

Rosh HaShana Torah Readings & Haftarot

First Day

First Torah - 34 p'sukim - B'reishit 21:1-34

Five people are called to the Torah

According to Tradition, Sara Imeinu was "remembered" on Rosh HaShana. She became pregnant, and subsequently gave birth to Yitzchak, despite her advanced age of 90. On the first day of Rosh HaShana we read B'reishit 21, from Vayeira, about the birth and early years of Yitzchak, and about the Sara-Hagar-Yishmael episode.

The last part of this reading is about the treaty made between Avraham and Avimelech. Commentaries point out that it was in the merit of the prayers of Avraham on behalf of the people of Avimelech's household, that his (Avraham's) and Sara's prayers for themselves were answered. This fits with one of the powerful themes and messages of RH, namely the power of prayer, in general, and of communal prayer, in particular. Almost always, we pray in plural.

2nd Torah - 6 p'sukim - Bamidbar 29:1-6

Maftir, from Parshat Pinchas, is about the Rosh HaShana Musaf (also mentioning the Musaf of Rosh Chodesh - a rare mention on RH of the

fact that it is also Rosh Chodesh Tishrei) and the mitzva of Shofar blowing.

Haftara - 38 p'sukim - Shmuel Alef 1:1-2:10

The haftara echoes and reinforces the theme of the Power of Prayer, by giving us another example of a "barren matriarch" who conceived after praying. It is the story of Chana, mother of Shmuel HaNavi.

The silent nature of the Amida is attributed to Chana and the way she prayed at the Mishkan.

Second Day

First Torah - 24 p'sukim - B'reishit 22:1-24

We continue reading from where we left off on the first day. Five people are called to the Torah in the first Sefer. Perek 22 is the portion of the Akeida. It is arguably the most dramatic and emotion-evoking portion of the whole Torah. Tradition tells us that the Akeida took place on Rosh HaShana. ZICHRONOT is one of the three major themes of Rosh Hashana, and the Akeida is the main element of ZICHRONOT. Not only is it the topic of the Torah reading, but it is the basis of the choice of Shofar -- namely, the Ram's Horn -- and it is an oft repeated theme in davening.

We stand before G-d on Yom HaDin and we proclaim that we are not only the biological descendants of Avraham and Yitzchak (and Yaakov), but their spiritual heirs as well. We are not just telling stories; we are inspired to emulate our fore-fathers and develop a total commitment to G-d and Torah.

2nd Torah - 6 p'sukim - Bamidbar 29:1-6

Same as the first day. See there.

Haftara - 19 p'sukim - Yirmiyahu 31:2-20

Again, we find one of the matriarchs who was without child for a long time. This time, Rachel Imeinu represents the people of Israel, more specifically, the kingdom of Israel, under the flag of Efrayim, who are in bad shape in their countries of Exile. The closing words of the Haftara contain G-d's promise of mercy.

The return of the people to Eretz Yisrael - as in, V'SHAVU VANIM LIGVULAM, is one meaning of T'SHUVA, and is seen as going hand-in-hand with the "other" form of return - of the people to G-d.

The readings of Rosh HaShana are not just Bible stories and we shouldn't take them as such. We read about an amazing love relationship between G-d and His people, us. Emotion is the key. We need to "open up" on Rosh HaShana, so that we can see the vital nature of T'shuva and of our membership in Klal Yisrael. And it is not just we who must warm to the relationship between HaShem and Am Yisrael. G-d too, so to speak, will hopefully respond to the feelings He has always had for us, and relate to us as He related to the Avot and Imahot.