

Message from the Haftara

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The Divergence of Traditions in Selecting a Haftara

VAYEITZEI

Haftarat Vayetzei is unusual in the curious divergence between what Sephardic (Eidot Mizrach) and Ashkenazic Jews read, with each reading a different section of the prophecy of Hoshei'a. Sephardic communities read from 11:7-12:12, whereas Ashkenazim begin the haftara at 12:13, and read until 14:10. Nowhere else do we find two traditions whose haftara passages sit exactly back-to-back, with no overlap (some Sephardic communities have modified the tradition to include some minimal overlap). Clearly, the different rites reflect two very different centers of thematic gravity. If we can discern the differences between the themes and content of these two readings, we can learn valuable insights not only into the words of the prophets, but also into the contrasting facets of Yaakov's life, which echo our own complex reality as Jews and as members of society.

The Sephardic reading, which starts earlier in Hoshei'a's prophecy, does not directly address Yaakov's life events that form the core of our parsha. Instead, it speaks of Yaakov and the major events in his life in broader strokes: "In the womb he grasped his brother by the heel, and with all his strength he struggled with God" (12:4). These two episodes – Yaakov's birth and his battle with the angel – occur in the parashot that precede and follow ours. They are referenced by the prophet here because they both highlight moments of conflict and struggle. Yaakov Avinu's life, from the beginning, was shaped by battles against those stronger than him, most notably Eisav; according to the Sages, even the angel with whom Yaakov wrestled was the guardian angel of his older twin (Rashi, B'reishit 32:25).

This life of struggle often compelled Yaakov to engage in acts of evasiveness and even deception, qualities that, Hoshei'a laments, were unfortunately passed down to his descendants: "Efrayim besieges Me with lies, the House of Israel with deception" (12:1); "Still the merchant possesses false scales; he loves to exploit" (12:8). These themes of guile and cunning and their problematic nature stand at the center of our parsha as well, as Yaakov and Lavan strive to outwit one another in their family and business dealings.

These themes are deeply relevant in and of themselves. They are central to our relationship with God, in which honesty and authenticity are paramount – and yet elusive. They are important subjects of contemplation for Jews who, in all ages and contexts, face adversaries, impossible odds, and the tension between integrity and survival. It is therefore these themes that lay at the heart of the ancient decision of many communities to read this first section as the haftara, even though it does not explicitly reference the parsha's events. Its message calls on us to learn from the failures seen in the Torah and haftara and strengthen our relationship with God and society.

By contrast, the haftara read by Ashkenazic communities begins with an account more directly and obviously related to our parsha: "Yaakov fled to the lands of Aram, and Yisrael labored to acquire a bride; for a bride he kept sheep" (12:13). This captures the Torah narrative that we have just read: Yaakov flees his brother's wrath to stay in Aram and works fourteen years in exchange for the right to marry Lavan's daughters Rachel and Leah.

But the prophetic message is more subtle than a simple retelling. Yaakov's diligence in working for his family contrasts sharply with the later faithlessness of his descendants

in the Kingdom of Israel. Alternatively, as some commentators have suggested, God's providential care for Yaakov during his most vulnerable years stands in jarring opposition to Israel's ingratitude in times of national prosperity. This tension stands at the heart of why Ashkenazic communities chose this passage; it anchors the haftara firmly in the parsha's events, while inviting us to consider the moral and spiritual implications.

Both customs treat the reader as thoughtful and mature, capable of tracing the connections and drawing meaning from the nuances of the text. In one approach, we consider the attributes of cleverness and guile, their historical use, and the price we pay for them. After all, the blessings stolen through deceit are never actually realized, and the use of such deception compromises the integrity of our values.

In the other approach, the events of the parsha serve as a window through which to observe the contrast between Yaakov's loyalty and his descendants' betrayal. Both of these lessons, and the interpretive methods behind them, are acutely worth remembering as we hold up our forefathers, their stories and their complex legacies as signposts for our own continuing journey. 