Educating a People: An *Haftarah* Companion As a Way of Finding a Theology of Judaism

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Introduction: Reconnecting to the *Haftarot*

Two goals dovetailed in writing this book. First, and perhaps primarily since it takes up the majority of this work, was the neglect of the *haftarot* among modern Jews. Starting with the time of the Mishnah, Jewish tradition assumed that selections of the Prophets should be read as an accompaniment to the public reading of the Torah.[1] Outside of the Pentateuch and the Book of Esther (or the other Megillot, according to Ashkenazic custom), these are the sole selections of Scripture which Jewish tradition mandated to read in public.

Haftarot have fallen on hard times today. In almost every synagogue I have attended, people daydream, talk to a neighbor, or leave the Sanctuary for a break (such as at a Kiddush club) during the reading of the *haftarot*. Perhaps because the text is less familiar than the Torah itself, or just because the obligation to participate seems less technically grounded, Jews allow themselves to ignore the *haftarot* or, worse, to mistreat their public reading.

Several years ago, I began emailing some interested congregants a discussion of the *haftarah* in an attempt to revive interest in these examples of God's Word. The first emails were long, taking up every interesting idea I could find in rabbinic discussions of the text. I found, however, that the length and convoluted presentation were distracting to readers. Eventually, I came to the form used here, a thousand-odd word essay on each *haftarah*, with section headings to help the reader.

[1] See M. Megillah 31a and the ensuing discussion in the Talmud. That Mishnah might only call for reading an *haftarah* on holidays and special Sabbaths; when and how the weekly reading of *haftarot* came about is not clear, as Michael Fishbane notes in .

My goal in those essays was and is fairly minimal. I seek to summarize the content of the selection, paying attention to where it started and ended, and then to see if that summary led to an understanding of why this selection fit either the Torah reading to which it was attached or the special day on which it is read. Often, people accept banal answers to why a particular text was chosen, such as that it bears a linguistic similarity to that week's Torah reading or it happens to mention an event in the Torah reading.

While I do not reject such suggestions out of hand, they may leave obvious questions unanswered. In many cases, for example, the *haftarah* starts or ends in the middle of a section,[2] for reasons that are both unclear and unexplained by the simple rendering of the *haftarah*'s connection to the text. I find here that looking more carefully at the *haftarah* as a whole many times reveals an internal theme to the reading, one that then (I'd like to think not just fortuitously) connects to that week's Torah reading.

An important aspect of these essays is my conscious attempt to derive only those ideas a fairly casual reader would, albeit a reader versed in rabbinic tradition. I consult classical Talmudic and Midrashic writings, as well as the medieval commentaries of Rashi and Radak, but in citing sources I always seek a reading of the text that a moderately educated Jew could be expected to derive from hearing the *haftarah* in synagogue. I am not trying to be scholarly or academic, but to read these texts in a way actual listeners might have been expected to.

[2] In the traditional division of the text; the chapter divisions in common use do not always match that division, which split up the text into units based on its view of their continuity or connection.

This is one way in which this book can be profitably read, as an *haftarah* compendium and companion. I hope readers can find in these pages a reasonable first-stage understanding of each week's *haftarah*, enriching their synagogue experience. If that were all this book would contribute to world Jewry, *dayenu*, it would be enough for my purposes.

At the same time, this project offered an avenue to insight on another question with which modern Jews struggle, whether there are any beliefs that are inherent to, or essential for, being Jewish. Orthodox Jews point to Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith as defining acceptable Jewish belief, granting room for some debate and adjustments made by thinkers who followed him.

Reform and Conservative Jews, of course, long disputed those claims, but recent years have seen even some Orthodox thinkers step back from the Principles as absolutely vital to Jewish faith.[3] My question, independent of what I believe myself, was whether I could identify a set of beliefs are so inherent to the worldview of Scripture that to reject them is to declare one's abandoning of what Judaism always has been, what Judaism inescapably *is*.

My quest, then, is for ideas so inherent to Jewish belief that it would seem impossible to claim to be adhering to Judaism without them. To claim to believe in the United States of America, for example, but to reject the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, seems oxymoronic, since it was precisely that set of values—applied judiciously to each era and region, perhaps—that animated the country's creation.

[3] See, for example, M. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* and M. Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (Littman, 1999).

So too in Jewish contexts. Various groups of Jews have made decisions about what it means to be Jewish, what laws are binding, what values are important; Reform believe this, Orthodox this, secular Jews this, and so on. Were we able to identify a set of beliefs fundamental to Judaism from its earliest times, we could at least say that those who adopt other faith commitments are breaking with the religion rather than applying it to a different set of conditions.

Such breaks have already occurred with regard to rabbinic tradition; I wondered whether Scripture itself could be shown to insist on some principles as central to its worldview, again challenging those who choose to define their faith-commitments in other ways.

It would be insufficient, for those purposes, for me to simply adduce sources I believed made the points I sought. Complex literatures such as Scripture or the Talmud are notoriously plastic, amenable to many interpretations, and often reflect multiple strands of thought, no one of which is necessarily binding.

The *haftarot* provide a limited corpus, easing one problem. In addition, these texts were *chosen* for public reading, so we would expect them to be representative of at least those ideas the invisible hand of tradition thought of as important for people to hear.

Extracting a minimal theology from the *haftarot* is a more complex task than just reading them, since the act of reading is almost inescapably impressionistic, reflecting the values and assumptions of the reader. The theology I would produce might then simply be the theology I already assumed.

To mitigate that problem, I have worked hard to build the theology presented here inductively. I worked on the essays on each *haftarah* separately and repeatedly. My goal in each was to read the text for itself, to the extent of my capabilities. Only once having done so did I step back to consider the larger themes of groups of *haftarot*. Even there, I first developed a one-paragraph summary of each *haftarah's* themes, and then examined a set of *haftarot* for continuities or recurrences within a group of such readings.

It is still possible that my own proclivities have affected the outcome, since my internal hammer might lead me always to see nails; only the reader can judge. I hope I have succeeded at extracting from these texts core ideas, ones so inherent and dominant to the text that readers can only concede that this is at least what the text meant.

I stress "at least" because I have not sought to exhaust the texts' rich possibilities, only to produce a set of ideas unequivocally central to the *haftarot*. Success would mean that readers walk away realizing that to be an adherent of Scripture means accepting certain faith principles.

People are free to do so or not, but I hope that after reading this work, they would at least recognize that rejecting these ideas necessarily means rejecting Scripture, independent of the question of the force of Jewish law in one's life.

Such claims can only be as good as the evidence adduced for them; impatient readers can flip to the end of each section of this book, or to the concluding chapter. I invite more patient readers to join me in a journey of discovery, of slowly building a realization of what our readings of Scripture tell us weekly. For those readers, I hope

the ends of each part—the book has seven sections, one for each of the five books of the Pentateuch, one for *haftarot* read on specific special Sabbaths, and one for those read on holidays-- and the concluding chapter will be the icing on a cake we have baked together, bringing together what we have seen in a complete whole.

PART I: THE HAFTAROT OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Haftarah No. 1, Parshat Bereshit,[4] Isaiah 42:5—43:10

Creation as Power

The *haftarah* opens with God mentioning that He created the Heavens and spread them out, formed the Earth, etc. This similarity to the Torah reading explains choosing a text like this one, but many other prophetic statements also speak of God as Creator. Moreover, that is not what the *haftarah* is actually about. God's having created the world quickly takes a backseat to other concerns, such as mentioning how much God has until now refrained from fully revealing Himself.

Isaiah tells us that that will change in the future, as God promises to make His Presence so manifest as to spur the Jewish people to sing aשיר חדש,[5] a new song. Whereas now he describes the people as blind and deaf, he promises they will find spiritual places they never knew or imagined. That context lets us understand that Creation here is a point of reference for emphasizing God's power, for noting how often humans neglect to notice His presence, an error that often shapes how we view the world. In the future, the obvious Creator will once again emerge.

At Creation, God was fully revealed. After Creation, He hid Himself, in order to leave room for human freewill, since it can only be truly free in an environment where God is not so obvious that any intelligent person would assume His existence and active involvement.

The *haftarah* reminds us that God will eventually return to the Creation mode, this time to fully redeem the Jews. Many today bemoan or complain about God's hiddenness,

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[4] I have not translated the titles of the weekly readings into English, since I believe they are not in wide use.
[5] I have chosen to include Hebrew citations in the original, with translation. Where the actual Hebrew words are important, I have transliterated the text for the non-Hebrew reader.

pointing to it as a barrier to faith and fidelity. Our *haftarah* asks us to consider the balance between God's hiddenness and openness, the values and costs of each.

Famous/Important Phrases from this Week's *Haftarah*:

Our general method of studying an *haftarah* will be to take it as a whole, summarizing and analyzing it in order. In these first weeks, though, some phrases have achieved a life of their own outside the *haftarah* itself; it seems equally useful to focus on those phrases to see where the *haftarah* as a whole was taking us.

The phrase in **42;10**, " שירו לה' שיר חדש, sing to God a 'new song'," is generally understood to refer to the song of praise the Jews will sing when God has publicly redeemed them, when all recognize the Jews as His nation. Some of the Sages' statements emphasize that this kind of song only comes in response to supernatural events, such as the Splitting of the Sea or when the Philistines yoked two cows to a wagon on which they placed the Ark. The text only says the Philistines wanted to test whether the cows would head straight back to Israel, but the Talmud (Avodah Zara 24b) assumes the cows also sang as they walked along.

42;21, "חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר ', God wants to help others become more righteous, therefore makes the Torah great and strong (and therefore attractive to people)." This phrase closes a collection of verses recited at the end the daily liturgy. In addition, many communities cite this verse before saying a קדיש דרבנן, a Rabbis' Kaddish. Tradition has it that such a Kaddish is said only after mentioning Rabbinically derived insights into Torah. After a Torah study class, the custom has become to recite the final Mishnah in Makkot, where R. Hananiah b. Akashya interprets this verse as saying that God gave much Torah and mitsvot to benefit us.

In Laws of Torah Study, 2;7, Maimonides cites the phrase to justify opening another *yeshiva* or school even when there already is one, since the verse tells us that God wants more and more Torah. While *halachah* often frowns on competition, in terms of spreading Torah—and knowledge of God- the rules differ.

More famously, Maimonides understands the Mishnah in Makkot as fitting his theory that any Jew who keeps one *mitzvah* fully, without any motives other than worship of God, is guaranteed a place in the World to Come. The stress on many *mitsvot* in the Mishnah was to celebrate the range of options God gave us for finding one to fulfill in this way. Again, staying with our theme, Maimonides is assuming that the way into at least the first level of the World to Come is by having a moment of complete God-focus, God-awareness that His hiddenness makes a challenge.

42:24, " מי נתן למשיסה יעקב...הלא ה' זו חטאנו לו, Who gave the Jews over to spoil…Is it not this God to Whom we have sinned?" Gittin 58a tells us that R. Joshua heard of a boy who had been imprisoned. He went outside his window and said the first half of the verse, and the boy completed it. Certain this indicated a bright future, R. Joshua ransomed him and he became R. Yishmael b. Elisha.

The story is a good one on its own, but the verse used suggests that R. Yishmael already at a tender age recognized God's impact on history, despite its hiddenness. Other Talmudic stories show R. Yishmael having remarkably direct interactions with God. Seeing God's "tracks" in the world is, apparently, the first step towards having even more intense such contacts.

43;4, " כל הנקרא בשמי ולכבודי בראתיו, יצרתיו ואף עשיתיו, All that is called by Name I created, formed and made." God as Creator does not mean just once, it means a continuing connection to and ownership of the world.

In his commentary to the last Mishnah in Eduyot, Maimonides cites this verse to explain the position of the Sages in a debate about which lineage issues the Messiah will settle (the Torah establishes rules about lineage that had been violated already by the time of the Mishnah; in theory, all of the descendants of such families were no longer able to serve whichever functions required that lineage).

The Sages said Messiah will not deal with such issues, he will only bring peace to the world. To explain, Maimonides quotes this verse, which shows that lineage is not an essential concern of God's, since God created us all.

It's a challenging claim, since the Torah established those lineage rules, but it does fit the overall theme of the *haftarah*, that we have nowhere near a sufficient understanding of God, God's power, and God's Truth. It is attaining that Truth that Maimonides thinks will bring about the peace the Sages did see as Messiah's job.

In summary, then, this *haftarah* used the act of Creation as the paradigm of God's power and Presence being made most manifest in the world. The *haftarah* challenges us to see God's impact even on occasions when it is not so clear.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 2, Parshat Noach, Isaiah, Chapter 54;1-55;5

A Deceptively Simple Explanation for Why We Read this *Haftarah*

A verse in the middle of the *haftarah* (54;9) refers to the promises God is making to the Jewish people as similar in some way to the waters of Noah. (The exact similarity is a matter of debate, as we discuss in the essay on the *haftarah* of Parshat Ki Tetsei[6]; it either means that the promise of redemption is as ironclad as the promise not to have a Flood or that the number of the days of Redemption will be similar to the amount of time from Noah to Isaiah).

One issue with that view of the connection is that it turns the promise to avoid future Floods into a central theme of the Torah reading, which seems untrue for the Torah reading itself. Second, were that our focus in the selection, we could have stopped reading at verse 10, a section break. Indeed, the extra twelve verses constitute a whole *haftarah* of their own, read for Parshat Re'eh.

We seek, therefore, an understanding of this reading that makes it significant enough to return to throughout the year.

Central Themes Point the Way

The *haftarah* speaks of the ways in which Jerusalem will grow in the future. The first half focuses on the physical expansion of Jerusalem, which in turn will lead to its becoming the clear seat of God's Presence in the world. Note that the first event is celebrated because it leads to the second, not for its own sake.

The second half of the *haftarah* divides into two parts. The first continues physical expressions of Jerusalem's future glory, speaking in seemingly hyperbolic terms, saying that the city will be paved with precious stones. At least one Rabbinic tradition took that

[6] See page 218ff.

even further, asserting that the stones would be incredibly large. A student who expressed doubt about the literal truth of those claims was rebuked as lacking in full belief, indicating that tradition attached an unexplained significance to accepting the miraculous here.

In spiritual terms, we are told that all of the city's inhabitants will be learned of God, creating such a strong connection that God will make our enemies' weapons fail when they are wielded against Jerusalem. The last piece of the *haftarah* reminds us how easy it is to form the kind of relationship with God that would allow for such supernatural interventions. Like water, Torah is so available that we should not need to pay for it, we could just absorb it (free) and see its fruitful results.

Taking the two halves together, the *haftarah* focuses on how we can help bring about a future we long for in our own terms, but that also has ramifications for the world and its success at accomplishing one of its central goals, establishing the well-accepted rule of God.

The Flood As Reminder of God's Power and Consistency

Some who read about the Flood will get caught up in the most obviously tragic aspects, such as the loss of life, human and animal. The saddest part of the Flood, though, was that so soon after Creation (in the Torah's presentation), and at least so soon after Adam and Eve were sent out into the world, their progeny had strayed so far that they could not retain the most minimal standards of behavior, nor recognize that God would punish them for those failures.

The root of all evil is not money, the Flood tells us, it is forgetting or ignoring God's relationship to the world. When God swears never again to bring a Flood, the oath

is to find other ways of insuring that the world can be reminded of its need to engage with God. Selective punishments, even horrible ones, are always available, but so are the positive ones of making Jerusalem into the center of the world's focus.

The *haftarah* thus continues the Torah reading by showing us how it is that God can insure there will be no need for another Flood, the ways in which the Lord can assert His Presence without violating His oath.

Of course, as always, the preference would be for God not to have to be the one to teach these lessons, for Jews and humanity generally to learn it on their own; this utopian ideal would lead to an even better future than imagined in this *haftarah*. Barring that, though, we have a bedrock promise that God will eventually clearly reveal Himself, and that Jerusalem will be the venue for that blessed event.

Famous Verses and Their Ramifications

Like with the first *haftarah*, this one has several famous phrases that deepen our understanding of the selection's themes. First, there is **54;5, "** כי בעליך עשיך יקוק צבאות שמו וגאלך קדוש ישראל אלהי כל הארץ יקרא:, for your husband is your Creator, God of Hosts is His Name, and your Redeemer, the holy One of Israel, will be known as Lord of the Earth." It is by becoming our partner and redeemer, we are being told, that God can expand to become the recognized Ruler of the whole world.

54;13, "וכל בניך למודי ה', ורב שלום בניך, and all your sons will be learned of God and will have much peace," is well known because it is recited at the end of Sabbath morning prayers, as part of the statement of R. Elazar b. R. Hanina that scholars increase peace in the world, reading בניך (*banayich*), your sons, as בוניך (*bonayich*), your builders. The inference interestingly connects scholarship with peace and building the world; as in the

rest of the piece, we are being told that scholarship is one of the surest paths to knowing how to build a world that will reveal God.

Finally, Maimonides twice cites **55;1**, "הוי כל צמא לכו למים, Ho, all who are thirsty, go to the water." In The Laws of the Study of Torah 3;9, he cites Taanit 7a, which sees this verse as highlighting an important similarity between Torah and water: both flow downwards from high places. For water, that is a physical reality; for Torah, it's an attitudinal one—those who are arrogant (high on themselves) will not readily find Torah, while those who are lowly, who place themselves at the feet of the Sages, will become repositories of Torah.

In Guide I;30, Maimonides notes that the metaphor of food and drink is used for wisdom, especially Torah, since those are also nutrifying, like food. For us, the call to go to Torah, then, becomes as simple as the call to eat right and exercise. And, as before, it reminds us that the physical world portrayed here is a vehicle to recognition of the broader spiritual world. Food for thought.

In summary, then, this *haftarah* mentioned the Flood in the context of the promises of physical and spiritual bounty that will occur in the future Jerusalem; that suggested that the tragedy of the Flood was as much in its cause-- the loss of realization of God so soon after Creation-- as in its resulting death and destruction.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Lech Lecha, Isaiah 40:27--41:16

Descendants of Abraham

As in the first two weeks, this *haftarah* also carries an obvious reason to read it, the reference in 41;8 to the Jews as " זרע אברהם אוהבי, the descendants of Abraham who loved Me." Like the earlier weeks as well, we contend that there is more to the story, with the topic here being Providence and how to interpret it.

Our selection opens with Isaiah referring to the Jewish people as Jacob, which the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 91;10) sees as focused on that Patriarch's having always experienced God as punishing, even when the Divine Intent was different. For example, Jacob saw Joseph's sale and all that came with it as retribution for his own failures when it was actually God bringing about the necessary future in a gentler fashion than originally planned. (The Midrash thinks that Jacob had been slated to be dragged to Egypt in chains; God instead had him brought there by his son).

The Midrash seems to ignore an important difference between the Jews here and that view of Jacob. What Isaiah sees the Jews as complaining about is that God has stopped paying attention to them, not that God is too strict with them. Assuming the Midrash did not just get it wrong, we would need to understand that the Midrash equates the two attitudes in their level of error about God's impact on the world—denying God's impact or misinterpreting it are similar enough to be lumped together.

The antidote for these problems is to notice all the many ways that God intervenes in human affairs, such as by giving strength to the exhausted (the phrase used in one of the traditional morning blessings) and shaping the course of world history. When the name of Abraham is invoked, it is to support the claim that our worries as a nation are

unfounded, that God who chose Abraham certainly bears a continuing and positive interest in our welfare, much as events seem to say otherwise.

Shabbat 156b takes 41;2's reference to God as the One who brought justice out of the East as part of a surprising story about Abraham. Abraham, in this read, did not believe that God could give him offspring because the stars said otherwise. It was at this stage that God taught him of the Divine superiority to astrology. Abraham had already rejected worshipping other gods, but thought Nature, as revealed by the stars, set limits even on what God could do (as do many scientists today). Isaac's birth, and our verse, taught him that God exerts absolute control, even to the breaking of what seems the absolutely necessary future.

Positive Providence

In our *haftarah*, then, we are being told that while Jacob's caution and concern are often appropriate, they can be overdone. We need to balance our emulation of one Patriarch by remembering the legacy of the other. The memory of Abraham should help us maintain our confidence that a) God is paying attention, and b) is doing so with positive intent. To secure the best form of that Providence, all we need to do is to shape our lives and turn our hearts towards God.

