

Bringing the Prophets to Life

**Weekly insights into the Haftara
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Better Than We Were?

Over these past two articles in which we discussed the first two of the T'LAT D'PUR'ANUTA - three chapters of tragedy, we focused on the prophetic personalities, comparing Yirmiyahu to Moshe Rabbeinu and contrasting Yirmiyahu to Yishayahu. As we turn to the third selection of these haftarot, the one taken from Sefer Yishayahu, I feel it necessary to clarify what some may have considered my "misrepresentation" of the holy navi, Yishayahu. In developing the personality of Yirmiyahu as an OHEIV YISRA'EL, one whose love for Israel could be found in the very tenor of his words of censure - I compared his opening messages to the rather harsh opening prophecies of Yishayahu - I may have given you the impression that Yishayahu was not such an OHEIV YISRA'EL (chas v'shalom).

Nothing could be further from the truth.

As the next seven haftarot of consolation, the SHIVA D'N'CHEMTA (all selections from Sefer Yishayahu)

can unquestionably affirm, that he was the "Prophet of Comfort". As such, it would be blasphemous to even suggest that the prophet lacked any love or sensitivity to his people. And, if so, why were his opening condemnations so severe in tone?

I would submit that the dissimilarities between the messages of the two great seers are based upon the different eras in which they functioned and the clear distinctions between the respective communities they addressed.

Yishayahu began his service during the Assyrian invasion of Israel that, soon led to the exile of the northern tribes. The collapse of the ten-tribe monarchy was of no surprise to the navi. Sefer M'lachim records twenty Judean kings who ruled after the division of the kingdom, of which eight were considered righteous (YASHAR B'EINEI HASHEM). It also records twenty Israelite kings in the northern kingdom of which NOT ONE was considered YASHAR B'EINEI HASHEM. Unquestionably, the moral corruption of the leadership in Shomron (northern kingdom) defined the kingdom's very culture - and made the presaged exile become a reality.

Although Yishayahu prophesied to both populations, he witnessed, in his early years, the downfall of the ten tribes and saw their exile as a clear

warning to Judea of what could befall them. In reviewing the first half of our haftara, I sense that many the navi's words of censure focus upon the immorality of the northern Kingdom of Shomron. The depiction of Israel as being rebellious, sinful and corrupt describes well the behavior of the north who had been worshiping false deities since their first King, Yerov'am, set up two golden calves in Dan and Beit El. In contrast, the kingdom of Yehuda at that time, had been ruled by a series four righteous kings, Yeho'ash, Amatzya, Uziyahu and Yotam, a period of over one-hundred years! It is difficult to imagine that Yishayahu would have described that community as being "weighed down by iniquity", "an evil offspring" or a nation that had "forsaken G-d".

In the second part of the haftara, however, Yishayahu directs his harsh warnings to the southern kingdom, calling out against BAT TZIYON, "Zion". It is here that the prophet decries their sacrifices as meaningless, their Temple services as abominations and that their prayers were fruitless for their hands were "covered with blood". Clearly, these horrors reflect events that centered around Yerushalayim and the Beit HaMikdash, and the navi's cry: EICHA HAY'TA L'ZONA - KIRYA NE'EMANA - "How has the [once] faithful city become adulterous?" is an obvious

reference to Jerusalem.

This non-dated, book-opening prophecy, one that is widely accepted as actually being a later nevu'a, might be seen as a combination of two different visions given at different times, thereby explaining the dual-focused messages. However, I believe that it was one directed specifically at the Judean nation of the latter years. Yishayahu introduces his condemnation by depicting the fate of their corrupt, exiled brethren, in the hope of awakening the people to understand how Hashem's sees them, to have them step back and realize that, though they may regard themselves as the chosen nation for worshiping in His House... G-d considers them no better than their exiled brothers!

It is for this reason that the ancient scholars chose this perek to be a "wake-up" call on this Shabbat before Tish'a b'Av. And when we look back upon the sins of past generations, perhaps we should contemplate: "Are we any better?"

Or, even, are WE really any better than WE once were? ✨