

Message from the Haftara

Rabbi Katriel (Kenneth) Brander

Rewriting Our Prophetic Story

HAFTARA OF VAYEISHEV

In the background of the current conflict looms a deeper crisis that threatens the very fabric of our society. Even before the current war, one in five Israelis was already living below the poverty line. Those numbers have only increased as small business owners have been displaced or mobilized and tourism has been decimated.

Add to that a growing societal rift, as certain segments of the population shoulder the entire burden of the fighting while others do all in their power to desist, causing more polarization among the citizens and the political camps.

But this isn't just a contemporary scene - it's actually a rerun of the prophecy of Amos, one of Israel's earliest prophets, which makes up this week's haftara. Amos decried a society in which the wealthy systematically exploited the poor and internal divisions threatened to tear a community apart. Thousands of years later, has nothing changed?

In order to reflect on this perennial crisis, let us reflect on the general

purpose of the haftara and why it was established.

Rabbi David Abudraham, a 14th century Spanish Jewish communal leader and expert on liturgy, in his magnum opus, *Sefer Abudraham*, writes about the institution of the haftara:

And after [completing] and wrapping the Torah scroll, we read the haftara; which needs to be connected to the [Torah] portion of the day. And why do we read from the Prophets? Because of the legislation imposed upon the Jewish people forbidding them from reading from the Torah... (Laws of Shabbat, Shacharit).

Rabbi Yoel Sirkes, one of the great 17th century Talmudic scholars in his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* known as the BACH, (an acronym for Bayit Chadash), concurs with the opinion found in the *Sefer Abudraham*.

Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, in his 17th century commentary on the Mishna, the *Tosafot Yom Tov*, further develops this idea, suggesting that the particular persecution causing the introduction of the haftara happened during the historical period of the Chanuka miracle.

When the Greek Emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes prohibited reading from the Torah, the Rabbis instituted that sections from the Prophets be read

focusing on a theme similar to the Torah portion:

The reason for the haftarot ...that Antiochus king of Greece legislated that the Torah should not be read in public. What did the Jews do? They chose a section from the Prophets that was thematically similar to the Torah portion of the week. Even though this [anti-semitic] legislation has been annulled, the custom [of reading from the Prophets] was not discarded (Megila 3:4).

For this reason, haftarot are intended to leave us hopeful, with each haftara complete with verses of redemption. It is also why the brachot of the haftara focus on redemption. Therefore, haftarot, even those with harsh or mournful messages like that read on Tish'a b'Av, always contain a positive, optimistic note.

It is against this backdrop that we approach the haftara for Parshat Vayeishev. The Rav (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik), in an address delivered in 1980, noted the unusual character of this haftara, which has no encouraging end to contrast with its dreary opening. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes, "The final words of each haftara express the idea that no matter how dismal our present situation, Israel can look ahead to a bright future. [...] This haftara is the one exception" (Divrei Hashkafa, 30-34).

Amos, one of the earliest prophets, does not mince words in calling out the thievery and corruption that has overtaken the kingdom of Israel, with the wealthy extorting money from the impoverished. "The idea expressed here", Rav Soloveitchik states of this choice of haftara, "is that the community that acts corruptly is fit for punishment and censure" (ibid.). The opening line of the prophecy, which speaks of 'the sale of the righteous for money', (Amos 2:6) was read by our Sages as a reference to the sale of Yosef which appears in our parsha (Pirkei d'Rabi Eliezer #37).

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that even when the Sages read Amos's words in reference to Yosef, they don't mean to deny the literal meaning of the verse. On the contrary, they are coming to highlight a crucial idea: that national corruption is not merely a passing phase in our history. The forms of contempt for one another, and for principles of justice, that repeatedly lead to violence between us have a deeply embedded history, signaling a great need for reflection and change.

As far back as we can trace, to the brothers who would go on to produce the tribes of Israel, there has been internal strife producing baseless hatred, theft and corruption, bringing about our own doom and destruction.

This is not a reason to lose hope; and it is surely not a reason to continue with our same comfortable patterns. We must take control, and take chances, much in the way the Maccabees did by lighting the tiny amount of oil they found, and as our modern Maccabees do today, willingly sacrificing all on the battlefield and the homefront to ensure that the light in our skies isn't coming from missiles but from the energy of a purposeful society.

In “those times”, it was the right thing to do, no matter how improbable it seemed that the oil would last even one night. And in “our time”, it has helped guarantee our immortality as a nation. With God’s help we should all make increased efforts to love our neighbors, serve those in need and act with humility. Only that will help us begin to heal our rifts. 📖🔥