This understanding of the role of the two Patriarchs in our *haftarah* highlights a balance that is surely a marker of a Jewish lifestyle. Maimonides noted in many places that idol worship extended from what seems a natural human instinct, the desire to control one's future, to insure one's economic, mental, and intellectual health. This includes controlling Nature, especially for farmers and others whose lives are extraordinarily dependent on the weather.

There are acceptable ways to indulge that human desire for control, such as by rotating crops, developing vaccines, and trying to avoid or reduce gaps in the ozone layer. Other methods, such as idol worship or witchcraft, are less encouraged. This Torah reading showed Abraham diverging from the rest of the world, learning to place his ultimate faith in God. The *haftarah* reminds us of that legacy, at a time when the Jewish people were discouraged and despairing of that Presence in their national lives.

Famous Verses and Their Ramifications:

The second verse of the *haftarah* starts with the words "הלא ידעת אם לא שמעת, do you not know, have you not heard," which Jewish philosophers pointed to as proof that we need to use traditional knowledge (that which we have "heard") and build on it with our own proofs (that which we "know"). Scholars were to first absorb tradition (ideally as children) and then, in adulthood, re-acquire that knowledge with fuller intellect.

Hovot haLevavot (Duties of the Heart), an eleventh century philosophical work, takes the first two verses as asserting that God is aware and involved in what occurs on Earth, as we have. In that view, the end of the verse "אין חקר לתבונתו, there is no grasping His wisdom," tells us we cannot even begin to understand how God keeps track of all Creation.

Verse 31 has the famous phrase "וקוי ה' יחליפו כח, and those who place their hopes in God will find renewed strength," which sources use for a variety of purposes. The Talmud in Kiddushin 82b uses it as part of proving that Torah knowledge is a valuable asset for a person in youth and in old age. R. Saadya Gaon, in his tenth-century *Emunot ve-Deot* (Book of Beliefs and Opinions), sees it as one proof that God only commands what we can achieve (forestalling the claim that serving God is "just too hard").

Hovot haLevavot uses that verse to support one of his distinctions between those who strive for natural success and those who study Torah; the former cannot be confident that they are immune to illness, which might ruin their enjoying the fruits of their labor. He sees this verse as promising that those who study Torah and seek God will not find that to be true, unless it is as expiation for sin. Here again, the assumption of Providence comes through—studying Torah and seeking God increases the connection to it, and, thus, immunity from the vagaries of Nature.

41;4 refers to God as "קורא הדורות מראש, who calls the generations from the beginning," which some read as meaning that God knows the course of history ahead of time. In one example, R. Joshua ibn Shueib, a fourteenth century Spanish preacher, assumes that God knew the Jewish people would have three exiles (to Egypt, to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple, and the continuing current one that began with the destruction of the Second Temple), which means they were in some way inherent to the plan of history.

This is a concept that needs nuancing, and is too complex for here, but interesting to raise: What is necessary to history (Messiah, e.g.) and what is accidental? If God calls the generations from the beginning, are we mere automatons walking out a predestined history, or are there aspects of history where we have freedom and others where the outcome is predetermined?

In summary, the *haftarah* contrasted the understandings of Divine Providence that typified Jacob and Abraham. Jacob often experienced God as exacting and punishing, an important perspective, but one that needs to be balanced with the Abrahamic view of God as the trustworthy source of much good as well. **Shabbat Shalom.**

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Vayera, II Book of Kings, 4:1—4:37

Why the Apparent Reason for Choosing This Piece Can't Be the Real One

The *haftarah* tells a story of the prophet Elisha promising a son to a childless woman, who then gets sick, almost dies, and is revived by the prophet. The parallels of the story might leads us to assume this is why we read the selection on this Sabbath. However, Elijah also resuscitates a child, so we would need a reason for reading this story rather than that one. In addition, we start reading this *haftarah* with a whole other story, about Elisha's helping a widow fend off her creditors. Both factors argue in favor of looking for some other connection.

Summary of the *Haftarah*

The *haftarah* opens with the story just mentioned, the widow of a prophet coming to Elisha to complain about the creditors' threat to take her sons as slaves. Elisha asks what she has in the house, and then tells her to take that cruse of oil, gather pots from all her neighbors, and pour into them. Miraculously, the oil does not stop flowing until she runs out of pots; when she returns to him for advice, he tells her to sell the oil, repay the creditors, and live off the rest.

The text then moves on to the woman of Shunem (also not named), who insists Elisha use their house as his inn whenever he passes through their town. When he asks her what reward she would like, she denies having any need, but Gehazi, his attendant, mentions that she is childless. Elisha promises a son, and it happens.

Some time after, the boy goes out to the fields with his father, takes ill, is sent home to his mother, and dies. She goes back to Elisha, insisting he help her. Elisha sends Gehazi with his staff to place on the boy and heal him, but the woman insists he

come himself. When he gets there, after Gehazi and the staff failed to revive the child, Elisha succeeds.

How We Treat a Prophet Affects How We Get Treated

The Midrash identifies the widow as Obadiah's wife, and says that she saved her generation, but does not tell us how. Since it is commenting on the verse in which she turns to Elisha for assistance, we might suspect it was her turning to him which itself saved the generation.

That suggests that one challenge of Elisha's time was convincing people to treat the prophet of God different from other prophets. This makes sense in light of Elisha's being the student of Elijah. Elijah, too, struggled to unalterably convince the people that God is the only true deity, as we will see in a later *haftarah*.

That Elisha lived in a time challenged to understand the exceptional nature of prophets also helps us understand the connection between the two stories, since the Shunemite woman sets herself apart by treating Elisha with special respect. She is not just a gracious hostess, she sets aside a permanent place for the prophet, so he will feel comfortable at any time that he comes.

Another parallel is in the open-endedness of the reward each gets, requiring them to consult further with the prophet as to how to benefit most fully. In the first story, Obadiah's wife comes to ask what she should do with the oil that came out of the container, and in the second, the Shunemite needs to save her son.

Seeing the *haftarah* as focused on the value and eventual reward for those who make efforts to recognize God's representatives offers insight into the stories of the Torah reading as well. There, we find Abraham welcoming guests (although without

regard to their status), he is told of the coming of Isaac, and, finally, has his son threatened with death but finds a reprieve, like the Shunemite.

Two messages are being stressed: First, the road for those who take the side of God and good may be rocky, but their eventual reward is assured, and, second, doing for the prophets is functionally the same as Abraham doing for God.

Great, But No Abraham: A Brief Look at Elisha

Lost in the similarities might be some important differences. Elisha parallels Abraham, in that he is the one working on God-awareness in his generation, but a closer look reveals how extraordinary the Patriarch was. Abraham connects to people better than Elisha, himself running to welcome guests and defending Sodom despite his lack of personal connection to that city Lot was saved by the angels.

The verses cast Elisha more harshly. He does not help Obadiah's widow until she pleads with him that she is on the verge of losing her sons to slavery. He accepts the Shunemite's kindness, but knows nothing of her life circumstances. In both cases, his ignorance is surprising—Obadiah was a fellow-prophet, and the Shunemite had gone out of her way to treat him well, yet he does not know the simplest information about her and her husband. Even once he resurrects the child, we see no emotion from Elisha; he has her called in, gives her the child and says "here, take him."

The juxtaposition, intentional or not, shows the difficulties in standing alone for an ideal. Throughout his life, Abraham stood on one side, with the rest of the world against him and his monotheism. It is surprising that he yet managed to retain his affection for others, concern with their welfare (such as Sodom), and insistence that they get the best possible judgment from God.

Elisha suffered the same loneliness, but seems to have coped with it in his own way, building a wall between himself and those around him. He shows us how wearing and lonely it can be to stand for truths rejected by the rest of the world, and increases our admiration for Abraham in handling it so well.

Two Famous Phrases: Strangers in God's Land

In verse 13, when Elisha asks what the Shunemite needs, she responds " בתוך עמי אנכי יושבת, I have relatives and influence of my own." *Hovot haLevavot* cites that as opposite to the attitude we should have before God. In God's land, we should see ourselves as strangers, without influence or family connections.

Rosh haShanah 16b infers an obligation "להקביל פני רבו, to greet one's teacher," on holidays from the husband's asking why his wife was going to Elisha when the day is " לא חודש ולא שבת, neither Hodesh nor Shabbat." The idea fits the theme of the *haftarah* as a whole, that teachers and prophets show us God in the world, and we therefore need to maintain a continuing relationship with them, treating them differently than others.

In summary, then, the *haftarah* offered a look at the reward that came to two women who treated prophets with the respect and reverence they deserved. It implied that much of what led to Abraham's exalted position was his firm attachment to representing God in the world, and to spreading knowledge of God to others.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Chayye Sara, I Book of Kings, 1:1—1:31

Preparing for the Inevitable

My dad passed away suddenly when he was fifty and I was twenty-four, so there was never the classic deathbed scene, when the family patriarch has the opportunity to share with his loved ones his final words of wisdom, his hopes for them, and the share of his heritage he hopes his offspring will carry into the coming generations.

That vision of the Good Death has some roots in the Torah reading and *haftarah* for Vayechi, as we will see there. What we have in this week's selections seems to me the more common occurrence in Scripture, a person taking steps to insure the continuity of his legacy long before he passes away.

If Isaac gets married at forty, Abraham sends Eliezer to find Rivkah when he is about 139, with thirty-six more years to live. Jacob gets to Laban at the age of 77, meaning that (depending on whether one accepts the Midrashic view that he stopped along the way to study at the academy of Shem and Ever), Isaac blessed his sons at about the age of 120, when he had another sixty years to live.

By the time we meet him again at the beginning of the Book of Kings, King David had also made some moves in that direction, although not ones that established Solomon as his successor as firmly as Solomon's mother Bathsheba would have liked. As she sees Adonijah build up allies and assume the kingship was his to inherit, she gets nervous. Attaching this selection to the Torah reading of Chayye Sarah perhaps draws our attention to Abraham's greater success in defining his successor.

Abraham worries about continuity, and through Isaac. He sends Eliezer to find Isaac a wife, the necessary first step in providing for a continuous chain of the Abrahamic

family. The references to Eliezer here are all to "the slave" or "Abraham's slave," perhaps to stress his status. Despite Abraham's once having worried Eliezer would be his heir, the verse stesses he will never be more to Abraham than his faithful servant.

David Moves More Gently

David had made gestures in a similar direction, but Adonijah had not gotten the point. Bathsheba and Nathan knew Solomon was the chosen successor, but Adonijah apparently thought he could circumvent that. Watching this son of privilege buck his father's wishes in what can only be seen as self-interest reminds us of how much we mess up in life by trying to fight battles that are better left alone. Adonijah might have lived out a productive and happy life, had he been willing to accept that one of his younger brothers would rule; instead, he attempted to get the throne himself, with disastrous results (at least for him).

Our selections of Scripture this week, then, highlight the difference between valuing the deathbed scene and valuing a well-defined succession. The former emphasizes the leave-taking aspect of death, while the latter focuses on insuring the proper formation of the future. The Torah reading and *haftarah* seem to be reminding us that our time on earth is limited (with all the lessons that implies). That knowledge should lead us to prepare for that eventuality in our broader legacies as well.

One challenge these selections do not help us navigate is how to balance the two, planning for after one's death while also focusing on continuing to contribute to the here and now. Some people work to the moment they die without stopping to prepare a successor; others retire early, leaving not only a particular job, but the sense of productive contribution to the world that characterized their working years.

Abraham lives for many years, and even allows Isaac to reach his late thirties, before setting him up with a wife. David reaches seemingly advanced old age before he makes his view of the future fully known. When we speak here of recognizing one's mortality, then, we do not mean to be fatalistic nor to dispense with a concern with this life; it is only to include in one's considerations the reality that time is limited, and to make some arrangements for the time after.

Having done so, the person can then enjoy the rest of his or her time on earth, however long that may be, secure in having done his or her own best to see that whatever contributions they have made will be carried into the next generation.

The Vision of Death As a Spur to Contemplating Eternity

In the first verse of the *haftarah*, we are told that David was old and could not be warmed. R. Saadya Gaon, in *Emunot ve-Deot*, suggests that just before a person passes away, they see the Angel of Death, and it causes fear and a chill. He argues that David saw the Angel of Death in II Samuel 24;1-17, where Scripture told us the king saw the Jewish people being killed in a plague his own misdeeds had caused.

R. Saadya assumes that from that day forward, David was left shaking and chilled. In light of our discussion, R. Saadya's idea suggests that the ability to ignore Death is essential to live a warmed and placid life. When King David was confronted by Death so starkly, he had no way to return to his equanimity of old (this might explain, also, why he does not take advantage of Avishag—his cold was from knowledge of Death, and knowing that precludes getting caught up in the ephemeral pleasures of the flesh). Most of us do not achieve that realization until we reach our deathbeds.

As a last interesting piece, Nathan the Prophet suggests to Bathsheba that she go in first to speak to the king, raise her issues with her husband, and that he, Nathan, will follow, promising to fill in her words. Several medieval scholars cite a dictum of the Jerusalem Talmud in Peah that infers from this that it is permissible to speak ill of those who cause strife in the Jewish people.

This is especially surprising for one of the works that does so, Sefer Hasidim, written by rabbis known as German pietists, who were advocates of extreme forms of piety. Their accepting this statement shows that they saw the damage caused by fomenting splits among the Jewish people as so problematic that the ordinary proscription of slander is removed.

In summary, then, the story of Bathsheba and Nathan safeguarding Solomon's succession highlights the human need to make plans for after one is gone, while yet continuing to work in the here and now.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat Toledot, Malachi 1;1-2;7

Family and Its Discontents

As is becoming our pattern, the obvious reason to connect this week's *haftarah* to the Torah reading does not pass cursory examination. We presumably read this section of Malachi because it refers to God's choosing Jacob over Esau, as in the Torah reading.

A problem to mention, but which would take us too far afield, is the reference to the choice of Jacob as having been God's, when the Torah portrays it as Isaac's. If God had really already settled on Jacob as the recipient of the important blessings, we ought to wonder why the Torah saw fit to record a sham competition. Along similar lines, we could wonder why Rebecca did not simply tell Isaac of the pre-birth prophecies regarding the twins.

Those questions, aside from affecting our understanding of that piece of Torah, touch on important general religious concerns, such as the interplay between freewill and Divine intervention, but are less directly related to the *haftarah* itself.

Jacob over Esau: The Larger Picture

Turning our focus there, we realize that Malachi's real complaint focuses on the Jews'—particularly the priests-- mistreating the Temple service. Instead of bringing appropriate offerings, they are bringing stolen and blemished animals, acting towards God in not nearly the way they would treat a human father or king. The mention of Jacob and Esau turns out to be a minor point in the broader complaint, an instantiation of why the Jews' treatment of God is so wrong.

The explanation lies in metaphor and its value. Malachi opens the piece by declaring it a "*massa*," which Rashi translates as a load carried from somewhere else. He

adds that the Sages deduced from this that all the prophets were at Sinai, where they received their personal messages. Using the word here seems to emphasize how inherent Malachi's message is in the Sinaitic revelation, that the choice of Jacob over Esau reflects something crucial in our relationship with God.

The word relationship is strange when it comes to God, at least for philosophically inclined Jews, but I use it because the metaphor of family holds the key to Malachi's complaint. As the prophet disparages the Jews' treatment of God, he sees it as an example of a generally distressing phenomenon, our reserving our cruelest comments, our most outrageous behavior, for the confines of family.

Which is how the Jews of Malachi's time treated God. Strangers came with reverence, as did pagans, who only respected God as one among many. In contrast, the Jews were bringing lame, stolen, and otherwise unfit animals. It is a common paradox: our comfort with family (and, in this case, God) brings out the worst in us.

The stress on Esau as part of the family also suggests that the rejected brother could still rejoin, could still get back into God's good graces, even into the nation. Since that has not yet happened, the *haftarah* leaves us wondering (even hoping) for that time.

The family metaphor explains two further aspects of the *haftarah*, the Jews' not understanding their crime, and the focus on the tribe of Levi. Malachi notes that the Jews offer these various improper sacrifices and feel "אין רע, there is no evil," another too-common element in family squabbles. We can, unfortunately, speak to parents, children, spouses, and siblings with a bite and a disdain that would horrify us in public. Within the family, we dismiss its seriousness.

The responsibility for changing that family dynamic lies with each member of the clan, but even more so with the leaders, whose job is to teach/remind/convince/coerce the rest of the gang to behave appropriately and properly. Translated to Temple service, that means that the priests—who in Malachi's time were apparently accepting and offering the improper sacrifices— deserved condemnation for their failures, and were being told to improve their own actions, to serve as a model for others, and to train the Jews as to the proper way to serve God.

A family dynamic can be changed, and so can our dynamic with God. From the contempt of familiarity, we can move to expressing always the love and connection we feel for those closest to us, and, we should hope, for God.

Phrases in Maimonides's Writings

Since Maimonides quotes several phrases from this *haftarah*, I thought it might be interesting to see the uses to which he puts them.

Chapter 1, Verse 7: The prophet refers to "שלחן ה' נבזה הוא, the Table of God is denigrated," which Maimonides in Guide to the Perplexed III;46 sees as the underlying reason for the laws about how to treat an animal sacrifice. For him, the requirement to wash the various parts of the animal and the prohibitions against certain people eating them, stem from the need to treat the sacrifice as the bread of a king. Just as the family metaphor was useful in its context, "food" as metaphor guides how treat God's "Table."

Chapter 2, Verse 3: God warns "וזריתי פרש על פניכם, פרש חגיכם, and I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your festivals," which Maimonides cites twice in the context of eating improperly. First, in הלכות דעות, Laws of Character Traits 5;1, Maimonides cites the verse to characterize those who chase food for the pure pleasure of

eating, meaning that he understood Malachi to be complaining about the Jews' using the holidays as an excuse to eat meat, not as a religious experience of closeness to God. He makes the same point in הלכות יום טוב, Laws of Holidays, 6;18, when he says that those who eat on the holidays without caring for the poor or needy turn days meant for religious growth into a purely physical (and therefore negative) experience.

Chapter 2, Verse 6: The verse refers to the priest walking "בשלום ובמישור, in peace and straightness" which the Talmud, cited by Maimonides in Avot 1;12, applies to Aaron, seeing him, in contrast to Moses, as a source of peace and unity among the people.

Chapter 2, Verse 7: The verse announces that " שפתי כהן ישמרו דעת, ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא, the lips of a priest will guard wisdom, and others will seek wisdom from his mouth, for he is an angel of God." Maimonides takes that both as a proof that it is appropriate to call a Torah scholar an angel of God (Avot 5;13, which allowed him to read some Biblical references to angels as actually meaning people), and, based on the Talmud, as a warning that we should only study with teachers who rank well both in knowledge and character—if the teacher is an angel of God, we should accept Torah, but if not, not.

In summary, then, the *haftarah* shows Malachi's use of the metaphor of family (and of food) to protest the Jews' treating God and the Temple too familiarly, allowing themselves to insult God egregiously, then deny having done wrong.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Vayetse, Hosea, 12:13-14:10

The Metaphor of Faithfulness

The challenge of speaking meaningfully, articulately, and intelligibly about God, the Ineffable and completely Other, looms large before each Prophet. One central tool in that task, metaphor, seeks to shed useful light on our relationship with God —itself a metaphor—by aligning it with other ones we have.

This search for the familiar as a way to assimilate new experiences shows itself in everyday life. People facing the entirely new, geographically, physically, or culturally, will often say, "This is just like..." or "This is so different from..." We comprehend the new by comparing and contrasting it —those mainstays of examination questions—to what we already know well.

In our *haftarah*, the metaphor is marriage, especially the faithfulness of partners in a good one, the betrayal of spouses who cheat, and the readiness of some spouses to take a wayward partner back, even after great damage to the relationship.

The opening, which connects us to the Torah reading, has Hosea invoking Jacob's service to earn Rachel as a parallel to God's having brought the Jews out of Egypt with a prophet, and watching over them with one. Just as Jacob worked resolutely towards his goal, never abandoning it in the face of various challenges, God metaphorically works resolutely on the relationship with us.

