Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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Questions for the Past; Questions for the Future

SH'KALIM 17 p'sukim
- Melachim Bet 12:1-17
(S'faradim start 4 p'sukim earlier)

The Shabbat of, or before, Rosh Chodesh Adar (the Adar which precedes Pesach) is designated by the Gemara in Megila as the first of the "special" parshiot that herald the arrival of Pesach and require a special reading for the Maftir and, consequently, for the haftara as well. The selection for Shabbat Sh'kalim is taken from the twelfth perek of Melachim Bet and tells the story of the repair of the Beit HaMikdash in the days of King Yeho'ash.

As the special Maftir reading calls for the half-shekel head tax to be gathered from all of Israel, so the haftara tells of the "fund-raising" campaign demanded by the king in order to restore and reinforce the Holy Temple. As the half-shekel tax was used for the purchase of communal sacrifices, thereby ensuring that the entire community had a share in these offerings, so the voluntary donations made by the entire nation in the days of Yeho'ash reinforced the idea that ALL of Israel had a share in the Beit HaMikdash.

It is, however, the entire story of King Yeho'ash, a tragic story that is NOT found in Sefer Melachim - that should be learned as well. In Divrei HaYamim Bet 22-24, we learn the details of the life of King Yeho'ash. When his grandmother, the wicked Queen Atalya, killed off the royal family in order to consolidate her hold upon the throne of Yehuda. The infant Yeho'ash, the son of the former king Achazyahu, was the rightful heir to the throne and was saved from certain death through the courageous actions of his aunt Yehoshav'at, the wife of the Kohen Gadol, Yehoyada. This righteous couple hid the infant in the Beit HaMikdash until he was seven years old, at which time his existence was revealed to the nation. The population, most of whom reviled the "illegitimate" queen who had usurped the throne, quickly deposed her and placed the young child upon the throne. Yeho'ash was brought up, educated and trained by Yehoyada (note the opening words of our haftara) and, throughout that time, followed righteous ways of his mentor.

When Yehoyada died at the age of 130, the king fell under the influence of the corrupt Judean nobility who convinced him to abandon Temple worship and pray to the false gods of

the surrounding nations. Hashem sent His prophets to admonish Yeho'ash, among them Zecharya (not to be confused with the prophet of the Second Temple period), the son of Yehoyada, the very man who saved the king's life. Yeho'ash ignored the many kindnesses done for him by his mentors and he ordered that Yeho-yada's son, Zecharya, be stoned to death! So ends the story of the once righteous king who restored the Beit HaMikdash.

I include the painful story of Yeho'ash - despite its omission from our haftara - because, to a certain degree, this bittersweet story evokes parallels to the Purim story. The successful fund-raising campaign that the King led in order to repair and rebuild the Beit HaMikdash, did not succeed, however, in its essential purpose: to renew Temple worship and return the nation to G-d.

Likewise, one can argue that the story of Purim has its own "bitter-sweet" epilogue. We celebrate the hidden miracles wrought by Hashem, that effected the survival of the Jewish community in Persia. But… what happened then? Like the story of Yeho'ash in Sefer M'lachim, the Megila does not finish the saga! Did the Jews of Shushan realize how unstable life could be for Jews in the Diaspora? Did they join in a large return to Yerushalayim to worship, once again, in the newly-built Beit HaMikdash? Or did they remain in galut for over 2000 years? Simply put: Were Hashem's Purim miracles meant only to save Persia's Jews or might there have been a more essential purpose?

This week's haftara posed questions for the past. Purim's Megila might very well be posing questions for the future! ✡