

Message from the Parsha

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Three Engines of Destiny

HAFTARA of LECH L'CHA

The connection between this week's haftara and the parsha is not immediately obvious. The haftara, from the Book of Yishayahu and focused on a prophecy of love and encouragement, does contain one passing mention of the patriarch Avraham – the parsha's protagonist. Yet the more striking parallel to the parsha's account of the founding of the Jewish people appears not in that verse, but in the cryptic passage that immediately precedes it, at the beginning of chapter 41 (vv. 1–4):

Hush before Me, coastlands and nations; renew your strength, and then come forward, speak, draw close; let us come into judgment. Who roused the one from the east and called victory to his feet? Who herded nations before him, laid their kings low, and made his swords numerous as dust, his bowshots like chaff in the wind? He pursued them and came through in peace on paths that his feet never walked. Who was it who acted and did this, who called forth generations long before? I, the Lord, am the first, and I shall be, I, with the last who will be.

The reference to this mysterious savior “from the east” has fired the imaginations of commentators throughout the ages. Who this figure might be has been intensely debated, and these different suggestions together reveal a valuable lesson: Multiple forces in history can converge to create the necessary conditions for redemption. It is a process that continues to play out before our eyes today, even during the difficult years since the attacks of October 7 and the multi-front threats faced by Israel and the Jewish people, not only from neighboring countries, but from antisemitism globally.

The prophet Yishayahu describes an unnamed individual called from the east by God to achieve victory over numerous nations and bring an era of peace and prosperity to Israel. But is this an event that has already happened? Or one that is yet to come? The original Hebrew text leaves this question open. Commentators have offered three possible figures for this mighty easterner, each representing a different paradigm of redemption.

According to Rashi (ad loc., following B'reishit Rabba 43:3), the prophet is referring to Avraham Avinu. Rashi explains that the Jewish people's oldest patriarch was called out of the east by God to journey to the land of

Canaan in the paramount act of faith. Avraham marked military victories over ancient Levantine kings (see B'reishit 14), but more importantly, he became a spiritual champion for everyone around him, serving as a model of justice and righteousness that inspired an entire civilization and reintroduced God into the world. As the first Jew, Avraham exemplified an authentic version of chosen-ness, highlighting the responsibilities, rather than the privileges, of being selected by God.

Ibn Ezra, in contrast, suggests that the savior celebrated in our haftara is in actuality King Cyrus of Persia. This great non-Jewish emperor is celebrated in the Scriptures as a deliverer who conquered and punished the Babylonian tyrants responsible for the first destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and the Temple. The text portrays Cyrus, whose empire extended over much of the Near East, as graciously inviting the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their shattered homeland. In performing these acts of kindness – knowingly or not – Cyrus was advancing God's plan for the Jewish people's sacred destiny.

A third possibility, found in the Midrash (Shir HaShirim Zuta 2:9), envisions the mysterious figure as the Mashi'ach. Emerging from the east like the rising sun, the Messianic King will usher in a new dawn for the

Jewish people and the world. According to this interpretation, Justice will prevail, and the Jewish people will finally know true peace, spreading the light of God and the Torah to the farthest reaches of the world.

History shows the necessity and utility of all three of these prototypes in furthering the process of redemption. The Jewish people, embodying Avraham's model of moral and spiritual leadership, must choose every day to uphold justice and responsibility. Leaders of other nations around the world, symbolized by Cyrus, can similarly facilitate or hamper God's vision for the world by supporting or opposing the people of Israel in their sacred work. Lastly, the divine hand of God in history, personified by the Mashi'ach, guides the world, sometimes mysteriously and convolutedly, toward its ultimate purpose.

In our times, we have seen all three paradigms converging marvelously and miraculously in the great and terrible multi-front war that still continues today, even though some relief has been achieved by the recent return of the remaining living hostages from Gaza. We have seen the Jewish people choose, time and again, the path of justice and morality in war, standing as a beacon of what humanity can be and become even in the most difficult of circumstances.

These choices are only the latest in a longstanding tradition of moral, intellectual, and scientific leadership that the Jewish people have shown in the world at large, always in the interest of furthering peace and prosperity.

At the same time, certain world leaders have stepped forward, standing up in the face of overwhelming global hate and antisemitism in support of the State of Israel. To be such a leader in today's world is still to move against the tide, but that makes such individuals' decisions all the more impressive and noteworthy. They are modern Cyruses, choosing to be instruments of God in the world and history, and they will be viewed as such by future generations.

And finally, we have seen the hand of God revealed in the innumerable miracles, occurrences, happenstances, and coincidences that have saved so many lives over the past two years and which have made the Jewish future seem more assured now than at any other time in recent history.

More than three thousand years have passed since Avraham first embarked on the Jewish mission. And, at every moment since that time, the forces of history – natural and human, seen and unseen – have never ceased to advance that mission toward the state of redemption that we all await.

Let us pray that the process of salvation that we have begun to witness comes swiftly to its conclusion, and that we will all merit to witness the fulfillment of God's words of comfort that we hear in the Haftara this week:

"I strengthen you and help you, uphold you with My right hand of righteousness" (Yishayahu 41:10). 