Continuous striving is one way to be faithful to a goal, but the *haftarah* implies and suggests others as well. Jacob ran away from Esau to get to Haran, a retreat strategic and appropriate for the circumstances. Leaving the scene, Jacob's actions teach us, is sometimes the only way to be able to move forward towards a goal.

Just as continuous forward motion is sometimes impossible, God's punishment, which might seem a disruption of our relationship, does not even have to mean a break in continuous divine involvement. When Ephraim incurs retribution here, God speaks of being like various animals—a lion, a bear—in attacking and punishing them. The punishment hurts, but there is the solace of God's deep involvement in administering it.

Getting From Punishment to Involvement

The *haftarah* records Hosea's attempt to convince the people to return to a more positive version of that deep involvement. Ephraim, probably the Northern Kingdom, was at one point highly faithful. The traditional reading of the text sees Jeroboam as having been gvien the Northern Kingdom for criticizing King Solomon's sleeping late on the day of the dedication of the Temple. The Midrash portrays God as either rewarding hom for his zealousness or challenging him to outperform Solomon. Either way he failed, the lure of power enticing him into establishing a competing worship to the one at the Temple.

Love Story, the book, makes the famous assertion that Love means never having to say you're sorry. While I think generally the opposite is true—it is precisely those we love most to whom we ought to be apologizing most fully and carefully-- the statement properly emphasizes that love cannot hang on the question of an apology. Love can be broken, but not by something so small as failure to apologize. Apologies can, however, improve a relationship, taking it to whatever its next level is supposed to be.

With God, the equivalent of saying sorry is repentance, so the prophet's call for repentance fits well here. In a relationship blessed with permanence but plagued by one partner's inability or refusal to shoulder responsibilities, the only barrier to improvement

is that partner's willingness to acknowledge error and rededicate him or herself to fulfilling the promise inherent in the relationship. As Jacob contributed permanence and effort to perfect his relationship with Rachel, we are being called to do so with God (Who already reciprocates).

Maimonides's Read of Famous Verses

13;8, refers to God punishing us by acting towards us as a "דב שכול, a bear bereaved of her whelps." Avot 5;7 defines seven qualities of a person with poorly formed character; in his commentary there, Maimonides notes that few people completely lack intellectual and character qualities, but anyone so bereft of humanity will be similar to a rampaging animal, and can be referred to that way. This raises the possibility that Maimonides could have interpreted our verse as meaning that God will punish us by forcing us to grapple with such people, a terrible task and burden.

The most famous verse in the *haftarah*, **14;2**, "שובה ישראל עד ה' אלוקיך, Return O Israel to the Lord Your God," emphasizes the power of repentance to fully rejuvenate (even improve) a relationship with God. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 7;6, echoes these messages when he speaks of how close repentance brings the penitent to God.

14;4 tells us that in the future we will no longer say "אלוקינו למעשה ידינו, God to the work of our hands." Maimonides in Laws of Repentance 2;2 understands this to mean that we will no longer need to falsely invoke God to support our actions, since God will truly know our positive intentions.

The final verse of the *haftarah*, which Maimonides does not cite, challenges us with its claim that the ways of God are productive for the righteous and destructive for

sinners. We tend to assume that good is good always, but the verse sees God's ways as more malleable.

Baba Batra 89b tells of R. Yohanan b. Zakai struggling with whether to publicize a certain halachic fact, for fear that it might teach evildoers how to get away with their evil. He finally announces the information anyway, citing our verse. In his view, then, Hosea was speaking of how some positive truths can be warped by evildoers. Horayot 10b assumes the verse is referring to how motive affects an act; positive motives can make it a meritorious one and negative ones can make it sinful.

The sources share a conviction that some actions are not inherently good or bad, but depend on the use to which they are put. As a close to the book of Hosea and of our *haftarah*, it reminds us, soberingly, that our internal righteousness necessarily affects our external experience of religion and the impact it has on us.

In summary, then, Hoshea uses the metaphor of marriage and faithfulness to bemoan the Jews' betrayals of God. God, on the other hand, is portrayed as punishing, but continuingly involved. The implication seems to be that we are being warned of punishment, are called on to match Jacob's faithfulness to Rachel.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Vayishlah, The Book of Obadiah

The Tragedy of Esau, As It Plays Out in Our Day

A reality too painful to be faced leaves two main choices, being overwhelmed by the accumulation of sadness or learning to distance oneself from events. Ideally, people find a middle road, where the tragedy penetrates their consciousness, but is taken with enough serenity to allow them to continue functioning. Doctors such as oncologists know this challenge well, as they cannot take every lost patient to heart without burning out or worse, but must also avoid become cold or inured to the sufferings with which their noble occupation confronts them.

This week's *haftarah* leads me to wonder whether the Jewish people have lost sight of that middle road in our attitude towards those who refuse to share our view of the world. Granted that we have always seen ourselves as Chosen to carry the message of God's rule to the world, our abject failure to convince the rest of the world of our status— those who accepted our message of monotheism tend to arrogate that to themselves, while others simply ignore us—carries with it ramifications we tend to either ignore or celebrate; our *haftarah* shows us that neither reaction is appropriate.

Casual readers of the *haftarah* might classify it in the triumphalist camp of prophecy, where the prophet tells us how we'll slam our enemies in future times, presumably thus lifting the spirits of an apparently bloodthirsty audience. That view ignores two important facts, first that the prophecy is addressed to Edom/Esau, and, second, that tradition saw Obadiah as a convert from Edom to the Jewish people.

Prophecies to Other Nations: Exercises in Futility?

The whole question of prophecies to other nations is one that has, as far as I have seen, been insufficiently addressed. Once we note that many if not most of the prophets recorded words spoken to non-Jewish nations, the next step is to realize that the prophets apparently attached enough value to those nations' reactions to spend their time and effort on addressing them. It would seem logical that they hoped they also would heed the prophecies and improve their ways. Otherwise, why speak *to* them—why not just speak to the Jews about them?

This is all the more the case when we see the Sages assuming that Obadiah was an Edomite convert. While there is some debate in Jewish thought about how much a prophet's personal circumstances impact his or her prophecy, the fact of God choosing a convert to convey a message to his old people is striking and indicates that this was a prophecy *to* Edom, not about them.

Reading the *haftarah* with that in mind begins to peel away the layers of sadness that underlie it. The selection tells Edom of their future sufferings, how they will become the lowest of nations, lose their power, language, continuity of kingship. In many ways, Edom will lose its status as a nation.

Betraying Family: The Fault of Esau

We are not told right away why Esau is doomed to that fate, but his reaction gives us a hint. Instead of confronting his problems, the prophet envisions Esau as putting on a show, trying to portray himself as stronger than he really is. Then, we are told of Esau's choosing to support nations in the process of destroying the Jewish people. Instead of feeling brotherly love, Esau celebrated in our destruction, an act that rebounds on him.

First, it is precisely those nations whom he supported who will turn on him. Second, Obadiah informs Esau that he will lose his leadership, so there will be no one with the wisdom to show him the way out of all his troubles.

We in the twenty-first century have not seen the nation of Esau in many years, so this can seem distant, but Obadiah's message applies in many ways to the non-Jews of our times. The prophets assume as a a simple truth of history that the Jews have a particular role in the world, that of announcing God's rule. Esau's refusal to accept Jacob's exceptionalism, his insistence that he was as great or as special, his celebration of every time the Jews suffered, leads directly to his eventual destruction, an outcome no one wants.

Esau loses nationhood, leadership, and wisdom because of his denial of Jacob's importance; those losses in turn lead to complete destruction. The one possible way he might have rectified all that, by agreeing that Jacob and his descendants deserved their position in the world, was closed off by his refusal to entertain it as a possibility.

What Is Old Is New

We face similar situations today. Our feeling of shared humanity with those around us should not blind us to the worry of how the future will play itself out for those who consistently refuse to admit to basic truths about the world. If God directs history, and the Jews have a special role to play in that history, those who deny it are setting themselves up for the kind of end Obadiah predicts for Esau here.

It is that dilemma that leads Obadiah to include the closing verse, the most famous one in the *haftarah* and one that was included numerous times in the traditional liturgy. "ועלו מושיעים בהר ציון לשפוט את הר עשו, והיתה לה' המלוכה, and redeemers will ascend Mount

Zion to judge Mount Esau, and God will have true Kingship." Those who align themselves against the Jewish people become a barrier to achieving what we should all hope for, a world in which God's rule is recognized by all. In doing so, they make their punishment a necessary part of achieving that final goal.

All of which, let me stress, was and is avoidable, if only the nations involved—in this case Esau—would change their attitude. Accepting only our special role and place, all who currently follow this path could instead become positive contributors towards bringing about God's desired future.

We can do it the easy way or the hard way; many read the prophets as if God and the Jews would celebrate doing it the hard way, but they are wrong. Obadiah, I believe, gave this prediction hoping against hope that his words would spur change. He knew, as we do, the odds against it; he knew that most likely his dire predictions would be forced to come to pass, that he and we will have to suffer a future in which those who might have been partners will instead be removed as adversaries. But I suspect he hoped otherwise, as should we.

In summary, then, the metaphor of family returns, this time in Obadiah's complaints about Esau's national neglect of that bond by rejoicing in our downfall. More broadly, the *haftarah* uses Esau as an example of the retribution awaiting those who reject the chosenness of the Jewish people; they are a particularly good example, since they should have accepted it as the truth of their family. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Vayeshev, Amos 2:6-3:8

Sticking Our Heads Firmly Into the Ground

The *haftarah* opens with a line that recurs in Amos, his declaring that "for three sins of ...., and for four I will not forego." In our selection, the culprit is Israel, the Northern Kingdom. He then names their having sold "a righteous person for money and an impoverished one for shoes," often taken as referring to the sale of Joseph. Since that story appears in the Torah reading, we might read this selection solely for that link.

Aside from my distaste for such a technical reason for selecting *haftarot*, here it also ignores the simple meaning of the verse; especially since Amos directs his words specifically to the Northern Kingdom (when Joseph was sold by all the brothers, and certainly not by Ephraim, the tribe that usually represents that kingdom), Amos seems to be complaining about their putting money above treating other people properly.

Further in the *haftarah*, the prophet speaks in God's Name, noting that it was God who got the Jews past the Emorites, took them out of Egypt, helped them survive forty years in the desert, and gave them the Land. It was also God who set up prophets and Nazirites (נזירים, people who vowed to forego wine, haircuts, and contact with corpse impurity for a certain period of time). Instead of being grateful, the Jews forbade prophecy and fed the Nazirites wine (luring or forcing them into violating their oath).

The prophet devotes several verses to this issue, suggesting that he understood God to "care" more about the Jews' failure to heed the warnings sent them than the sins themselves. Sin is understandable and comes to us all, but shutting out the voices that could help us improve is less excusable.

That also explains the punishment, that each person will lose that quality he or she would ordinarily have relied on to save him from adversity, the swift will lose his speed, the strong his strength, the hero his courage, the archer his ability to stand, and so on. Our strengths fooled us into ignoring the warnings of the prophets; losing them will teach us the lesson we need to learn.

Correlations, Connections, and Prophets

The second half of the *haftarah* takes a turn that will eventually lead back to the focus on the prophets we identified in the first half. Amos notes that God has "known" only us of all nations, and that "knowing" is a necessary precursor to two people walking together. This connection leads him to note other connected events, which then allow for expected results, as in the various metaphors Amos trots out.

When a lion roars, it means he has caught his prey; when a bird falls suddenly to the ground, it's been caught in a trap; when a trap springs, it means it has caught something; when alarms are sounded in the city, it signifies a time of danger. Note that all the cases involve capture or hunting, and Amos is pointing out the well-known signals of those outcomes.

In what is meant to be a similar way, the "knowing" that God speaks of in terms of the Jewish people takes the form of God not acting without informing the Prophets; their words, then, are to be seen as just as much part of a chain as the lion's roar. The people's refusal to heed those warnings is thus the first, and crucial, step in leading to their downfall, and thus the one to be most bemoaned.

Looking back to the Torah reading, the *haftarah* seems to argue that the brothers' fatal error was not the sale of Joseph itself, but their rejecting his dreams. Distasteful as

they found the idea of his ruling over them, the dream was an accurate prediction. The desire to run away from truth can be strong, but the Torah reading and the selection from Amos warn us to resist it. Truth comes to us in many forms, and if we heed it, we can know which challenges we face, can consider how best to cope with them, and come out as well as possible. If we reject the truth or stifle its messenger, none of that can happen.

Famous Verses and Their Echoes

The first verse of the *haftarah*—"על שלשה פשעי ישראל, ועל ארבעה לא אשיבנו, for three sins of Israel, and for the fourth I will not allow him back"—is recorded by Maimonides in the Laws of Repentance 3;1. Based on statements at the end of the Talmudic tractate Yoma, he codifies the principle that God does not count the first three times one commits a certain sin, only counting from the fourth on.

In context, Amos seems to have been referring to four different sins; it was the fourth *type* of sin that was intolerable to God in the original, not the fourth incident. When the Sages understood the verse the other way, they assumed the issue was the extent to which a person or nation is enmeshed in sin; at the national level, that might reveal itself in the range of sins commited, but for the individual, it is the repetitiveness of sin that best shows the person has lost the battle, and is now captive to that sin.

That same verse leads Mabit (R. Moses ben Joseph Trani, 16th Century Safed, Rabbi of the community after R. Joseph Caro's death) to raise the question of the definition of צדיק, a righteous person. He notes that God is referred to that way, Noah, Joseph here (following the tradition that the verse refers to the sale of Joseph), and the entire Jewish people. The word is not uni-dimensional, nor does it have one clear

definition. Each time we see the word in Scripture, we might productively question how it is being used, the kind of צדקות, of righteousness, being lauded.

At the end of the Laws of Nazirites, Maimonides notes that **2;12's** connecting Nazirites to prophets shows us that such vows are properly undertaken only for the purpose of becoming holier and closer to God.

Finally, the last verse of our *haftarah* uses the striking metaphor of " אריה שאג, מי לא ייראה, the lion has roared, who will not fear?" as the lead-in to pointing out that when God speaks, prophets cannot but issue their prophecies.

In the Responsa literature, this phrasing is also sometimes used to express trepidation about disputing earlier authorities. For one example, the 18th century R. Ezekiel Landau disagrees with the 13th century Torah giant Rashba in one of his response (Noda BiYehuda, Later Responsa, Yoreh Deah 56); he has Ran, who lived close to Rashba chronologically, for support, but cites our phrase to express his trepidation at taking on this giant.

In summary, then, Amos reminds us that we often ignore the prophets because we rely on our own strengths. So, too, Joseph's brothers insisted on denying his dreams, which could have told them the future that was coming their way.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Miketz, I Kings, 3;15-4;1

This is an *haftarah* that is rarely read (if ever), since the week we read Miketz in synagogue is almost invariably the week of Hanukkah, and we read the special *haftarah* for that occasion.

The central story is well-known; soon after he becomes king, Solomon is asked to judge between two women (זונות, in the Prophet's term, probably meaning they were prostitutes) who had each given birth to a baby. One of the babies had died in the middle of the night, but the women each claimed it was the other's baby that had died (the woman currently in possession of a deceased baby presumably claimed the other woman had switched them).

One-Time Solutions As a Mark of Solomon's Wisdom

Faced with the seemingly intractable problem, King Solomon called for a sword, announcing his intention to split the baby in half, much as one would do in a parallel monetary case. The true mother gave in, agreeing to give up her claim to let the baby live, while the other woman, perhaps embittered by her loss, agreed that this was fair.

Seeing their reactions, the king could now declare the true mother, and return her child. The people all heard of their new king's wisdom, and became awed by his insight.

The story as told (and probably as remembered by most people) emphasizes Solomon's great insight. From the perspective of 3000 years later, it is worth noting that Solomon's trick can only work once (if that; Makkot 23b wonders whether the woman might not have been lying anyway, but understood the importance of compassion. The Talmud therefore claims a Heavenly Voice declared Solomon was right. Rashi and

Radak both mention this tradition). We today cannot imagine anyone agreeing to Solomon's idea, both because we have pity on the baby and because we know the story.

Aside from that, the *haftarah* adds a verse at the beginning and at the end (not part of the story itself, set off by spaces in the traditional writing of Scripture) that shape it differently. The first verse tells us that Solomon woke and realized "it" was a dream. Starting the *haftarah* there assumes, as the Sages often did, that Scripture was familiar to ordrinary Jews. Such people would know the preceding scene: God came to Solomon soon after he had taken the throne, and offered him anything he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom to judge God's people properly, and God, pleased he had not asked for wealth, long life, or military success, gave him all four.

This, too, is a trick that only works once. Once we know that asking for the selfless option will get me all the selfish goals I want, the gesture loses its value, and there is no reason for God to give all the other desires as a reward.

Solidifying a Monarch's Hold On His People

Solomon wakes, sees it is a dream, returns to Jerusalem, stands before the Ark, offers sacrifices, and makes a big party. To those who like to think of the *haftarot* as casually slapped together, this verse would be the connection to the Torah reading, in which Pharoah awoke and realized he had had a dream. As so often, this view does not satisfy us, for the simple reason that if it were true, the *haftarah* should have consisted of the dream itself, *ending* at this verse, rather than starting it.

In addition, the *haftarah* does not end at the point where Solomon's dream had proven true by virtue of his wisdom being publicly shown. Instead, it goes one more

verse, to tell us Solomon was king over all of Israel (a verse so different from what came before that it is a new chapter in the common current division of Scripture).

Radak's interpretation of the awe of the Israelites when Solomon renders judgment helps us understand better. He recognizes that their emotions were more complex than simple admiration—they became afraid to act wrongly even in private, fearful that Solomon's great wisdom would extend to figuring out what they did in their own homes.

In light of that perspective, Rashi and Ralbag's (Gersonides, a 13th century Provencal philosopher and Bible commentator) reading of the last verse resonates more. They agree that the verse means that the Israelites were all happy with Solomon's rule, since he had proven his qualifications for the job.

Brilliance Is Not an Unmixed Blessing

Putting Radak, Rashi, and Ralbag together, we can understand the point of this reading, as well as how it relates to the Torah portion. Solomon has been blessed with unequaled brilliance, in an incident we allude to but do not read. So, too, Joseph's road to power lay in his remarkable talent for dream interpretation, which led him to know how to face the crises upcoming for Egypt and its environs.

It is not obvious, in either case, that people will welcome the person thus blessed. Pharoah hears Joseph's interpreations and his ideas for the future and decides that no one is better suited for the tasks at hand; the people are awed by their new king's wisdom, but perhaps a little anxious as well. Both, then, suggest that extraordinary talent is not always easily assimilated by those around them.

Song of Songs Rabbah 1;10 helps us see that as well, engaging in an extended comparison of Solomon's court and God's. In our case, Solomon, like God, was able to

judge accurately and well even without witnesses or warning, usually indispensable for human courts.

This reading of the *haftarah* enriches our Torah reading, at least by explaining the tenuousness of Joseph's getting the position he wanted. Nachmanides notes that Joseph intended Pharoah to choose him to oversee preparations for the famine, and compliments his strategy as an example of Ecclesiastes 2;14's saying the wise man "has eyes in his head," meaning understands and prepares for the future. The *haftarah* suggests that even his doing so did not guarantee the reception he wanted.

If so, the *haftarah* is alerting us to the challenges sometimes faced by those whose excellence sets them too far apart from their generation. Joseph attracted attention wherever he went for his success, but that could arouse opposition. Solomon was handed a kingdom with a strong foundation, and wisdom unparalleled in human history. Mostly, people appreciated the added value it would bring to their kingship, but Radak points us to the other side of that coin.

In summary, then, we read the story of Solomon finding the real mother of the live baby as an example of the challenges of brilliance, even that which is God-given. While all can recognize it, it is not always easy to get others to *accept* it, to follow the brilliant person in the direction he (or she) leads.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 11: Parshat Vayigash, **Ezekiel 37, 15-28**

Unity Is the First Step

Like the weather, it is easy to speak about unity but harder to do anything about it. Here this week, we will only have enough time to understand what the *haftarah* assumes by that word, and what that kind of unity can bring about.

