nation and releasing them from the Egyptian bondage, in order to bring them to His "home".

And yet, Israel, bemoans Hoshei'a, Israel, as opposed to the faithful Rachel, forgot Hashem's protection and kindnesses, and turned to other "gods".

HaRav Yehuda Shavit, however, takes a unique view of these words of Hoshei'a, focusing specifically upon that same "root" word SHIN-MEM-REISH. Rav Shavit reminds us of the opening story in Parashat Vayeishev that relates the growing friction within Ya'akov's family, friction that was amplified by Yosef's dreams of grandeur. Although Ya'akov publicly dismissed the dreams - even berating Yosef for sharing them, the text closes the story with the words V'AVIV SHAMAR ET HADAVAR, "and his father remembered the matter." Commenting on that word SHAMAR, Rashi contends that the word does not simply mean that Yaakov remembered the dreams of his son but that he looked forward to them being realized. In other words, SHAMAR should be understood as the father's longing and yearning for the fruition of Yosef's dreams

Based upon this approach, Rav Shavit suggests that the navi Hoshei'a was telling the people that, just as Ya'akov longed for his soon-to-be wife, and yearned to join with her, so G-d longs for His beloved nation and

yearns for them to return to Him! The nation's perfidy in their abandonment of Hashem would condemn them to suffer G-d's punishments, as Hoshei'a tells them. But perhaps equally tragic was their ignorance of how much Hashem desired them to return to Him and how He longed for their closeness. The harsh words of the navi that Hashem, the protector of His "sheep" will be forced to become its destroyer ("...I shall devour them like a lion...") stands in contrast to the words of Yaakov to Lavan that, in all the years, he never brought back a torn lamb to his father-in-law. Yet underlying these punishments was the painful reluctance of G-d to chastise the nation He loves, and does so only so that they would eventually understand, repent and return.

Only when we understand this message of how Hashem is SHOMEIR - protecting AND yearning for - his nation, can we appreciate the closing p'sukim calling for Israel to repair the rift. Hoshe'a's cry SHUVA YISRAEL, urging Israel to return, fittingly echoes the word of G-d to Yisrael/Yaakov found in the parasha: SHUV EL ERETZ AVOTECHA, "return to your ancestral land." In truth, our return to G-d will be fully realized with our return to ERETZ AVOTECHA, our ancestral land.

And all we need to do is look at the massive return to Israel and the miracle of its survival and growth in order to see how much our SHOMEIR has longed for us. ✨