

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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Emor

There is an old joke (?) that, after Moshe Rabbeinu shattered the Luchot, the people began to pick up the pieces left from the broken tablets. One group picked up the side of the stone tablet that said: LO, LO LO - "You cannot", "You may not", "You shall not" - and built their faith on that. The other group picked up the other side of the tablets and read what remained: "Steal", "Testify falsely", "Covet" ... and carefully followed those laws.

Because, you see, the smallest word can make the most difference.

When trying to understand this week's haftara, we best pay attention to one LETTER - the first one, VAV. Our reading from Sefer Yechezkel (44:15-31) closely parallels the very first theme of our parasha, i.e., the sanctified position placed upon the kohanim. The Torah details many laws that pertain to the obligation of the Kohanim to retain a lifestyle even more sacred than that of others and the obligation of the people to revere them as the attendants of Hashem.

Likewise, the haftara tells of how the Kohanim, descendants of Tzadok who retained that sanctified behavior and holy lifestyle required of them, would continue to serve Hashem and the people in the future.

But what about the VAV?

Well, were we to study the first fifteen psukim of this perek that precede the haftara, we would learn that the kohanim of Yechezkel's time were NOT those who faithfully carried out the mitzvot commanded to them in the parasha. These earlier verses describe how the Kohanim had, like the masses, fallen into idolatry, even serving false gods, so that the navi describes them as B'NEI NEICHAR - foreigners, strangers. As a result, Hashem denies them the right to serve as full Kohanim anymore, relegating them only to attending to - but not actually performing - the ritual rites (Sefer Yechezkel 44:11-12).

V'HAKOHANIM - HOWEVER... the Kohanim descended from Tzadok were the exception to that rule. The haftara, therefore, takes on more significance, underscoring a most important truth about Kedusha - i.e. it is granted by Hashem but can be lost by Man. The very same lesson taught by the prophet Amos in the haftara we would have read last

Shabbat, had it not been Machar Chodesh: Kedusha is a privilege that can be retained only by meeting its challenges.

HaRav Soloveitchik adds an equally important lesson taught by the haftara. He asks: "What new laws or ideas regarding the obligation of the kohanim does the navi add in this message? The Rav explains that, years after Yechezkel issued his message to Israel, when Ezra led the return from Galut, he struggled to reinstitute the state of purity to the kehuna. In Babylonia, many Kohanim had intermarried and Ezra had removed them from the Kehuna, and when he arrived in Yerushalayim, he found the same was true.

What G-d had Yechezkel impart to the people - and what Ezra reminded them years later - was that the Kehuna, would exist even after Galut and even after the destruction of the Temple. The sanctity and purity of the kehuna is the cornerstone to the holiness of Israel.

Kedusha does not depend of a Mikdash; it depends on the Am Kadosh. ✨