Ezekiel is told to unite two sticks, symbolically according to Radak, or miraculously according to Rashi and Radak's father. On one of those he wrote "Judah and the Children of Israel who are his friends," and on the other "Joseph, the House of Ephraim, and the Children of Israel who are his friends." This is meant to predict the future reunification of the Northern Kingdom with the Southern, which will apparently precede God's taking the exiles back to their land, where they can be made into one nation, with one king.

Note that the verse speaks of the two sides as Judah and Ephraim and their respective cohorts. The origins of their split, in the Book of Kings, might suggest that they had a dispute over one question, whether to submit to Rehoboam's (Solomon's son) taxation, but Ezekiel is seeing them as two kingdoms that differ in basic outlook.

Recognizing that Ephraim and Judah were at conceptual odds with each other explains also why the Prophets often refer to the Northern Kingdom as Ephraim—it was their perspective that typified the Kingdom. The challenge of reunification, then, is to bring together those who disagree, even violently, into a productive working relationship.

Unifying Despite Our Differences

Some of us might think that can only occur when all Jews happen to already agree, but I do not believe that was Ezekiel's intent. If he meant *that*, it seems to me, he'd have

written the two names on one stick; his writing them on two and then bringing them together suggests they will maintain their separate identities. In spite of that, he is holding out the hope that they will still manage to reconnect.

Isaiah's vision of the angels, (read in a different *haftarah* and which forms the center of the "Kedushah" prayer in synagogue), suggests a similar idea. He describes them as calling out to each other, and then saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God." That calling out, at least in Rashi's reading, is to make sure they recite the "Holy, holy" together. Each angel has its own task, Jewish tradition claims, but their highest expression is when they praise God as one. Here, too, Ezekiel is telling us that our task is to find a way to unite while also maintaining our independent status and views.

I do not believe that means becoming indifferent to others' views or lifestyles, to confuse a desire for unity with an apathy to right and wrong. Accepting others' differences can only occur within the range of the morally plausible. Allowing others to act immorally fosters anarchy, not unity.

Unity comes once we have established parameters of accepted behavior; within those, the range offeres opportunities for different people to focus on and emphasize their particular interests and concerns. Many of the differences between Ephraim and Judah are fixed and unchangeable. What can be adjusted is the two camps' inability to work together. They can, with effort, build a polity that knows when and how to compromise.

The Key to Redemption, in Joseph's Time and Beyond

That view of unification makes clear how it could lead to the benefits described here-- return to Israel, active and open presence of God in our midst, rebuilding of the

Temple, and the return of a Davidic king. Unity is the required first step, because none of those was meant to be externally imposed.

Rather, Ezekiel is telling us that they ideally come in an environment that lets them flourish. Once we know how to reject what is absolutely wrong, make universal what is absolutely right, and grant people the opportunity to differ reasonably on the rest, we will be on the road to the final redemption.

This idea also shows us how the *haftarah* relates to the Torah reading. Joseph reveals himself to the brothers at the point that Judah has made clear at least his awareness that Jacob cares more about Benjamin than about him, Judah. Judah knows that returning without Benjamin will kill the old man, but that the loss of Judah himself would not be as catastrophic. Whatever we think of Jacob's parenting skills, Judah's ability to recognize and accept the different feelings his father has for him and his brother led, in their case, to the outcome they all wanted, reunification.

One Famous Verse, Two Important Ramifications

R. Joseph Albo, in his fifteenth century work on Jewish faith called ספר העיקרים, the Book of Principles, insists that God's promise to make the Jews one nation, in verse 22, was originally meant to apply during the Second Temple; it was only when that failed that it was left for Messianic times.

In context, it helps him make a fascinating point, that some prophecies meant for earlier times were postponed by human failure to actualize them. That also means that nothing miraculous is needed to achieve at least that aspect of Messianic times, since it could have occurred in the Second Temple era, had we only acted properly. We need not wait for it, as we wait for the Arrival, we need only make it happen.

The second example highlights some of the issues we've been discussing. R. Solomon Kluger, in his book of Responsa, האלף לך שלמה, *A Thousand For You, Solomon*, deals with a questioner who did not wish to say the morning blessing "שלא עשני גוי, who has not made me a non-Jew." The questioner noted that Jews are also called "גוי, nation," as in our verse, which refers to us as a "גוי אחד בארץ, a unified nation in the Land." R. Kluger answered that Jews are only called "nation" in the aggregate; the morning blessing refers to a non-Jewish individual that way.

He seems to understand the blessing as thanking God for not making us like non-Jews, who are, each of them on their own, a complete whole. Jews, on the other hand, are only a complete whole in unification with others. That he could see the blessing as thanking God each morning for being incomplete, for needing other Jews to be a complete whole, strikes me as a nice supplement to the ideas in the *haftarah* itself, stressing real unity as a necessary and unavoidable phase of bringing the Jewish people back to the glory of a Temple, King, and close relationship with God.

In summary, then, the symbolic act of bringing two sticks together offered a model for national unity in which differences are retained, but all unite around a core set of issues and concerns. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 12: Parshat Vayechi, I Book of Kings, 2:1-12

Starting with a Famous Verse

Although we generally leave a discussion of famous phrases from that week's *haftarah* for the end, one of the early phrases I wanted to focus on captures the theme of the *haftarah* so well I am leading off with it.

In the second verse, David tells Solomon that he is going "בדרך כל הארץ, in the way of all of the earth," a euphemism for death. The particular phrasing, however, expresses an attitude towards death that is central to understanding the *haftarah*, and vital to Judaism's view in general. David here is preparing for his death by directing Solomon on how to act after his death, akin to Jacob's telling his sons how each of them will best contribute to the Jewish people.

Instead of focusing on broad themes and life lessons, of issues of character and moral development, David tells his son which people need to be killed and which rewarded, a seemingly mundane discussion, lacking in the kind of vision or uplift we would expect from such an historic figure. It is especially odd to see someone contemplating meeting his Maker by recommending tit-for-tat vengeance. Admittedly, David opens by admonishing Solomon to keep God's law, the condition on which their hold on the kingship rests, but it seems almost lost in the shuffle.

A key clue to understanding David's words lies in realizing that the *haftarah* goes beyond the end of that section, adding two verses, one summarizing David's rule, and the other telling us that Solomon took over the throne, and that his monarchy was very well established.

The Reason to Settle Scores

These last verses suggest that David's words to Solomon were more about solidifying or completing David's legacy than about how Solomon could act for himself. To insure the continuity of *David's* kingship—different than Solomon making sure *his* rule was secure-- Solomon needs to strengthen himself and "be a man." Radak understood that to mean that Solomon needed to learn to control his temptations. Serving God has to be in there as well, since God's promise was contingent on observant of *mitsvot*.

Within that rubric, David might have told Solomon about Joab, Barzilai, and Shimi because they carry some broader message about how Solomon can best tie up the loose ends of David's life. It seems unlikely that these were the only three people with whom David had accounts to balance, since Scripture tells us of many people who had helped him, and he must have had antagonists other than the two mentioned. Rather, in learning how to handle these people, Solomon will learn lasting lessons about his father's rule.

David's having left Joab alive and functioning for many years after his crimes highlights the limitations on even David's power. By asking Solomon to take care of Joab, David was both closing a chapter and teaching Solomon that even as king he, too, would confront people he could not control but also could not excise from his life.

Barzilai: Showing Friendship Unnecessarily in Times of Need

Joab presents the complicated example of how to deal with people with whom we are close, who have provided great services, but have also caused distress and acted inexcusably. Barzilai models a different kind of friendship, where the kindnesses performed have no apparent cause other than goodwill. When Barzilai helped David, the latter was out of power; helping him could only bring trouble. David's stress on

permanently welcoming his descendants at the king's table teaches Solomon the value of publicly rewarding such open-handed friendship.

Shimi is almost the reverse, in that he had no need, no personal stake, in cursing David when Absalom rebelled. In such cases, David tells Solomon, the king has to actively kill the person (in contrast to Joab, where David only recommended insuring that Joab not die peacefully).

Rather than recording the minute details David chose to waste his time with in his waning moments, the *haftarah* shows us David using those last instructions to show his son the complexities of his own life. Armed with his father's lessons, Solomon would have a good foundation to continue his father's legacy and establish his own monarchy.

The final verses of the *haftarah*, summarizing David's rule and leading into Solomon's well-established throne, show us the success of this last scene with his son. David had ruled well himself, but, as importantly, had lain the groundwork for that success to continue well into the future. We should note that for all Solomon's great wisdom, he did not match his father in this regard, and his son presides over the split of the Jewish people into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

Two More Verses with Resonance

Verse 5: When speaking of Joab, David speaks of him as having put " דמי מלחמה בשלום, the blood of war in time of peace." David was referring to Joab's having killed without need, but in later *halachic* literature the phrase comes to mean causing unnecessary strife or embarrassment. For example, Rashba uses it when speaking denigratingly off someone who embarrassed someone else, while Rivash applies it to

nullifying an oath that was taken for someone else's benefit. Removing the promised benefit is putting "blood of war in times of peace."

Verse 9: When David wishes to broadly hint that his son needs to kill someone, he throws in "כי איש חכם אתה, for you are a wise man." Since this is before God grants Solomon his famous wisdom, David is apparently simply expressing confidence in the future monarch's ability to handle the challenge ahead of him. In Responsa literature as well, rabbis write these words to buck up a correspondent's self-confidence.

In summary, then, David's insistence that Solomon settle his scores after his death, both by rewarding those who had treated him well and taking vengeance on those who mistreated him, suggested that continuity involves each successive generation taking on the unfinished business of the previous one, and from there adding its own touches.

Shabbat Shalom.

THE *HAFTAROT* OF PART I, GENESIS: RECAP, REFLECTION, AND REPEATED THEMES

Even having limited ourselves to a thousand-odd words per *haftarah*, we still have said too much to simply collate our discussions into repeated themes and stresses. We will, therefore, take a few lines to review each *haftarah*. Once our memories are refreshed, we can more productively reflect on the repeated messages of these *haftarot*.

Parshat Bereshit: The *haftarah* used the act of Creation as the paradigm of God's power and Presence being made most manifest. The *haftarah* makes reference to, and challenges us, to see God's impact even when it is not so obvious.

Parshat Noach: The Flood was mentioned in the context of the promises of physical and spiritual bounty that will occur in the future Jerusalem; to us, that suggested that the tragedy of the Flood was as much in its cause-- the loss of realization of God so soon after Creation-- as in its resulting death and destruction.

Parshat Lech Lecha: The *haftarah* contrasted the understanding of Divine Providence that typified Jacob and Abraham. Jacob often experienced God as exacting and punishing, an important perspective in many ways, but one that needs to be balanced with the Abrahamic view of God as the trustworthy source of much good as well.

Parshat Vayera: The *haftarah* offered a look at the reward that came to two women who treated prophets with the respect and reverence they deserved. It implied that much of what led to Abraham's exalted position was his firm attachment to representing God in the world, and to spreading knowledge of God to others.

Parshat Chayye Sara: Through the story of Bathsheba and Nathan safeguarding Solomon's succession, the *haftarah* highlights the human need to make plans for after one is gone, while yet continuing to work in the here and now.

Parshat Toledot: Referring back to the selection of Jacob over Esau, the *haftarah* shows Malachi's use of the metaphor of family to protest the Jews' treating God and the Temple too familiarly, allowing themselves to insult God egregiously, then deny having done wrong.

Parshat Vayetse: Hoshea uses the metaphor of marriage and faithfulness to bemoan the Jews' betrayals of God. God, on the other hand, is portrayed as punishing, but continuingly involved. The implication seems to be that we are being warned of punishment, and are called on to match Jacob's faithfulness to Rachel.

Parshat Vayishlach: The metaphor of family returns, this time in Obadiah's complaints about Esau's national neglect of that bond by rejoicing in our downfall. More broadly, the *haftarah* uses Esau as an example of the retribution awaiting those who reject the chosenness of the Jewish people; they are a particularly good example, since they should have accepted it as the truth of their family.

Parshat Vayeshev: Amos reminds us that we often ignore the prophets because we rely on our own strengths. So, too, Joseph's brothers insisted on denying his dreams, which could have told them the future that was coming their way.

Parshat Miketz: We read the story of Solomon finding the real mother of the live baby as an example of the challenges of brilliance, even that which is God-given. While all can recognize it, it is not always easy to get others to *accept* it, to follow the brilliant person in the direction he (or she) leads.

Parshat Vayigash: The symbolic act of bringing two sticks together offered a model for national unity in which differences are retained, but all unite around a core set of issues and concerns.

Parshat Vayechi: David's insistence that Solomon settle his scores after his death, both by rewarding those who had treated him well and taking vengeance on those who mistreated him, suggested that the way to have continuity is for each successive generation to take on the unfinished business of the previous one, and move on from there to add their own touches.

Taking the *haftarot* of Genesis on their own, then, we see several themes addressed more than once. First, there is the question of God's relationship to the world, whether in terms of how manifest the Presence is; how well humanity keeps that Presence in their awareness; whether humanity manages to internalize the range of ways in which Providence can appear (punishing, rewarding, and all in between); the importance of treating God's representatives on earth with particular respect; and the question of whether we are willing to accept the admonitions of those who speak in the name of God.

A second but related topic is the use of metaphor in describing and/or experiencing our relationship with God. Whether as family or as a marriage, *haftarot* showed prophets assessing Jews' actions (and those of Esau as well) by how we would judge them if family members acted that way toward each other. We will need to watch future *haftarot*, but it is possible the metaphor is more than a convenient form of expression; perhaps metaphor expresses a view of human history, that it is no ore than a playing out of a family drama.

Third, several *haftarot* questioned how humanity can best function. These included the idea that humans need to be aware of their own mortality and prepare accordingly, that our children are meant to carry on our life's work, finishing what we left and then

building for themselves, and that true unity often involves ignoring some differences in the name of a greater whole.

I hope it is obvious that twelve *haftarot* do not a pattern make, but the limited number of themes we find in these *haftarot* at least opens the possibility that the *haftarot* as a whole will reveal a cohesive message, the lesson or lessons the Rabbis hoped Jews would learn from hearing the reading of these passages every year.

PART II: THE HAFTAROT OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Shemot, Isaiah 27;6-28:13, 29;22-3

Visions of Redemption

In obvious parallel to the Torah reading, the *haftarah* discusses redemption, starting with the actual fact of the Jewish return and "rooting" in their Land, but focusing more with the (sometimes unpleasant) steps leading up to the redemption.

For Jews stuck in Exile, the promise of return might itself be attractive enough, but the Talmud and Midrash expand it. Shabbat 145b quotes R. Joseph as reading the first verse's references to יציץ ופרח, sprouting and flowering, as referring to Torah scholars, who make fringes and decorations for Torah. Song of Songs Rabbah 7;3 takes the verse as evidence that the Jewish people are rooted to their Land in a way other nations are not.

Putting the two together, tradition seems to be suggesting that our greatest redemption involves attaching to and beautifying the Land, as Torah scholars do with Torah. Without belaboring the point, that nods in the direction of Bnei Akiva-type views of what it means to be Jewish in Israel, combining Torah study and performance of *mitsvot* with active concern with building up the Land of Israel.

After starting with the unequivocally good, several verses refer to punishment for our sins as readying the Jews for their salvation. Exactly how that works is a matter of debate, as we'll see in the "Famous Verses" section, below. Here, we can at least not Isaiah's insistence on full and proper repentance as prerequisite to redemption, and his assumption that some element of punishment will (sadly and unfortunately) be necessary before we will get to that repentance.

What Does Redemption Look Like? The Redeemer

Exodus Rabbah 1;26 reads verses 10-11 as relating to Moses and the Messiah, both of whom, according to tradition, will have grown up in non-Jewish environments (Moses in Pharoah's palace, the Messiah in Rome). At least according to this Midrash, it sounds like the redeemer might be someone who was raised in a not-specifically Jewish environment, who learned significant lessons from non-Jewish society, and only then came to take the Jews to their land.

Possibly, the Midrash implies that our attachment to our land is not meant to exclude an awareness of other nations. A leader raised in a foreign milieu will be more likely to lead us in a continuing engagement with the world.

What Does Redemption Look Like? The Different Places of Exile

Verse 12 says that God will take us out of the middle of the rushing stream, bring us back from the river of Egypt, and one by one take Jews back. Rashi reads it as referring to three types of exiles—the Assyrian, the Egyptian, and a future one. Radak identifies the river as Sambatyon, which spews stones from the strength of its flow, except for Shabbat, when it rests.

Either version makes the point that Jews inhabit exiles differentiated by more than just geography. Some are in the middle of a rushing stream, part of an exciting, vibrant society not, perhaps, particularly antithetical to observance. Others are in large groups, but in a place like Egypt, the paradigm of a culture hostile to Torah observance.

Finally, some Jews live in small groups, or in situations where so many will be assimilated that only individuals will survive (spiritually) to reach redemption. Aside from promising that God will take Jews back from all types and locations of exile, the

verse also indicates our challenge to forge a unified society out of people from such different experiences.

Verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 28 point out that the Kingdom of Judea's overinvolvement with wine, while less severe a sin than the Northern Kingdom's, still suffices to deserve punishment. Verse 8, about which see below, highlights the problem with *any* competing commitments to God; even just too much of a focus on drinking wine loosens our connection to God, leading to exile and postponing redemption.

What Will Redemption Look Like? The Challenge of Change

Starting from verse 9, Isaiah makes a comment about how God's wisdom can only be taken in little pieces. Rashi thinks he means only babies will be able to absorb that wisdom, while Radak thinks even adults might, but only in bits and pieces over long periods of time. Either version reminds us of the difficulty of retaining the kind of openmindedness, of flexibility and readiness to admit to being wrong, that might be necessary for salvation. The change of redemption might therefore need to be multi-generational, each generation moving only small steps towards absorbing enough of God's to gain the the ultimate redemption.

Famous Verses

As mentioned above, **27;8** speaks of God measuring out our punishment, " ,בסאסאה בשלחה תריבנה, In that measure, when God sent them out, did they (the enemies) contend with them" which Sotah 8b-9a took two ways. First, it read the verse as meaning that God's punishments are directly responsive to the sins committed; the Midrash adds that the same is true in reverse, that God rewards in a way directly related to the good we did.

Second, the Talmud notes God's kindness in punishing the Jewish people at each step along the way. Other nations are left untouched until the weight of their sins demands their downfall and exit from the world stage. Punishment helps us in two ways, perhaps making us aware of our sin before we get too caught up in it, but also allowing us to expiate it in small pieces instead of having to face it all at once.

Verse 13 of Chapter 27, famous because it became a song, tells of those lost in various exiles being brought back to Jerusalem. Makkot 24a sees it as Isaiah reversing Moses's warning that we will be lost in the nations where we are exiled.

Verse 8 of Chapter 28 is cited by Avot 3;3 to require including words of Torah at a meal where 3 people eat together. One of the ramifications of this reading is that it assumes that involvement in eating for its own sake is similar to idol worship in some way. Like with the drinking of wine in the Kingdom of Judea, this shows that the wrong of idol worship is in allowing competing commitments to God, whatever form they may take. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Vaera, Ezekiel 28;25-29;21

The Most Significant Challenge of Our Times (All Right, One of the Most)

This *haftarah* is a complex piece of writing, with many themes, but repeated review shows that it overall deals with how and when nations should see world events as connected to the hand of God, a question central to our times as well.

Many people instinctively recoil from the topic, since it is so widely abused. Almost every time a calamity strikes the world, some religious leader, Jewish or not, will confidently announce why it happened. In reaction, many choose to avoid considering the topic; the *haftarah* teaches us that that, too, is not a solution.

The main body of the *haftarah* records God's complaint about Egypt's seeing itself as all-powerful, and the threat that Egypt will be fully destroyed, lie desolate for forty years, and then return to spend the rest of history in subservience to those around it. Egypt is called the "Great Alligator," proud of its Nile as a source of its power. In addition, the Midrash thinks the punishments promised to Egypt here parallel the Ten Plagues begun in the Torah reading.

