

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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Bo - 16 p'sukim - Yirmiyahu 46:13-28

Listen ... and Learn

This week we have the unique opportunity of reading a haftara that includes a nevu'a of Yirmiyahu that parallels the nevu'a of his younger contemporary, Yechezkel - which we read in last week's haftara. Both prophets share Hashem's vision of the devastating defeat that Egypt would suffer in the hands of Bavel, the powerful empire, and her king, Nevuchadretzar. Likewise, both prophets foretell the punishments that would befall the surrounding enemies of Israel, with Yirmiyahu focusing upon eleven specific nations, beginning with Egypt.

As both the parshiyot of Va'eira and Bo speak of the plagues that Egypt suffered as punishment for their sins, it is understandable that their accompanying haftarot would focus on the ruin and defeat wrought upon Egypt for her sins, hundreds of years later. It is also interesting to note that Chazal saw yet another connection of this prophetic reading to the weekly parasha, in the fact that Yirmiyahu declares how the

Babylonian enemy would overrun the Egyptian empire, being "more numerous than locust". In similar fashion our parasha opens by describing the plague of locust that swarmed over, and ravaged, Egypt.

In order for us to fully understand this nevu'a of Egypt's defeat, we must realize that its roots are found in a battle that took place some years before the prophecy, a battle that deeply impacted the Jewish nation.

In the final years of the righteous King Yoshiyahu, Par'o N'cho led his Egyptian army to Ashur in order to challenge the Assyrian Empire. In order to do so, he planned to march through Israel, assuring Yoshiyahu that he had no designs against Judea itself. Nonetheless, the Judean monarch ignored Hashem's word and, instead, followed his counsellors' advice, leading his army to Megiddo in an attempt to block the Pharaoh's entry into Assyria. As a result, Yoshiyahu was killed in his battle against the Egyptians, tragically ending the rule of the last righteous king of Yehuda. During the four years of battle between Assyria and Egypt, the nascent Babylonian Empire grew in strength and eventually defeated Par'o and the Egyptian army. And it was at this time that Yirmiyahu addresses his words of prophecy to both Egypt and Bavel.

Yirmiyahu shares his vision of a panicked Egyptian army attempting to flee back to Egypt but being caught and destroyed by the Babylonians. Our haftara then begins describing the invasion of the Babylonians and the destruction of Egypt - all in repayment for its killing of Yoshiyahu and its failure to support Judea when she was under siege.

The haftara's message, therefore, was not simply one of Egypt's defeat and punishment. Once we understand the background to Yirmiyahu's words we realize that, underlying the obvious message, lies another: The Egyptian Pharaoh had ignored Hashem's demands and Yoshiyahu had ignored Hashem's charge - and both of them fell.

As a result, we may find the words of comfort offered to Israel after her defeat and loss of her king as being given at a seemingly inappropriate time. But the closing words of our haftara carry a crucial message for all future generations. These ancient enemies would be punished and would disappear. But Hashem reminds Israel that, despite the persecutions and oppression, despite the pogroms and libels, despite the murders and inquisitions - we are THE Eternal Nation. Those who attack us will be relegated to the ash heaps of history while we will survive

to return and to rebuild. And all we need to do is listen to G-d's word. ✨