

Message from the Haftara

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The Pauper's Offering

VAYIKRa

The opening chapters of Sefer Vayikra introduce the sacrificial system - the intricate framework through which an individual sought forgiveness and built or restored their relationship with God. At first glance, these rites may seem distant from our contemporary religious lives. Yet embedded in these opening chapters is a subtle spiritual distinction so theologically charged that the Sages treat it as one of the Torah's most powerful statements - one that speaks directly to how we approach God even today.

When the Torah describes the ordinary person who brings an animal offering in chapter 1, it uses the word ADAM - the standard term for a human being: "When one of you [ADAM] brings an animal offering to the Lord..." (1:2). But in chapter 2, which addresses grain offerings, the Torah shifts its language. It no longer says ADAM; it says NEFESH - meaning "soul", or "self": "When one [NEFESH] brings a grain offering to the Lord..." (2:1).

The Gemara in tractate Menachot

(104b) notices this shift and interprets it in light of the fact that grain offerings tended to be brought by those of limited means, who could not afford an animal sacrifice. In the Gemara's reading, when one with so little to give makes the effort to bring even the most modest of offerings, God regards it as though he has offered his very soul [NEFESH].

This point is made even more forcefully in Vayikra Rabba (3:1), which asserts that the grain offering of a poor man is more precious to God than the most elaborate incense brought on behalf of the entire community. What makes it so is not its monetary worth but the purity of intention it represents - the willingness to give all of oneself even in times of great duress and want.

This contrast between ADAM and NEFESH - between outward ritual practice and genuine self-offering - is precisely what this week's haftara addresses on a national scale. Drawn from Yeshayahu chapters 43 and 44, it confronts the Jewish people at a moment of spiritual deprivation. Like the ADAM of chapter 1, they are present in form but may be absent in substance. Their religious practice has become hollow. God's rebuke is direct and stinging: "It is not Me you call for, Yaakov; Israel, you wearied of Me. You did not bring Me the lamb of your offering; it was not Me your

sacrifice honored” (43:22–23). This is not a people that has stopped sacrificing altogether. It is a people that sacrifices without meaning it - going through the motions of religious life while remaining spiritually detached.

And yet - and this is the pivot at the heart of the haftara - God does not abandon us. The very next verses are not a verdict but an astonishing declaration of grace: “I am I, who expunge your offenses for My own sake and will not keep your sins in mind” (v. 25). The forgiveness is not contingent on the people having earned it. It is offered for the sake of God Himself. The covenant does not wait for the Jewish people to become deserving before it holds.

Yeshayahu names the depth of the problem unflinchingly. “Your first father sinned”, he says (v. 27) - a reference some commentators identify with Avraham, who in a moment of uncertainty asked, “My Lord God, how shall I know that I will possess it?” (B'reishit 15:8), revealed that even the greatest patriarch was not beyond doubt and faltering. If the founding father himself fell short, how much more so a people in the depths of political and spiritual crisis? Yeshayahu does not look away from this, but he pivots immediately to consolation: “And now listen, Yaakov My servant, Israel whom I

chose” (44:1). Even now, the relationship has not lapsed.

This arc - frank acknowledgment of failure, followed by unconditional reaffirmation - is not incidental to the haftara. In truth, it is one reason the whole institution of the haftara exists. When foreign rulers prohibited the public reading of the Torah in synagogues, the Sages instituted the reading of prophetic portions in its place. The haftara was born out of persecution, and it carries that origin in its purpose: to say that even when access to the sacred is impeded, even when the people have fallen short of what they could be, the relationship endures. The glass is half full - not because the problems are not real, but because the love that holds the Jewish people close to God is greater than their failures.

That message has not aged. We live in a period of genuine difficulty - conflict, communal fracture, searching questions about the kind of society we are building in the land to which we have returned. There are moments when the mirror Yeshayahu holds up to ancient Israel feels uncomfortably familiar. We are not always bringing the NEFESH offering; sometimes we bring the ADAM offering - present in body, absent in soul.

But the haftara refuses to end on that note. The covenant between God and Knesset Yisrael is not transactional. It

does not expire when we fall short. It holds - not because of what we have achieved, but because of who He is, and who we have always been to each other. That is the promise Yeshayahu asks us to carry out of shul and into the week ahead. 🌟