In the parallel Torah reading, we see Moses trying to convince the Egyptians they cannot hold on to the Jews against God's Will; they ignored the message and bore the consequences. Egypt in Ezekiel's time is repeating Pharoah's error, seeing itself as fully independent, all-powerful, god-like. The *haftarah*, by showing us a similar situation, raises the question of how nations will ever learn to submit to that Will.

Punish Them Until They Learn

One option, that of the *haftarah*, is to administer warnings and punishments. When Egypt will be laid waste, it will show the survivors and surrounding nations the folly of

ever thinking of oneself as all-powerful. Forty years is a traditional time of reeducation—think of the Jews in the desert after the sin of the spies, which proved they could not shift their mindset from that of slaves to that of free devotees of God—so Egypt's time of desolation would seem to be geared towards teaching them a lesson.

That last point is made even more strongly by a Midrash that says that those forty years will be repayment for the five years of famine the Egyptians avoided in the time of Joseph. (Tradition has it that once Jacob came to Egypt, the famine ceased, after only two of the predicted seven years).

Since forty years is many more than five, I suspect the Midrash is making a thematic connection—in Joseph's time, when the famine had been directly predicted and prepared for under his guidance, the five years would have fortified their understanding that God rules many world events. At a later juncture, when the Egyptians have ignored all the various prophecies and been punished for that, they will need a fuller dose of reeducation before they can return.

Failure Leaves a Mark Which We Might Hope Will Teach Others

Even then, having failed twice to react appropriately to God's power, they will be doomed to subservience to other nations. Lord Acton famously said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but God expects it to be used wisely, judiciously, and with humility. Those who cannot will find their power taken away, never to return.

The introduction and conclusion to the *haftarah* flesh out the importance of trying to understand how and when world events can be traced back to God. It opens with the concluding verses to an earlier prophecy, which tell of the Jews' returning to their land, building homes, planting vineyards, and living securely.

There can be many reasons for a prophet to promise that, but the emphasis here is on the example it will set for other nations, which makes the prophet's singling out vineyards worth pondering. While it may simply reflect his time, I suspect that planting a vineyard is also seen as an inherently religious activity. Aside from the *mitsvot* connected to agriculture and to wine, farming is one of those human endeavors most reliant on factors out of human control.

Indeed, Maimonides thought all of idol worship had its roots in farmers' attempts to gain greater control of the supernatural factors that would affect their harvests. (In defense of farmers, it is only in the last few hundred years that agricultural yields have been good enough to make food plentiful in most years in most parts of the world; until then, good years were good enough to keep everyone alive and fed, and bad years were disastrous. The temptation to seek any possible advantage in securing a better harvest must have been overwhelming).

World Leaders as Servants of God

The end of the *haftarah* points in the same direction. God suddenly speaks to Ezekiel of Nebuchadnezzar, who is seen as having done God's work in destroying Tyre, despite the likelihood that he did that for his own reasons. As part of that reward, God says that the Babylonian king will replace Egypt. That reminds us that Egypt had a role to play in world history, that it could have been successful and earned reward. Its failure created the need for a replacement.

Possibly, God envisions the world as always having one or two superpowers, entrusted with directing the course of events, and, ideally, seeing their job as given to

them by God, for Godly purposes. Our *haftarah* shows us a superpower that instead became intoxicated with its power, leading to its eventual, but certain, downfall.

Nebuchadnezzar eventually did the same, becoming too sure of his power. The question he raises for us, though, is how and when we can see such leaders as instruments of the Divine Will or as opponents of that Will. In this context, the verse from Proverbs, 21;1, פלגי מים לב מלך ביד ה', like waves of wter is the heart of a king in the Hands of God, tantalizes us with the suggestion that God limits the freewill of world leaders, but does not give us exact guidance on how to distinguish one from the other.

In concert with the Torah reading, the *haftarah* reminds us that political events, especially those of great import for the Jewish people, often have a component of Divine Providence to them. The search for an exact definition of when that happens, as well as for a superpower that handles its job as an extension of God's impact on the world, that humbly and honestly seeks to do what God would want, continues. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Bo, Jeremiah 46;13-28

Two Prophets Reacting to the Same Event

The prophet Jeremiah gives a date for this week's *haftarah* that puts it at just about the same time as in last week's, although that one was by Ezekiel. Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt inspired both prophets, living hundreds of miles apart, Ezekiel in Bavel and Jeremiah still in Israel.

That fact alone raises the question of how naturalistically we view prophecy. Some Jewish thinkers saw prophecy as mostly a function of the prophet's personal perfection. For such views—Maimonides seems close to this one—if a person achieves the requisite personal perfections and God does not choose to intervene to interrupt the flow of prophecy, prophecy comes. In this view, prophecy is a metaphysical event that is nonetheless part of the makeup of the world.

For people who understand the workings of prophecy this way, our two *haftarot* suggest that both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were so moved by Bavel's conquest of Egypt as to have a prophetic vision. Since prophecy depends on the prophet's readiness for it, we would have to say that the event impressed them enough to spur their words.

On the other hand, for those who see prophecy as mostly God-driven—that God decides who gets prophecy and when, although there may be minimum standards for who God would speak to in this way—we would need to understand these two prophecies as reflecting God's interest in "getting the word out" about His perspective of the events.

Either way, the conquest of Egypt was clearly repercussive, a world-shaking hapening that reflected a change in the very fabric of God's relationship with the world.

We saw some of what that was about last week, but Jeremiah will help us flesh it out further.

Note also that while these prophecies seem relevant to us because of their parallel to our Torah readings (the Exodus, the Egyptian failure to understand the need to listen to God), they are less obviously explainable in their original context. The Jewish people were about to themselves go into exile, the Temple was about to be destroyed, and God was taking time to hearken back to the mistakes Egypt had made and continues to make. At a basic level, it reminds us of Egypt's permanent role as bearer of the message of God's supremacy in the world.

One Voice, Two Messages

For all that their prophecies reflect the words of the One True God—whose Unity means that the messages must somehow come together into one whole—Ezekiel and Jeremiah appear to have absorbed God's message slightly differently. In last week's *haftarah*, Ezekiel focused on Egypt, her overweening view of herself, and the comeuppance headed her way. That it would be Nebuchadnezzar who served as the vehicle of that destruction was only mentioned briefly at the end, and is linked to the reward he deserves for destroying Tyre.

Ezekiel thus concentrates on God striking down those who deny or ignore God, such as Egypt and Tyre.

For Jeremiah, on the other hand, the conquest is central, providing a date for the prophecy; Jeremiah also relates his words to the Egyptians back to the Jews, encouraging them by saying that God will not abandon them, that they need not fear the kind of outcome Egypt is getting.

I think the difference between the prophecies stems from where the two prophets were living—where you stand depends on where you sit. Ezekiel, already in Bavel, was necessarily removed from events in Egypt; they might be interesting on the scale of world events, but not urgently or directly important to him.

For Jeremiah, though, the fall of Egypt was a significant step towards the Destruction itself, taking away one of the political and military allies some Jews had relied on. He elsewhere also mentions that the Jews repeatedly turned to Egypt for assistance with attackers, that instead of seeing Egypt as an ancient enemy, Jews of the eighth through fifth centuries saw them as a source of salvation. For Jeremiah, their defeat drives home a very practical point about allies and who the Jews should turn to for protection, more than some philosophical ideas about world control.

The Whole Message May Take More than One Sitting

Why would God give both prophecies (or, for the naturalists among us, why would there be value in seeing both perspectives of the event)? One aspect of the answer depends on remembering that Egypt was both a world power whose attitudes challenged the Jewish monotheistic picture and also an ally who more directly tempted the Jews to see their salvation coming elsewhere than from God. These two qualities show us where each prophet's message would have value, in particular for the audience who might first hear it.

In Bavel, the question of allies had long ago fallen off the top of their agenda, since they had no political autonomy anyway. For them, the fate of Egypt was of more theoretical interest, as a question of where and how God's rule would be revealed.

In Judah, where the defeat of Egypt dashed many actual hopes and brought the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth and its Temple one step closer, the event would impact Jeremiah's listeners more personally and more distressingly. Seeing Egypt lose to Nebuchadnezzar might inspire complete despair (hence Jeremiah's care in reminding the Jews *not* to fear, because God is with them), but might also have us miss the forest; seeing it from afar, as Ezekiel did, allowed him to point out its cosmic and historic significance.

Hence the two *haftarot* give us both immediate and general perspective of Egypt, thus also enriching our understanding of the Exodus, redemption, and its multiple meanings for Jewish history. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Beshalach-- Judges 4;4-5;31

Why is This the *Haftarah* for Parshat Beshalah?

The tempting answer to this question is that it contains a song of praise to God, like in the Torah reading itself. Indeed, Sefardi custom limits the *haftarah* to the Shirah, the Song. Ashkenazic custom, which reads the story leading up to the Song, seems to add another element; along these lines the Mechilta says that the salvation of Devorah's time, not just the Song, is parallel to that of the Splitting of the Sea.

We can see how Devorah's events somewhat replay those at Yam Suf by focusing on three aspects of the *haftarah*—the scorn Devorah displays for Barak when he insists on her coming with him, the interest in Yael and her killing of Sisera (as shown by her figuring prominently in the Song as well as in the story), and the Song's negative reaction to those who neglected to join the battle against Sisera. (Devorah herself, both in her functioning as a judge and involvement with the wicks of the menorah, points in the same direction, but clarifying those points would take too much space).

The Call to War

After introducing Devorah, the prophet tells us that she sent a message to Barak ordering him to take ten thousand men from Naftali and Zevulun to Mount Tabor, where God would cause Sisera—whom we were earlier told was the general for Yavin, the king of Canaan who had been troubling the Jews—to come fight.

Barak agrees to go only on condition that Devorah come with him. While she accepts, she makes her displeasure clear by noting that his unwillingness to act on his own means he will not get any glory for the victory he is about to produce. Barak's

hesitation about listening to Devorah, apparently, is both bothersome to her and worth our while to know.

Yael's Prominence

Telling the story of the victory takes ten verses; seven of them are devoted to Yael's interactions with Sisera, ending with her showing his corpse to the Jews who had been chasing him. Four verses of Devorah's Song praise Yael's role in his death. Despite recognizing how impressive it is that a woman took upon herself to lure an Assyrian general to sleep and then killed him with a tent-peg and a hammer, I still also suspect the prophet is celebrating more than just the fact of her killing Sisera.

Denigrating Those Who Failed to Join

The key to understanding our focus on those two parts of the incident lies in the Shirah's also taking time to curse those who did not come to help Barak fight against Sisera. In today's world, that kind of behavior would be criticized as unseemly; once a battle or effort is won, the winner is supposed to thank those who helped, not speak against those who did not. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, contemporary society holds, and respect involves not looking down on them for holding to their views.

Regardless of whether that is true in ordinary human interactions, it is decidedly not true when a prophetess of God issues a declaration. At that point, it becomes incumbent upon all—Jew or non-Jew-- to contribute to the success of the prophet's endeavor. The tribes that failed to heed her call—and, in the Talmud's reading, the celestial stars that did the same—deserve blame for failing to further God's cause.

Phrasing it that way also explains Barak and Yael's role. Barak should have taken Devorah's directions, since she speaks in God's Name. Had he done so, he'd have been

the vehicle of God's saving the Jewish people and celebrated as such; that he needs continuing support from the prophet is itself a mark against his character.

Yael, on the other hand, had no obvious obligation to join in the defeat of Sisera, so her decision to intervene, in ways not at all characteristic of women of her time, was all the more impressive. It was not so much that we needed Sisera dead, since he'd been defeated already, as that we revel in someone else's recognizing the truth of our God and our prophets.

Taking all three of these together, we see the subtext of the *haftarah* is the question of joining, of when and how people in the world, Jew or non-Jew, are willing to cast their lot with God, Creator of Heaven and Earth; at the Sea (in the Torah reading), no one had a choice because of how clear the Hand was. In the rest of human history, the challenge is more complicated, and thus what Devorah sings about in her Song.

The Return of Famous Verses

1) Pesachim 66b uses Devorah's call to herself (**verse 12:** "עורי עורי דבורה, awake, awake, Devorah") to prove that if a prophet acts arrogantly, his/her prophecy will be removed. Devorah had previously (verse 7) said that Jews were afraid to live in border cities, until she came and made it safe. That arrogance deprived her momentarily of prophecy, so she had to revive it by saying "awake, awake."

2) **Verse 23** starts with the words "אורו מרוז, curse Meroz," (Rashi says it's either a star or an important person), from which the Talmud derives the right to excommunicate a person who refuses a summons from a religious court, a Beit Din. Devorah's call to war, in other words, was binding on all Jews; refusing it lay one open to communal

sanctions. That verse ends by saying that they did not come to the aid of God, from which the Sifrei understands that helping the Jewish people is the same as helping God.

3) The Sages understand Yael to have helped Sisera fall asleep by more than just giving him milk rather that water. Based on **verse 24**, the Talmud famously declares an "עבירה לשמה, a sin undertaken with perfectly pure purposes" greater than a " מצוה שלא לשמה, a mitzvah performed with lesser motivations than just serving God."

4) Sisera's mother's cries teach the Talmud, Rosh haShanah 33b, that the blasts of the shofar on Rosh haShanah should sound like crying, since Onkelos translates יום תרועה, a day of blowing as "יום יבבה, day of crying," the same verb as describes Sisera's mother crying for her son.

5) The last verse in the *haftarah* serves as the crux of a famous Talmudic declaration (e.g. at Yoma 23a), that those who "are insulted and do not insult, hear themselves reviled without replying, act out of love and are pleased with the travails [God sends them]" are the definition of the lovers of God whom our verse describes as "the going out of the sun at its full strength." **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Yitro-- Isaiah 6;1-7;6, 9;5-6

The connection of the first half of this *haftarah* to our Torah reading is clear, since it is Isaiah's vision of God; just as the Jews' saw God at Sinai, Isaiah sees God here. The second half does not fit so well, either with the first half or with the Torah reading, since it takes up another incident at a different stage of Isaiah's career.

A little thought shows that the first half, too, bears further consideration. True, both readings speak of a revelation of God, but the Torah reading speaks of God's appearance at Sinai, an event on a different scale and of a different sort than Isaiah's. God appearing to an entire people and giving them the laws that form one version of the core of their religion bears little relation to an individual attaining a personal vision of God in which he volunteers for a prophetic mission. Especially since that mission consists of informing the Jews of their inadequacies, the relation to Sinai becomes tenuous.

What Does God Look Like to Isaiah?

The content of the vision offers a key to figuring out the role of the second half of the *haftarah* as well as the relationship of both halves to the Torah reading. Isaiah sees God sitting on an exalted throne, with His "bottom parts" (whatever that means when applied to God) filling the Temple. That already suggests a God who is exalted and removed even as His impact is strongly felt in the world, immanent while transcendent.

Isaiah locates his vision in the Temple, an interesting choice since so much of his book bemoans how the Jews' emphasis on ritual and sacrifice has fed a neglect of social justice. This vision reminds us that he did not mean to deny the Temple's importance,

just to point out the Jews' failure to balance their Temple- focus with necessary other actions.

Placing the vision in the Temple also gives it a more national than personal tinge, since that is where God promised to relate to the people as a whole, not just individuals. Isaiah's seeing "שרפים, seraphim," fiery angels, rather than ordinary ones, fits the content of the vision, since he then finds out that he has volunteered to tell the Jews of the trouble they are in.

The commentators disagree as to whether he is telling them that their hearts, ears, and eyes *are* too hardened to heed the messages that will help them avoid the coming destruction or whether he is informing them that God *is going* to harden their hearts, with the same result. Both readings stress the implausibility of change, again moving the experience from the personal to the national.

This complements Sinai; in the first case, God appeared to the entire people with a message of love, command, and continuing connection, while in the later vision He called on Isaiah to serve as messenger to inform the people of how far they have strayed and their inability to any longer hear from God directly.

Chapter 7, Verses 1-6: A Message of Hope

So far, the *haftarah* gives a negative counterpart to Sinai, leaving little hope. Chapter 7 balances that picture, opening the door to a more positive outcome than just death or destruction. Here, Ahaz, an evil king, is told not to fear the kings who are coming to attack him, because God will protect him from them. The two incidents, juxtaposed, show us an exquisite irony of Isaiah's career. He begins his prophecy during

the time of a good king, Uziyah, and predicts doom and destruction, but is later also commissioned to tell an evil king, Ahaz, that God will save him.

In the context of Sinai, we see that Isaiah's job was to clarify aspects that might have been misunderstood by the Jews. At the beginning of his prophecy, faced with people who were in many ways good and dedicated to God, his job was to remind them that they were nonetheless neglecting vital aspects of God's service. Were that to continue, he is telling them, they would bear significant consequences.

Later on, when the people's spiritual status has declined, perhaps to the point that they can no longer imagine God's love, Isaiah is there to remind them of the other half of Sinai. Sinai embodies command, which implies reward and punishment, but also love, connection, and closeness.

God can show both in one meaning-packed event, but people need to separate the various pieces, to experience each on its own, before they can put them back together into a unified whole. Isaiah, in the *haftarah*, shows us one example of such a process.

Famous Verses

1) Yevamot 49b identifies Isaiah's referring to the Jews in **Verse 5** as an " עם טמא שפתים, a nation of impure lips" as the sin that made him vulnerable to being killed. The Talmud says that Menaseh, the son of Hezekiah, accused Isaiah of contradicting Moses, since he claimed to have seen God, which the Torah says is impossible for mortals.

Realizing the pointlessness of arguing, Isaiah instead hid in a tree; Menasseh ordered it chopped in pieces, and when the ax hit Isaiah's lips—the locus of his sinful denigration of the Jews-- he was killed. Note that his lips remained vulnerable despite an angel having removed his sin by placing a hot coal on his mouth.

The Talmud offers an answer to Menasseh's claim, explaining that only Moses had to worry about seeing God and living, because only he saw through an "אספקלריא המאירה, a clear glass," meaning with enough accuracy that any fuller a vision might be beyond his powers to bear. For all other prophets, the issue never arose.

2) **Verse 10** threatens or predicts that the Jewish people's hearts will be fattened, preventing them from repenting. As it does so, though, the verse notes that were the Jews to repent, they would be healed, teaching R. Yohanan (Rosh haShanah 17b) that, at least for a community, repentance is available even after the promulgation of a Divine decree of punishment.

3) **Chapter 7 verse 3** refers to the place where Isaiah and his son should meet Ahaz as "שדה כובס," which the Talmud interprets as meaning that Ahaz was ashamed before Isaiah. That shame saved him a share in the World to Come, so that he is not included in the list at the beginning of the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin of those who permanently lost that share. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat Mishpatim-- Jeremiah 34;8-22, 33;25-26

The Significance of Slaves

This week's Torah reading, the first after telling us of the greatest mass revelation ever claimed by any people, starts with the laws of slaves. Especially considering our current revulsion for the whole institution, we might find it odd verging on problematic that the Torah would open its presentation of Jewish law with this. Stranger is Nachmanides's claim that we start with it because of its significance.

The Incident

The *haftarah* opens with the story of a covenant made by the people and Zedekiah, the last king of the First Temple, in which they agreed to free their Jewish slaves (who were being held longer than the prescribed term). Soon after, though, the people violated the pact and took their slaves back.

The first part of God's reaction, verses 12-16, recaps the events—the original violation of Torah law, the covenant, and the reneging of the promise. At the simplest level, the text portrays the richer, stronger class of the era of the Destruction as not only willing to enslave the poor among them, but as so addicted to slavery that they could not resist re-enslaving them despite their best intentions otherwise.

The Talmud adds an element by assuming that the freeing of slaves here was actually the *yovel* freeing, which came once every fifty years. Since those laws only apply when *all* the tribes are living in their section of the Land of Israel, the Talmud has to also assert that Jeremiah brought back members of each of the Ten Lost Tribes, exiled by Assyria many years earlier.

That *yovel* is in effect only when we have שבטים במקומם, the Tribes resident in their parts of the Land, shapes the meaning of the requirement to free slaves in that year. Moderns tend to read the *yovel* obligation as expressing an avoidance of permanent slavery, at least for Jews. If that were the whole truth, making it apply only when all the tribes are in their assigned regions is counterintuitive.

It seems more reasonable to say that the freeing of slaves at *yovel* depends on the context of a certain kind of society. In contrast, truly fundamental Jewish obligations—loving God, imitating God's Attributes, studying Torah—apply to all social circumstances. To be living a full ideal Jewish life in the Land, apparently, means subsuming oneself, somewhat, to tribal affiliation. Something about *that* experience makes it important to free slaves every fifty years.

Who Cares About *Yovel*?

Without the Talmud, it seems clear we would have assumed the case was one of inappropriate buying and holding of slaves, without any connection to *yovel*. The Sages brought that in here, I believe, because of the text's use of the word *deror* for the freedom to be given the slaves. When the prophet uses the same word when announcing that God will release sword, pestilence, and famine as punishment for their failures, it emphasizes this connection. As the Liberty Bell made famous, the word *deror* is how the Torah describes the *yovel* release of slaves.

Just as one more point of interest: the Talmud in Shabbat relates the word *deror* to the ציפור דרור, a free or wild bird, which treats habited and inhabited areas equally. If so, *deror* signals indifference to distinctions of types of space or, perhaps, personal status.

That we only call for *deror* when the Tribes are accepting their assigned places of residence highlights the dialectic in a Jew's experience of boundaries.

The Meaning of Freedom

Deror freedom, the ability to throw off the yoke of slavery (or of a prior sale of land), is only properly given to those who operate on a backdrop of a deeper awareness of the lines that need to be drawn in society.

It is not freedom to do as one wants, it is a freedom to contribute freely while knowing which boundaries are inviolable. In a society that respects limits of places of residence, the more restrictive realm of slavery—which, after all, also teaches limits, just in a more drastic way, with significant other costs—can be made temporary rather than permanent. In a society that does *not* have that sense, there is less push for the freeing of slaves.

The ideal Jewish society re-makes itself every fifty years, gives a renewed chance to all its inhabitants to contribute and succeed, by freeing slaves and repatriating land. Failure to undo those restrictions, God says, will lead Him to undo other restrictions, the ones ordinarily placed on the destructive forces of Nature.

In the Talmud's reading, Jeremiah's plainsense complaint about re-enslaving people becomes a broader indictment of their failure to use their social differentiations—by Tribe—to allow them to periodically give a new chance to society's failures.

The Closing Verses

The closing two verses surprise us by going back to chapter 33. The commentators agree that the verses mean to correlate God's faithfulness to His covenants (day and night and heaven and earth, or, according to some statements in The Sages,

circumcision) to His concern with having a ruler for the Jewish people descended from David, and, perhaps, a priest from the family of Aaron.

The idea that the rule of David and his descendants signals the proper workings of Nature fits well with the themes we have already seen. When people order themselves properly, God orders the universe properly, preventing the advent of chaos. A king from the family of David likewise contributes to insuring the proper ordering of the (human) world and is therefore intimately connected to God's promises to maintain the order of the natural world.

All of which supports Nachmanides's claim that slavery is put first because of its significance. In our *haftarah*, slavery is seen to be problematic in its practice, but not in theory. Just as Nature needs limits, and the Davidic king provides them, slavery can be a workable system when operating within a *yovel* society, one with sharp limits woven into its fabric. The failure to adhere to those limits can, in the extreme, lead to the loss of other important limits, bringing on us the destruction that comes with that loss. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Terumah-- I Book of Kings 5;26-6; 13

Selecting Issues to Discuss

In a fairly obvious relationship between the *haftarah* and the Torah reading, we read about King Solomon building the Temple. Among the many issues this *haftarah* raises, we here only have room to deal with four: 1) Why focus on this part of the building process? 2) The ethics of making pacts with non-Jews, 3) The superhuman effort needed for building a Temple, and 4) The role of converts in the process.

Our text opens with a comment on Solomon's wisdom, on there being peace between him and Hiram the king of Tyre, and their having made a *berit*, a covenant with each other. But this was not their first interaction, even about the building of a Temple. Figuring out why we start here, then, should tell us about the message the *haftarah* seeks to send.

Focus on God

In line with the Torah's stress that donations to the Tabernacle should reflect personal generosity and freewill gifts, the *haftarah* might be trying to de-emphasize Solomon's contribution. Just as the Torah wants the money and materials to be given with no thought of personal recognition, the *haftarah* does not want us to put Solomon in the center of the proceedings. Starting where we do stresses God's giving Solomon the necessary wisdom, de-emphasizing Solomon himself.

Alternatively, the *haftarah* might be pointing out that approaching a supplier, even when the meeting goes well, is not the same as actually embarking on actual building. Perhaps the *haftarah* starts here because Solomon's getting the necessary wisdom and his signing an agreement with Hiram were the start of the building process.

Making a Pact with a Non-Jew: An Interesting Problem

The pact with Hiram is no simple matter, since Tosafot in Yevamot 23a is of two minds as to whether the Torah's prohibition of "לא תכרות להם ברית ולא תחנם, you shall not make a covenant with them nor show them favor," includes all non-Jews. In their first answer, they suggest that Hiram was a גר תושב, a person who formally accepted the שבע מצוות בני נח, the Noahide laws. Accepting this view makes it unclear how we could make pacts with non-Jews in modern times, since we generally assume that only a Sanhedrin can certify non-Jews with this גר תושב status.

In our search for another answer, we can point to the Talmud in Avodah Zarah 20a, which seems to see the prohibition of pacts as limited to the 7 Canaanite nations. For other nations, the pact-rule would apply only if the point of the treaty was to agree to worship idols; Solomon could not have made an agreement with Hiram to help him worship idols in any way, nor could he have made reached a covenant with any of the Seven Nations. Other than that, foreign policy was unfettered.

The Sum of All Energies: The Call of the Project

The opening reference to God giving Solomon wisdom is odder than we as readers of the *haftarah* might realize, since the prophet had already mentioned it, in parts of the book we don't read. Nachmanides repeatedly hints that the verse means to imply that God in some way rested His Divine Presence within Solomon.

Not only did God give him sufficient wisdom to rule the people, a huge challenge, He additionally and separately made him able to build a Temple, an endeavor that apparently calls for skills beyond pure intelligence. To build the House of God (for all that we know that the term is a metaphor) requires a metaphysical and superhuman

understanding of the Divine, something that can only come with an extraordinary influx of wisdom from God.

Another example of how Solomon had to stretch to the boundaries of human capability to build the Temple comes in the staffing of the project. The verse tells us thirty thousand people would rotate on a three month cycle, spending a month at a time away from home. R. Yohanan, in Ketubbot 61b, reads this as the outer limit of a husband's acceptable absence from home, showing us that Solomon was demanding as much as he could of the people. The building of the Temple, then, called for everyone involved to reach the limits of human capabilities, not only in wisdom but in physical and emotional commitment.

Call in the Converts

Yevamot 79a assumes that all the tens of thousands of workers who helped Solomon build the Temple were converts, not natural born Jews. Further, the Talmud assumes they were inspired to their conversion by an incident in David's career, where God visited famine on the Jewish people until David atoned for Saul's having mistreated the Gibeonites.

It seems odd that those who joined the people after seeing our dedication to justice should then be pressed into hard labor. The Talmud seems not to notice the irony, perhaps because we err in envisioning these tasks as undignified.

To highlight the contrast, I once heard of a family where the grandfather was blind and largely deaf. Friday night, the mother would place her father in law at the sink, show him (by hand) the faucet, the dishes, the washcloth, and the drying rack and leave him to his task. Rather than fobbing off an unwanted chore on a defenseless old man, the

incident was this family's way of showing that he was still a valued contributor to the workings of the household.

So, too, I suspect the Talmud would say that Solomon was giving these converts the privilege of being directly involved in building a structure that would be at the center of the nation's existence, which also shows them how readily and fully they had been accepted into the Jewish people. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Tetsaveh--Ezekiel 43;10-27

The Dedication Ceremony and Its Connection to the Torah reading

This *haftarah*, as so many others, comes in the middle of a longer discussion. In the original context, Ezekiel is giving a lengthy description of a Temple. It is not clear whether he intended his predictions about the second one (which had not yet been built) or the third, but it *is* clear that his vision did not come true in the Second Temple and would therefore (presumably) be in the Third.

In the selection we read, the connection to the Torah reading would seem to come from their both outlining a dedication ceremony. If so, the *haftarah* would seem to signal that the dedication part of the Torah reading is central to the portion of the week.

The altar's sanctification is described in the second half of the *haftarah*, which might fool us into glossing over the first half. That section-- in which Ezekiel is told to embarrass the people by informing them of the Temple, and then, once they are properly chastened, to tell them the design of the House—carries important messages of its own.

Tanhuma to Tsav 14 sees the verses as supporting the contention that just thinking about the Temple can somewhat replace the structure itself. This idea is more commonly known from Hosea 14, where the verse says ונשלמה פרים שפתינו, we will replace bulls (of sacrifices) with our lips. These sources cannot be taken fully literally, since there would then be no need for the Temple itself.

Study, Knowledge, Action: An Unbreakable Chain

Looking more broadly, the reference raises a problem that plagues philosophical readings of Judaism, those that focus on how religion is supposed to affect us internally.

For many, if the internal goal is reached—such as thinking of God as one would at a Temple—it is not clear why action is necessary.

I believe the sources actually only mean to say that study puts us in the ballpark of having an actual Temple, not replaces it. The mention of embarrassing the people suggests that studying about the Temple makes us feel its absence, and stimulates the kind of *teshuvah* that will merit its rebuilding. Similarly, studying the laws of sacrifices might bring us close the kind of reaction to our sins as were stimulated in the person bringing that sacrifice. Study is not instead, it is the next best way to achieve that.

The introductory material thus reminds us to see this week's readings—Torah and *haftarah*— as a way of trying to make up for our loss of the structure and practices that best focused our thoughts and actions on God. This additionally serves to keep us conscious of what we lack, to avert our ever thinking that we can practice the religion fully even without that building.

Unpacking the meaning of the various measurements of the altar would take us too far afield here, but I will note Midrashim that focus on the prophet's use of the phrase מחק הארץ, from the bosom of the Earth, to indicate measuring from the ground up. Several midrashim, such as the introductions to Lamentations Rabbah, explain this as reflecting the assumption that the Temple is itself the bosom of the Earth. Here, too, we see the Temple being given a significance beyond its atonement function.

Contrasting Dedications

Comparing the dedication ceremony described here to the one in the Torah reading draws our attention to Ezekiel being told to give a bull-offering for the priests, but after that first day, to spend seven days offering a שעיר, a goat, as a sin-offering, which seems

to be more about the altar itself. In the Torah reading as well, the offerings made for the priests, a bull and two rams for seven days, seem separate from the offerings that dedicated the altar itself, a bull and then two sheep daily.

We can explain these separate dedications, I think, based on Nachmanides's comment in Numbers 7;13. He says God had not planned a formal dedication of the Tabernacle, but the נשיאים's, the heads of the tribes, initiative brought about a whole ceremony. His view is an example of what we've seen several times, that God leaves room for human beings to contribute creatively to the system He outlined.

What Was the New Role of the *Mizbeah*?

Nachmanides does not discuss whether he means that God left blank spaces with many options for how to fill in, or whether God expected or wanted one kind of future but yielded to human desires for another kind (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive; there may be examples of each). Another of Nachmanides's examples, the second opportunity to offer a Paschal sacrifice, known as Pesach Sheni, highlights this issue: Did God not care about the topic, and left it open for human input, or did God have a different view of how it should work?

Applying that idea to the dedication ceremony for the *mizbeah* is no simple matter. My own guess would be that God would have seen the need to dedicate the priests, to have them spend a week formally being inaugurated into their roles, because they were being converted into living representatives of God.

The *mizbeah*, on the other hand, was an object and was built for this specific purpose. Such an item, we could have imagined, would not need dedication other than use (as was true for the rest of history, when vessels of service in the Temple were

sanctified by use). When the heads of the tribes brought offerings that led to a dedication ceremony, they were pointing out that people need pomp and circumstance to properly focus their minds on the goals of this place and this altar. That truth, Ezekiel shows us, will apply as much in the future as it did in the past.

Our *haftarah*, then, complements the Torah reading in several ways. It reminds us of how embarrassing it is not to have this central structure of Jewish life; it suggests that immersing ourselves in study of the Temple can serve to partially make up for its loss; and it shows us how the dedication ceremonies for the Temple combine the Divine Will with human input in a way that readies the Temple for its role as the center of the earth, as the place where humans can serve as living representatives of God, and where pomp and circumstance will serve people by focusing their minds and actions towards service of God. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Ki Tissa, I Book of Kings 18; 1-39

Public and Private Recreations of the Challenge of the Golden Calf

This week's *haftarah* starts with God sending Elijah to tell Ahab that He is going to make it rain. Everything else in the *haftarah* extends from there, but the connection to the Torah reading would seem to come only in the second half, where Elijah and Ahab meet, joust tensely about the cause of the current drought, and then Elijah defeats the priests of Baal in the contest to bring fire down from heaven.

That the story flows in the original text does not explain why we choose to read it all, since Elijah's meeting with Obadiah, a servant of Ahab, has little to do with later events. Elijah sends Obadiah to the king with the news that he would be coming that day, and the latter protests. A spirit of God would surely whisk Elijah away, leaving Obadiah—who mentions that he has saved a hundred prophets from Ahab's wife, by hiding them in caves—to face his master alone.

Honing in on the connection between the second half of the *haftarah* and the sin of the Golden Calf will also show us why Obadiah's life story is surprisingly prominent in our *haftarah* readings, appearing in two others besides this one.

Carmel and Calf: Two Ways of Proving God's Power

A crucial component of the Torah reading and the *haftarah* is that the Jewish people had lost sight of the identity of the True God. Some part of the people declared the Calf "the God Who took you out of Egypt." In the *haftarah*, Elijah offers a stark choice between Baal and God, and the people are silent, unable to choose. The prophet in each case had to prove and/or reinforce faith in the true God.

Emphasizing the people's inability or refusal to choose explains aspects of each story. Ahab greets Elijah rudely every time he sees him, and accuses the prophet of being the source of the people's problems. At the same time, he obeys Elijah's orders, gathering the people and the priests of Baal to Carmel as he commandes.

It is not that he and his people lacked belief in God or Elijah, it was that they believed in God *and* Baal. Elijah's thundering insistence on choosing between the two was so foreign to their perspective they could not respond.

That helps us understand Elijah's reason for mocking the prophets of Baal as they tried to bring fire on their sacrifice. It was almost not enough for him to win, since that might only convince the people that God was stronger than Baal on *this* occasion: he needed to win so fully as to erase the people's connection to Baal.

This theme of rejuvenating faith explains what we learn of the altar he uses. The verse tells us he "rebuilt מזבח ה' ההרוס, the altar of God that was destroyed." Then he took 12 stones—the verse itself notes the parallel to the tribes, to whom God had said "Israel will be your name." The altar and the stones remind his audience of their heritage, shows them how far they, the descendants of the Twelve Tribes, epitomes of faith and originators of the Shema, have fallen.

The Calf—National Calamity?

In parallel, God's reaction to the Calf might surprise us when we notice that the Levites killed "only" 3000 Calf-worshippers. While no small number—it is as many deaths as on 9/11 in a smaller group— it is still only a half a percent. Were 50,000 New Yorkers (or 1½ million Americans) to develop some crazy religion, would we expect God to blame the city or region as a whole?

We need to realize, instead, that the sin lay in the broader community, who saw the Calf as no big deal, who were either silently supportive or at least agnostic. The actual worshippers became liable for death, but God's reaction focused on the wider nation, whose lack of protest made the sin so intolerable.

Obadiah: Presence Beyond Apparent Impact or Importance

Recognizing that the Jews of Elijah's time had this pluralistic and confused religiosity helps us decode his meeting with Obadiah. According to tradition, this is the third time we meet Obadiah in the *haftarot*, since the Sages assumed it was his widow who cried out to Elisha for financial assistance (and he told her to borrow pots, and fill them with oil, etc.), and we read the entirety of his book as the *haftarah* for Vayishlah. Considering his relatively small impact on Scripture as a whole, it is surprising to see him so often.

The answer may lie in his role in this era; his central act was hiding and sustaining God's prophets, revealing him to be a force for good despite his inability to invoke supernatural assistance (in contrast to both Elijah and Elisha). He circumvents Ahab rather than challenge him; knows supernatural forces will save Elijah, but does not expect them for himself. When the text shows us his meeting with Elijah, we see two ways people can make God's Presence known in the world, working within the natural order or beyond it.

The two halves of our *haftarah* thus combine to show us the test of the Calf and at Carmel in its fuller difficulty. In a world of competing allegiances, the Jewish people repeatedly develop an attachment to controlling powers other than God. Weaning them from those other worships has proven difficult, since Jews may insist that other powers

than God control the world. Recognizing that God is the only ultimate power in the world is a lesson that has proven hard to inculcate.

Most of us have to work towards this goal as individuals, like Obadiah, doing our best in a sometimes hostile environment. The examples of those who could make the point more splashily, like Moses and Elijah, serve as brilliant flashes of light to help the rest of us continue working at the task.

Having watched the Jewish people fail to avoid those sins in the Torah reading, and seen Moses' need to battle back from that nadir, the *haftarah* shows us that the battle is one which continues throughout history, sometimes in the model of Elijah, but more often that of Obadiah. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Vayakhel—I Book of Kings 7:40-50

For Ashkenazic Jews, this *haftarah* is the same as for the second Shabbat of Hanukkah, but Sefardic Jews read verses 13-26. Even for Ashkenazic Jews, we here focus on something other than the Menorot, which are the proper center of discussion when we read this on Hanukkah.

The *haftarah* is somewhat technical, devoted to listing various parts of the Temple that the builders of Solomon (in particular, Hiram, to whom we will return below) completed. It presents a similar dilemma to the Torah reading, how to comment meaningfully on a discussion of a building we have not had for thousands of years.

Truth is, the Torah reading is more easily discussed, since it has a few verses of easier relevance, such as the command to observe Shabbat, the appointment of Betsalel as chief designer of the Tabernacle, the collection of funds, etc. The *haftarah* is more uniform in sticking to technical details, but trying to figure out the differences between the Ashkenazic and Sefardic customs will help us find productive insight.

The Sefardic Reading: The Pillars of the Temple and Their Names

Sefardic Jews read of Solomon's having chosen Hiram, a resident of Tyre, to be the main builder of the Temple. He should not be confused with the king of Tyre of the same name, whom we met in an earlier *haftarah.*

Sefardic Jews then hear of his building several of the parts of the Temple, including especially the עמודים, the pillars, which had names, the right one *Yachin* and the left one *Boaz*. These names were appropriated by several authors for later Jewish books (for example, two brothers from the Duran family, residents of Algiers in the fifteenth century, wrote Responsa collected in a volume known as Responsa Yachin u-Voaz; the

best-known edition of Mishnah before Kehati had that name also, because its central commentary was split into two parts with those names).

Rashi records a Midrashic tradition that the right pillar, the *Yachin*, corresponded to the moon, to which the Davidic monarchy was also compared. He emphasizes that the comparison was to the *yareah* aspect of the moon, a term that ignores its quality of waxing and waning (in contrast to *levana*, which Rashi sees as incorporating that aspect).

The differentiation perhaps makes sense if we consider that the moon only gets bigger and smaller in our view of it, not in reality. So, too, (I understand Rashi to mean), the comparison of the kingdom of the House of David to the *yareach* indicates the permanent underlying aspect. An example of this, incidentally, is that the Talmud tells us we insert the blessing praying for the arrival of צמח דוד, the sprout of David (the Messiah), just after the one for the building of Jerusalem because the city is not considered to be rebuilt until there is a restoration of a King of David.

Creativity in the Making of the Temple

These pillars were additions not included in the original architecture of the Tabernacle, reminding us that the structure in the desert was a minimum, open to adjustment and expansion (as were the dimensions, since Solomon's Temple was much larger than the Tabernacle).

This reminds us that even when God gives detailed commandments of how to serve, those are not always meant as the full parameters of what can be done; sometimes they are the lower limits, defining what *must* be done. Given the detail of the Torah's description of the Tabernacle, we could easily have assumed that was the whole of the structure God wanted. Solomon and Hiram apparently knew different.

Hiram: A Return to a Family Legacy

The Sefardic *haftarah*, then, focuses on the process of Solomon's chief builder, and the creativity he brought to that task. The text tells us that this Hiram was the son of a widow, from the Tribe of Naftali, but his father lived in Tyre (which is outside of Israel, the capital of the King Hiram we've seen several times before).

The confusing name-similarity—Hiram the king provides materials for Solomon, while Hiram the craftsman shapes the structure itself—alerts us to at least one interesting tension in this Hiram's life. He is the son of a man who chose to live outside of Israel during Solomon's reign, when it was at the pinnacle of power and economic success. As a further sign of his alienation, this father gives his son a non-Jewish name.

While Hiram's place of birth and name might have distanced him as it had his father, our builder chose differently. In the Sages's reading, in Erechin 16b, he took the path of his mother's family, who descended from Oholiav of the tribe of Dan, Betsalel's chief assistant in building the Tabernacle.

Hiram's little drama reminds us that those who return to our community from afar often bring with them skills we can use for Jewishly valuable purposes. It would be a shame if we encouraged such people to abandon those skills, rather than finding the way to channel them to service of God.

So What Do Ashkenazic Jews Read, and Why?

I have spent so much more time on the Sefardic *haftarah* than the Ashkenazic one, since it is simply richer. Seeing how technical the Ashkenazi reading is, and that we would read it (potentially) on two different occasions, we should wonder why this was such a popular choice.

As part of the answer, we note that while this *haftarah* does not recount the completion of the Temple—that comes in the next chapter and is the *haftarah* for Pekudei as well as the second day of Sukkot—it tells us of the last steps, the finishing touches, the inventorying of what has been built and insuring that it all was done properly.

One element of the Sefardi/Ashkenazi difference here, then, is that the Ashkenazic custom focused on getting to the end, not the exciting times during the course of it, while the Sefardic one focuses our attention on what was new, different, and conceptually compelling. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 11: Parshat Pekudei—I Kings 7;51-8;21

Taking Care of Unfinished Business

This week's *haftarah* continues from where the *haftarah* of Vayakhel left off, telling us of the completion of the actual building of the Temple, and then some of the dedicatory events that occurred. It is also the same *haftarah* as for the second day of Sukkot, except that this one begins two verses earlier.

The first of those, I believe, offers an emphasis for this reading that differs from the themes we will stress in the context of Sukkot. It establishes the framework in which to experience King Solomon's construction of the Temple, telling us that it completed an initiative begun by David, his father.

That explains why Solomon's first act upon completing the construction is to deposit in the Temple the gold, silver, and other vessels his father had prepared. Rashi and Radak report two views among the Sages as to why Solomon did not use the gold and silver in the construction itself. According to one, he foresaw the destruction of the Temple and did not want to subject these items to that fate.

The other suggestion is that Solomon did not use them because he saw them as morally tainted. In his father's time, there had been a famine for three years in a row, and yet David apparently did not dip into the reserve he had been building for Temple construction. Solomon could not see using gold and silver that had been kept at the expense of the suffering of those in a famine for the House of God.

What fascinates me about the second view is its portraying Solomon as more concerned than his father with caring for the poor. Especially since, after Solomon's death, the rebellion of the Northern Kingdom starts as a tax revolt, a desire to loosen the

heavy burden Solomon had placed upon them for the purposes of funding his construction, this Midrash is both stimulating and difficult. It would seem to be saying that Solomon would never have built the Temple and his palace when there was a famine need for those funds, but he *was* willing to overtax the people when famine was not an issue.

Continuing and Breaking from the Past: Inducting the Ark into Its New Home

There are two parts to the rest of the *haftarah*, eleven verses devoted to telling of the bringing of the Ark into the Temple, and then ten more with Solomon's first words after that event. For the bringing, note that Solomon gathers the entire leadership of the nation, I assume to insure that people properly experienced this as a major national event. (It's a little interesting to see that he had to make that point to them, as if they did not know to gather there themselves).

I would point out that the verse mentions that they brought the entire אוהל מועד, the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle from the desert, but does not tell us what they did with it. The verse also says that it was the כהנים הלויים, "the priests the Levites" who brought these items; the phrase is not uncommon, and is usually interpreted to mean the priests who, originally, were from the Tribe of Levi.

Here, Radak splits the phrase apart, reading it as saying that the priests took the Ark itself, and the Levites took the other parts (which Radak thinks were then also left in the storehouses of the Temple). In contrast, Gersonides (Ralbag) assumes it was only priests who did this, and argues that they insisted on performing this function—even though it's theoretically a Levite task—because it involved entering the קדש קדשים, the Holy of Holies.

Radak also makes the most noise about the כרובים, the cherubs, which (as all recognized) are not the ones that were always on top of the Ark itself. Instead, like with the extra tables and Menorahs, King Solomon had made a distinct set for the Temple. Radak here says that Solomon chose what to build anew based on prophecy. Since there are no verses that say that—nor do I know of a statement in the Rabbinic literature to that effect—I feel free to suggest an alternative: King Solomon built new appurtenances that *supplemented* the items Moses built, not replaced them.

That view connects well to Solomon's attitude towards his father's initiative in building the Temple, if we take the more positive view, that he did not use the items themselves out of a worry that they would be part of an eventual Destruction. Solomon, it would seem, saw himself as the caretaker of earlier legacies, finding ways to move them forward in positive ways.

We have stressed his creativity on other occasions, but here we see that creativity channeled and guided by those who came before him. He builds the Temple his father wished to, using the vessels of the Tabernacle Moses built in the desert, and holding on to all the pieces of the past, each in their appropriate place.

Solomon's Words

Seeing Solomon as aware of his past even as he creatively advances it explains his first verbal reactions to the completion of the Temple. Witnessing the physical sign of the Divine Presence's residing in the structure (its filling with cloud), he articulates that fact ("God has chosen to rest the Presence in a cloud"), and adds that he has built it to be a permanent House of God.

Then, turning to the people, he tells them of his father's desire to build a Temple, and of God's telling David that Solomon would be the one to do it. Noting that this had now come true, he recounts his bringing the Ark, the sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

If the Torah reading told us of the first step in establishing a place of concentrated Divine Presence, our *haftarah* shows us the after-history of trying to make that arrangement permanent. King Solomon, presented here as someone who balances fidelity to the past with adaptability to the present and awareness of the future, completes his structure, with its vessels from the time of Moses, its stored gold and silver from the time of King David, and the new items he himself added.

We can only hope that we, soon, will have the chance to add to that tradition, building again a structure that allows us to experience the Divine Presence more directly, and more fully, than in our present Exilic state. **Shabbat Shalom**.

THE *HAFTAROT* OF PART II, SHEMOT: RECAP, REFLECTION, AND REPEATED THEMES

As with Genesis, we cannot summarize the *haftarot* of Exodus and their major themes without a quick review of what was stressed in each.

Parshat Shemot: Redemption will eventually bring us to a rooting and re-attachment to the Land of Israel, but that can only come once we have set aside all other competing commitments (even wine-drinking). In addition, at least some Jews will have to bear the consequences of their actions before they can be returned from the various types of Exile they are experiencing.

Parshat Vaera: The *haftarah* stresses the importance of seeing God's Hand in history, at least sometimes. At the center of the discussion is Ezekiel's prediction of destruction and desolation for Egypt, which has sinned by viewing itself as independently powerful. In other sections, this same message is stressed by speaking of the Jewish return to prosperity and power and of Nebuchadnezzar as a messenger of God. Seemingly "natural" world events, then, are actually to be understood as evidence of Providence in action.

Parshat Bo: Dealing with the same events as the previous *haftarah*, Jeremiah sees it in a different light, reminding us that our hopes for Egypt were wrong and misplaced, that we were supposed to look to God and only God for salvation. The comparison between the two *haftarot* allowed us also to note the differing views about whether prophecy just comes, a person earns it, or a mixture of the two.

Parshat Beshalach: Reading the Song of Devorah as the *haftarah* for Beshalach focused our attention on the importance of recognizing God's cause and attaching oneself to it. This explains Barak's being blamed for wanting Devorah to go with him, the praise

of and focus on Yael for killing Sisera, and the blame of those tribes who did not answer Devorah's call.

Parshat Yitro: Isaiah's vision of God and his message of hope to Ahaz combined to show us the two sides of the Sinai experience read in the Torah that week. For those who are largely good, but significantly lacking, Isaiah has a vision that calls on him to bring them a message of doom; at a time when people despair of God's help, Isaiah is called on to remind them of God's omnipotence.

Parshat Mishpatim: Slavery, in the Torah reading, the *haftarah*, and in the laws of *yovel*, helped us to understand the importance of boundaries in Judaism's vision of a proper society. The freeing of slaves at *yovel* only becomes obligatory in a society that otherwise accepts its social boundaries, which, as Nachmanides noted, is an important introduction to the idea of law in general.

Parshat Terumah: The *haftarah* showed us several ways in which the building of the Temple required human beings to extend themselves to the limit of their capabilities in order to get the structure built. Solomon's wisdom, the pact with Hiram, the absence from home of the Temple workers, and the use of converts to build the Temple, all pushed limits, an example of the effort necessary to successfully make a place for God's Presence to be manifest on Earth.

Parshat Tetsaveh: The section reminds us that the Temple is central and necessary for Judaism, even as study of the Temple's laws and structures can somewhat make up for its absence. In the dedication ceremony, we were shown the joining of God's Will with human initiative to provide the kind of ceremonialism that humans need

to achieve the Temple's purpose, being the center of the earth, the place humans know they can focus their minds and actions on the service of God.

Parshat Ki Tissa: Elijah's meeting with Obadiah and then his defeat of the priests of Baal suggested the two paths we can take to make God's ultimate power recognizable to the rest of the world. Most Jews of that time—and so, too, of the Golden Calf—were unsure as to whether there were competitors to God, leaving Moses, Elijah, and Obadiah to prove the point, either supernaturally or by fighting for that ideal within nature.

Parshat Vayakhel: The two versions of the *haftarah* let us see that Sefardic Jews read about the process of building the Tabernacle, one which took advantage of the skills and creativity of a Jew raised in a distinctly non-Jewish environment, and that added to the original plans of the Tabernacle in a creative yet appropriate way. The Ashkenazic reading, more technical, focused on the completion of the structure, on getting the job done.

Parshat Pekudei: The reading tells of the completion of the Tabernacle and Solomon's reaction to that completion. It focuse our attention on his interest both in furthering and completing earlier legacies while also making his own creative contributions to those legacies, leaving us with the structure that tradition sees as more magnificent (physically and metaphysically) than any other in human history.

These précis show that two themes dominate the *haftarot* of the book of Exodus, paralleling the two central events of the book itself, the Exodus and the building of the Tabernacle. In the *haftarot*, the discussions of the future redemption and how to earn it emphasized seeing God's hand in history, banishing any competing commitments to God, and the necessity of punishment for those who adopt such other competing commitments.

In terms of Temple-building, the endeavor was one that taxed human capabilities, as they tried to contribute creatively to a Divine structure. The investing of the Divine Presence in the Temple depended both on building off of the past as well as adding creatively based on the whole of one's talents (including those acquired in a non-Jewish environment).

We will try to establish what themes are common to the *haftarot* as a whole after having seen them all, but the *haftarot* of Exodus again show us a few themes that repeat, suggesting they are, in some way, the intended message of the *haftarot* as a whole.

PART III: THE HAFTAROT OF THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Vayikra, Isaiah 43;21-44;23

This week's *haftarah* calls our attention to the question of sacrifice, as did the Torah reading. Those who know the book of Isaiah at all are accustomed to his complaining about the Jewish people's excessive focus on sacrifice, but our selection fits better with the Torah reading, avoiding negativity about sacrifice while drawing our attention to broader underlying concerns.

Sacrifice, Sin, and Substitutes for God

God opens with a complaint about the Jews' failure to call out to Him, despite His having made them His people. Making it worse, they not only do not call out to God, they do not bring their sacrifices to Him, despite God's having refrained from imposing excessive burdens of sacrifice upon them. Worse still, as opposed to bringing what they were supposed to, they have "burdened" God with their sins.

The mention of sin leads into two sections (separated by a brief break in the traditional writing of the text, indicating a separation that may yet imply some connection), in both of which the prophet speaks for God in stressing that God is the source of all punishment and forgiveness. In the first, God reminds us that our earlier ancestors sinned towards God (Radak understands that to refer to Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, who encouraged people to offer sacrifices outside the Temple, which dates this prophecy to the early years of Isaiah's career and adds a further sacrifice aspect to it), leading God to punish the Jews.

With but a brief pause, God then turns to the opposite tack, stressing the Divine concern for the Jews, the plan to forgive and purify them, bringing about a time when

many Jews will return to God and once again assert their fidelity to God and to the traditions of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As we try to track the chain of reasoning (so we can know how it all hangs together), we need to remember that Isaiah started with calling out to God, which led to his mentioning sacrifices and the Jews' failures in that regard. Since much of sacrifice is brought to atone for sin (although not all—this week's Torah reading also offers examples of freewill offerings, where a person voluntarily decides to offer a sacrifice to God), at least the connection to the complaint about the Jews' sins and the assertion of God's being the source of forgiveness makes some sense.

A Disquisition on Idolatry

The *haftarah* then spends fifteen verses (out of a total of thirty one) complaining about idolatry, especially its inherent contradictions. After three verses about how God, as first and last, is the only source of true forgiveness and/or salvation, the *haftarah* turns its attention to those who worship idols.

The prophet points out that people ignore the uncomfortable the fact that they are the ones crafting these idols out of ordinary materials and then endowing them with divinity. In the most pungent expression of this idea, Isaiah notes that some people chop wood, use half of it for ordinary house needs, such as fire for heat, and build an idol with the other half.

To perhaps even further stress why this issue is so distressing, the last three verses again return to the theme of our need to pay attention to God, the only real source of either forgiveness or salvation.

So Many Ways to Be Led Away from God

This flow of ideas brings to the fore an important undercurrent of Jewish thought that we ought to notice more fully. The Jews of Isaiah's time allowed themselves to believe that sacrifices were how they got forgiven by God, as well as how they insured a good future. That error, which Nachmanides stresses in many places, can take several forms, since its basis lies in seeking ultimate security in some source other than God.

In the continuum of religion, one's focus on sacrifice (or lack of it) is not all that distant from idolatry. One who invests too much in the power of sacrifice is likely to neglect other of God's concerns, meaning that they are not truly worshiping God, they are using the magic of sacrifice to provide the security they crave.

So, too, one who does not bring sacrifices often enough (such as when s/he has sinned) is losing sight of God as the true and only source of forgiveness. Once God is not the source of forgiveness, the difference among the other sources one can seek to avail oneself of is fairly small, since they all share the crucial (flawed) assumption that forgiving sin is more magical than anything else. Rather than introspection and rectification, forgiveness for such people involves finding the right magic (sacrifice or idols, in this selection) to wipe away the blemish.

Idolatry in Our Time

We may allow ourselves to tune out prophetic discussions of idolatry, believing such practices to be forgotten relics of the past. Whether or not that is true (there are, in the Western world today, many who have become attracted to ancient pagan practices, such as feng shui), the *haftarah* takes the discussion in a direction that is unequivocally relevant today. As opposed to limiting idolatry to the problem of believing in a deity or power other than God (although it would be interesting to consider whether believing in

Nature to the exclusion of God is a form of idolatry), Isaiah is also bothered by people's trusting their own creations more than God.

That suggests that our *haftarah* is warning us that people tend to get too caught up in seeking security in ways they can control, such as idols or (to put it in relevant contemporary terms) money. The only real security, however, lies with God, just like the only real forgiveness lies in using korbanot (or, in their forced absence, prayer) as a way to fully repent our sins and return to God. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Tsav, Jeremiah 7:21-8;3, 9:22-23

Jeremiah opens this week's *haftarah* by telling the Jews to add their עולות, burnt-offerings, to their זבחים, sacrifices where the owner gets some of the meat to eat him or herself. Rashi understands it as sarcasm, that at least that way they would get *something*, since God is rejecting the sacrifice as a means of closeness.

The Missing Hatat: Religiosity for Show

Radak notes that Jeremiah does not mention sin offerings, such as the חטאת, the sin-offering, or אשם, guilt-offering. Radak assumes the Jews of that time were not offering those sacrifices, because they would never confess a sin. He does not specify, but his theory opens two possibilities: that the Jews either were not willing to admit to even sins committed without full knowledge, the only kind for which there are offerings, or all their sins were committed knowingly and deliberately.

His view highlights an ever-present danger for religion, that people may be more concerned with the appearance of religiosity than with the actuality. In Radak's reading, the people would buy the feeling of religiosity for the cost of a voluntary sacrifice, but admitting sin and trying to rectify it came at too high a price.

Going Their Own Way: The Jews and God's Commands

To emphasize the Jewish people's misplaced values regarding sacrifice, the next verse speaks for God in saying that He did not command us about sacrifice on the day He took us out of Egypt. Rashi explains that he means that God never indicated that sacrifices should loom so large in Jewish life. The battle here—one Jeremiah lost—was to convince people to do what God wants, as God declares it and with the emphases God provides, to wean them from picking and choosing what seems best to them.

Sadly, at least then, Jews insisted they knew better. The prophet notes that this is despite God's having sent them prophets ever since the Exodus. They did not listen to the earlier prophets, nor will they listen to Jeremiah. When that happens, God tells Jeremiah, he is to tell them they are a nation that has not listened to the Voice of God, has not accepted reprimand, and has lost faith.

These verses highlight how easy it is for people to know they are right in the face of mounds of countervailing evidence. While many claim they would believe more if only there were (insert your answer here: miracles, scientific evidence, etc.), our text suggests that *no* evidence is compelling enough on its own.

This carries a sobering message for those who work in fields that try to articulate truths about God and how to serve Him. Being right gives no guarantee that those messages will be heard and the erroneous ones ignored (at least in the short term).

From Sham Religiosity to Idolatry

In verses 29-31, God tells the Jews to remove their *nezer*, which either means that their misdeeds have lost them their special status or that they should stop growing their hair like a nazirite. The latter interpretation offers a striking image-- a generation that refuses to listen to its prophets, but has many accepting *nazir* status, a voluntary and extreme set of practices meant to foster closeness to God!!!

Jeremiah mentions that people would pass their children through fire (a form of idol worship) at a place called Bamot haTofet. Rashi says the word "*tofet*" refers to the drums the priests of Baal would bang to prevent fathers from hearing their children's cries. It was not, in other words, that parents did not care about their children, it was that they assumed this was the best practice for all involved.

We know the experience of conquering our compassion in the name of a higher goal, because we do it with circumcision each time a Jewish boy is born. The striking difference in our Jewish reaction to the two cases bears considering. One father is violating a serious Torah prohibition; the other is fulfilling a central and significant obligation. Religious observance can and does entail acting in ways that might ordinarily seem unsympathtetic, perhaps even cruel, but only when God declares the act necessary. It is not the dedication we should applaud, since idol-worshipping fathers were equally dedicated, it is the obedience to the Divine Will.

Why Should the Soul Care If the Body Does Not Get Buried?

The next six verses describe the degradations that will be suffered for lack of burial space. The chapter division separates what will happen to those already dead from what will happen to those who will have no place to be buried, but the traditional grouping shows that the prophet meant to emphasize that the punishments of that time will affect even the dead.

I have long wondered why not being buried, or having one's body defaced, is a punishment. Once we're gone, the rationalist in me wonders, what does it matter? It would seem the prophet was assuming that the soul has some knowledge of what happens to the body even after death, a view implicit in Sanhedrin 46b. There, the Talmud accepts the view that the pain of burial serves as expiation of sin. Lack of burial, then, is a real threat that there is no escape from bodily punishment.

Making Sure the Message Is Clear

Perhaps my stress on the flaw of choosing what to emphasize in serving God does not jump out at readers, but the the *haftarah's* moving to verses 22-23 of Chapter 9

confirms its centrality to this *haftarah*. In the two verses, Jeremiah denies the right to be proud of qualities that people ordinarily see as great, wisdom, strength, and/or wealth. True pride, he says, comes from seeking and knowing God, Who performs acts of kindness, justice, and charity in the Earth.

Without analyzing the many rabbinic and medieval readings of these verses, sticking to what an average listener would get from hearing this *haftarah*, these last verses drive home the need to know that religion is about doing what God wants. We may decide to use our money well, to train our bodies to perform remarkable feats, to become nice people, or even smart and wise, but the *haftarah* points out that those can become kinds of metaphorical idol worship just as much as the real thing.

The only perfection, the only source of pride, is to gain an understanding of God, to the extent possible for each of us, and to use that understanding to spur us to activities that would be those that our Creator would want, in fulfilling our mandate to take His Earth, work it, protect it, and perfect it. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Shemini, II Samuel 6;1-7;17

A *Haftarah* in Three Sections

To understand the main message of an *haftarah* long as this one, we must split it into its three or four distinct parts. First, there is the story of David bringing the Ark to the City of David, with two sub-parts, the first initiative to bring the Ark, aborted when Uza got killed, and David diverted it to the house of Oved Edom. The second half of that story comes when David is reassured, and brings it the City of David with great celebration.

Having finished, we see his interaction with his wife Michal, who disdains his undignified actions during the celebration. David's reply that he would gladly be even less dignified when it comes to celebrating before God captures what will be a theme of the week. I note that Sefardic Jews and some Hasidim end the *haftarah* at the end of the celebration itself, leaving out the Michal interaction.

Third, we have the discussion between David and Natan about building a more permanent structure to serve as a House of God. One immediately striking aspect of that story is that Natan gives an answer and then, that night, has a prophecy informing him he got it wrong. He comes back to David the next morning to take back his encouragement of the day before.

The theme of death of celebrants at dedicatory ceremonies offers the simplest connection between the *haftarah* and the Torah reading, Nadab and Abihu in the Torah, Uza in the *haftarah*. As so often, though, the simple answer does not explain the length of our selection of Prophets to read for the *haftarah.* Sefardic Jews, who stop after David brings the Ark to the City of David, might accept that answer, since their reading only

encompasses the tragedy of Uza and recovery from it. The Ashkenazic custom to continue calls for a more satisfying answer.

Uza Is the Key

From the text itself, we might understand that Uza died because he grabbed onto the Ark when it looked like it was going to fall. Rashi, working off of Sifrei, notes that a prior error set the stage for Uza's demise. As Rashi phrases it, King David mistook a matter of simple Jewish law, clear to schoolchildren, that the Ark is supposed to be borne on the shoulders of Leviim. (Radak adds that the Philistines were not punished for sending the Ark back in a carriage because they had no reason to know any better; he suggests that David did not ignore the rule, he concluded it only applied in the desert).

Uza's grabbing the Ark betrays a further misconception. As Rashi points out, he ought to have realized that the Ark is not an ordinary physical item, prone to falling when its support is taken away. (The Midrash holds that the Ark held up the priests who took it through the Jordan; if it could support others, it could certainly hold itself).

It seems to me that the two missteps share a common denominator, an insufficient awareness of God's Otherness, which extends to the Ark that bears the Covenant. David knows—as every schoolchild should—that the Ark is carried on the shoulders, but assumes that was not inherent to the Ark. Uza knows the Ark's past, but is still convinced that if it is tipping, it needs his assistance to stay upright.

That explains David's fear of being near the Ark when he sees what happens to Uza. It seems irrational, since he might have learned the narrow lesson of avoiding touching the Ark. Rather, David has been confronted with his inability to predict the Ark's rules. Worried that he has no way to appease God and control the Ark, he leaves it

with Oved Edom. It is only once he sees that the Ark has a rhythm of its own which leads to blessing, once observed and accepted, that he brings it to the City of David.

Michal And A Permanent House

This framework explains the rest of the *haftarah*'s relevance. Michal sees the celebration over the Ark as akin to any other, which makes David's lack of dignity upsetting. His response, ונקלותי עוד מזאת, roughly translated as I would be willing to give up even more of my dignity, shows he has learned the lesson of God's difference, which sets aside ordinary human modes of conduct. (We might wonder why her mistake deserves the severity of his reaction, but that is for another time).

The challenge of understanding what God wants without direct consultation figures in David and Natan's conversation as well. At first glance, the idea of building a permanent structure sounds right—it is part of the eventual plan, we know, and David seems to have pure motives in suggesting it. Natan, too, assumes that this is an idea so clearly appropriate that he answers right away, without consulting God.

That night, a vision tells him once again of the broader message of the *haftarah*, that the closer a topic is to God's plan, the less able we are to predict what the Divine Will dictates. Natan has to come back to David the next morning with the humbling message (for both of them) that God does not see David as the right person to build the Temple, a task that will have to wait for his son. Some explanation of God's reasoning is given in Chronicles, but that is again not our issue.

Looking back to the Torah reading, this *haftarah* now seems to editorialize about Nadab and Abihu's misstep. The Sages offered many options for what the "strange fire" was that they offered, and we need not decide among them. Our *haftarah* does suggest,

though, that the underlying issue was their arrogating to themselves the right to make decisions about the new Tabernacle's needs and rules.

That is not completely untrue—later in the same Torah reading, Moses becomes upset about Aaron and his sons' failure to eat a certain sacrifice, and then concedes that Aaron and his sons have successfully reasoned it out to realize they should not be eating that sacrifice on the day their sons and brothers died.

The key challenge, in all these instances, highlighted for us by the segments of the *haftarah*, is to know when we are to seek God's law and when we can assume that our reasoning and extrapolating from experience can guide us in serving God properly. In the case of the Ark and the timing of the building of the Temple, in our *haftarah*, the weight was heavily on the side of taking direction from God. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Tazria, II Kings 4;42-5;19

Why The Miracle of the Bread?

The story of Naaman, the Aramean general afflicted with צרעת (the disease commonly mistranslated as leprosy), whom Elisha heals and thus convinces of God's power, tells a complete tale in nineteen verses, a comfortable length. We are left to wonder why we start three verses earlier, with the story of Elisha's miracle of making loaves of donated bread suffice for a large assemblage.

Rashi comments at the beginning of the Naaman story that the text is listing all of Elisha's miracles, heightening our problem. A connection between the stories would do us better in understanding why the one would be introduction to the other; if Rashi is all there is to this placement, our choice of readings remains a mystery.

We can ferret out such a connection, I believe, by turning our attention to the relatively simpler part of the story. Naaman is an Aramean general who is highly successful at war, but stricken with צרעת. When he captures a Jewish slave girl, she suggests Elisha might cure him (it is interesting that she tries to help; the text does not tell us whether this was out of a hope of gain for herself, or because she had honest positive feelings for her master, a possibility Americans tend to reject in the slave relationship).

Naaman turns to his king to help him convince Elisha to help him; the king sends a large gift to the King of Israel, asking that he cure Naaman. The Israelite king tears his clothes in distress, sure this is a ploy to secure an excuse for invading and conquering Israel, but Elisha sends him a messenger, promising to heal Naaman. (Radak suggests the king was too embarrassed to go to Elisha himself, since he did not listen to him on other occasions. A conversation for another time).

It's All About Expectations

The story becomes more interesting once Naaman arrives at Elisha's house. The prophet sends him a message (an act that stresses how offhandedly the prophet can perform this miracle, that it is not even worth his time to leave his house), to bathe in the Jordan seven times. Naaman is admirably transparent about how this has failed to meet his expectations. As he says it, he had anticipated that Elisha would come out to greet him, and then engage in a vigorous and public prayer. To bathe in a river, Naaman says, he could have done at home.

His servants' response seems so obvious it forces us to reconsider Naaman's position. They point out that Naaman was ready to perform great tasks to be healed, had the prophet required them, so why not at least give this river-bathing in the Jordan a try?

For Naaman, we realize, priests and prophets only wield their power in flamboyant gestures, in arm-waving and public miracle working. The idea that nature could be changed in such a quiet way was so foreign as to be ridiculous. His servants point out that this attitude closes off truths, for little reason. His readiness to undertake taxing tasks should translate into an equal readiness for a simple one.

Naaman's skepticism is clear from the text, and yet the miracle works, and the Jordan heals him. We could have predicted he would be grateful, but he goes further, returning to Elisha and declaring his knowledge that God is the only deity. The text does not make clear how he reached this conclusion (the Mechilta to Yitro notes that Yitro himself only said that God was greater than all other gods; since we like Yitro, we tend to take that to mean that he also accepted monotheism, but Naaman's version is much stronger, closer to our own view).

Back to the Bread

The oddities in the Naaman story can perhaps be answered by looking back at the first miracle. A man gives Elisha some bread as a gift, which the prophet decides to use to feed the assemblage before him. His attendant objects that the bread will not suffice, but Elisha is serene in repeating his order. Miraculously, the bread does not run out. This is similar to the other miracles we have seen from this prophet, such as where he had the widow of Obadiah assemble pots, and then have her jug of oil continue pouring until she had filled all her pots.

It is a different version of the miraculous than Elijah, such as when the latter brought fire down from the sky. Elisha's miracles, here, work much closer to Nature. He makes bread last, he has someone bathe (usually a cleaning act) in order to "clean" off the צרעת. I suspect it is that minimalism that Naaman at first rejected, but then swayed him so greatly.

Varieties of Miracles and Their Persuasive Powers

Polytheists are used to powerful gods; their only question is which god is more powerful in which situation, so they can know whom to worship when. But all those gods, in their view, are able to overcome Nature, to blast through the ordinary into the miraculous. Had Naaman been healed by Elisha coming out to him, praying to God, waving his hands, and then assigning a hard task, Naaman would have recognized God as powerful, perhaps even more powerful than his Aramean god, but not as the sole Power of the Universe.

The ability to extend Nature, to take a simple act like bathing in the river Jordan, and converting *that* into the source of the miraculous (an ability to which our *haftarah*

draws our attention by preceding the story with the miracle of the bread), ran directly counter to the beliefs of the time. God does not need to overpower Nature, God is the God of Nature, and God makes the rules of how Nature itself works.

Connecting that to the Torah reading, I note my own care in not translating צרעת. Leprosy is a natural disease, treated medically. *Tsaraat* is a disease with physical appearance, but it is declared and treated by a Kohen. Naaman's *tsaraat*, too, is treated by a prophet in a way that has some natural element to it, but is clearly a function of Nature that no one at the time could have understood.

For them, the highest proof of God's power was the ability to intervene in Nature in ways that did not disrupt it completely, but that moved it in directions they could not themselves have imagined it going. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Metsora, II Book of Kings 7:3-20

The Mission of Metsoraim

The *haftarah* tells of the discovery that God had dispersed the army of Aram, lifting the siege from the city of Samaria. The obvious connection to the Torah reading is that the protagonists are a group of people afflicted with *tsaraat*, but that raises the question of why we did not read it as the *haftarah* for Tazria. Especially since *that* reading was about healing *tsaraat,* a topic discussed in this week's Torah reading, they ought logically have been switched.

We also start two verses later than we might have expected, skipping where the text tells of one of the king's advisers mocking Elisha's prediction, at the height of the siege, that in two days barley and flour would be inexpensive. Elisha replied that the man would see it happen and yet not enjoy its benefits. Since the end of our *haftarah* reports the fulfillment of the prophecy—that officer was trampled to death after seeing the plenty in the camp of Aram—we wonder why we did not start with that.

One part of the answer lies in the *haftarah* wishing us to understand that our central characters are the four *tsaraat*-afflicted men, whom tradition identifies as Gehazi (Elisha's former disciple) and his sons. Following Torah law, they were sitting outside of Samaria, since lepers cannot enter a walled city.

If This Isn't Working, Do Something Else

Starving from the siege, the four decide to surrender to Aram, a move Baba Kama 60b sees as one source for the idea that famine requires those who are adversely affected to move to a place of greater plenty, at least temporarily. Naomi and Elimelech are disdained for moving to Moav at the beginning of the Book of Ruth, because they had the

money to ride out the economic downturn, and were moving to avoid being besieged by those seeking assistance.

Times of hardship produce two necessary reactions, depeding on where one is on the economic spectrum. Those in financial straits need to try something and perhaps someplace else—they cannot just demand assistance from others--and those blessed with resources need to work on sustaining the economy.

Starting Before Dark

The verse tells us the four woke בנשף, in the dark, the same word used for when God produced the fright and flight in the Aramean camp. The introduction of the time of day seems deliberate, since the story would make sense without that detail.

I suggest we are being told, implicitly, that God impacts human relations in the dark (literally or figuratively). The sounds which scared the Arameans out of their wits, their flight and its discovery, all happened when there was too little light to see.

In Egypt, too, the Exodus itself occurred in broad daylight, but the killing of the first-born happened in the dark, at a time when the Jews could not leave their houses. The enemy's defeat came in the night, but the Jews' were not freed of their siege and starvation until the daytime.

Perhaps this carries a broader message. God acts unobserved by His beneficiaries. The *effects* of that salvation, and its celebration, happen for all to see and hear. That might also explain why the prophet does not tell us of the miracle directly, but as an aside explaining what the *tsaraat*-sufferers were going to discover; we do not emphasize the miracles themeselves, we emphasize when humans catch a glimpse of their effects.

Can't Believe in Miracles

Our heroes find the abandoned camp, celebrate, and hide gold, silver, and clothes from several tents before they have an apparent attack of conscience, and return to the city with their good news.

When they go back to the city, the king and people cannot believe it. To check, the king sends their last remaining horses with riders, and they track the Arameans all the way to the Jordan river, finding strewn possessions along the way.

Similar to *tsaraat*, this event is stressing the challenge of certain kinds of miracles. Believing in the splitting of the Sea and the rest of the Exodus is no great challenge, and therefore no demonstration of faith. Faith is about believing in and learning from God's less explicit messages, such as the death of the king's officer. While Elisha predicted it, skeptics could decide it was natural, the unfortunate outcome of a starved people rushing for the food they knew was theirs for the taking. The challenge of God's actions is to be able to recognize them and accept them as such.

Tsara`at* brings the same challenge. It is so tempting to treat it as a physical ailment, a disease like leprosy, yet the Torah insists that its roots are spiritual as is its healing. In bringing our *tsara`at to a priest and abiding by his decisions as to how to handle it, we are not only going to be successful at ridding ourselves of it, we will have shown our ability to recognize the hand of God in the world.

Gehazi was punished with *tsaraat* precisely because he had damaged Elisha's showing Naaman that lesson. When Elisha healed Naaman (in the *haftarah* for Tazria), he had refused any reward, to further prove that this had come from God. Gehazi then ran after Naaman to ask for some items, which Naaman had happily given.

By reading about him here, we are being shown that he was punished for more than having violated the no-payment order. Gehazi's *tsaraat* forces him to move beyond his greed, to become the bearer of news of God's unseen but miraculous salvation.

The Difference of House-Tsaraat

This view of the *haftarah* also connects it well to the Torah reading itself. Rashi on Leviticus 14;34 reports the tradition that the Emorites hid treasures in the walls of their houses; house-*tsaraat*, which requires removing the affected stones, would reveal those buried goods.

Nachmanides on Leviticus 13;47 says this was only true when the nation had fully conquered and divided the Land, each tribe in its proper place. He might be suggesting that house-*tsaraat* in particular is about rising to the challenge of seeing God's actions in the dark, which happens most fully when the nation is in its Land, in its proper places. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 6: Aharei (or **Kedoshim**, when the two portions are separate, but Aharei is Shabbat haGadol), **Amos 9; 7-15**

Section Selection and Its Confusions

This week's *haftarah* reads the last 9 verses of the book of Amos. I note the length because the brevity is so striking—we pick up the *middle* of a section, and then read only a few verses. In addition, the rest of the section, which is only eight verses, seems to echo the messages of the section we do read. Why not read the whole thing?

Another immediate question is what makes this *haftarah* so important that we make sure to read it every year. When two sections of Torah are read together, the general practice is to read the *haftarah* for the second, but when we read Aharei Mot and Kedoshim together, we read *this haftarah*, even though it is for Aharei Mot, the first of the two. In addition, when Aharei Mot is Shabbat haGadol, we read "Halo Kivnei" on Shabbat Kedoshim.

The first four verses of the *haftarah* promise exile to the Jews as a whole and death to the sinners among them. The commentators debate exactly which sins will bring this about, based in large part on the opening metaphor of the section, where God calls us בני כושיים, like children of blacks/Africans.

Depending on whether you prefer Rashi, Nachmanides, Ibn Ezra, or Radak, Amos may be berating us for assuming we are inherently special, a view supported by God's pointing out that He can and has taken *other* people out of another nation; or that we were wrong not to recognize how specially God treats us, as shown by God's destroying other nations when their time for punishment comes, while maintaining our survival even as we are being punished.

Whichever way we go—and there are others, such as seeing it as a complaint about our faithlessness, like spouses who fail to remain faithful in their marriages—the complaint revolves around our not paying proper attention to the nature of our relationship with God, as also stressed by God's promising to punish in particular those sinners who say, "The bad will not come because of me."

A Pause for a Tirade on Providence, Punishment, and Productive Growth

We will get to the positive aspects of this *haftarah* in a moment, even though many of Amos' listeners might have turned off after hearing this part, in the way people do when they do not like what they are hearing. Before we do, we should pause to absorb the complaints fully. God is bothered here less by the Jews' specific sins than by their refusal to recognize God's mechanism for running the world.

First, they pay insufficient attention to the uniqueness of the Jewish people (for good and for bad). In the current context, they do not accept that God punishes the Jews differently than other nations, that while other nations will have no punishment for extended time, but then disappear from the world stage, the Jews will get punished repeatedly (and painfully), but that that punishment is an example of our guarantee of a continuing and irrevocable connection to God.

Second, they are too quick to excuse their behavior, to minimize its importance, to reject the possibility that their personal sins could lead to disaster, trouble, or tragedy.

I raise these issues because those attitudes seem to me both to explain how this *haftarah* connects to the Torah readings and also because they are attitudes prevalent in our times, I think to our detriment. On the first question, the Torah reading warns us to keep the laws of incestuous relationships carefully, so that the Land not vomit us out by

virtue of our defiling it (the verses raise a whole other set of issues, the question of how and when the Land itself responds to our sins, a blurring of the line between physics and metaphysics that should be discussed, but not here).

If so, the *haftarah* complains about people who reject the possibility that those kinds of punishments occur, who lose the opportunity to even recognize God's punishment and react appropriately to it. Such people will eventually be killed, lost to the future of Judaism, and will never even understand what happened.

Applications to Today?

Which brings us to wonder about our times, when people of all walks of life, but especially observant Jews, deny the possibility of connecting the sufferings of our people (or of other people) to any actions we/they may or may not have committed. Our *haftarah*, especially as read by tradition, makes it odd to today see people who picture themselves as fully observant, on good terms with God, but relinquish or reject this fundamental principle of God's action in the world.

An example that has always struck me as interesting. A few months after Hurricane Katrina struck, wiping out (among other places) the Ninth District of New Orleans, the city was not back to full strength, but did have tens of thousands of people living there. Even so, the New York Times reported, not one murder had occurred in New Orleans since the hurricane, where pre-Katrina New Orleans had had a very high murder rate, and the Ninth District was the most deadly region in the country.

I don't need to claim to understand why Katrina struck (if, indeed, there was a reason; there may be fully natural disasters for all I know) to wonder how the residents of

a city that hosts the most murderous region in the country could be so positive that God could not possibly be sending them a message.

Don't Forget the Positive

The flip side is that those who take God's messages to heart are also told that we will have tremendous economic bounty (as much of the world already does), be returned to our Land, rebuild destroyed cities, and establish a permanent and unbreakable residence in the Land. Wiping away the sinners' and their incorrect perspectives of how God works is a vital prerequisite to reaching that blessed time, but it will come and be bountiful beyond imagination (or beyond theirs—I think we're seeing a lot of it already).

One last thought: The *haftarah* is the source of the phrase that God will re-establish סוכת דוד הנופלת, David's fallen Sukkah, a reference to his monarchy. Radak explains that we call a monarchy a sukkah because it protects the nation; we see a Davidic kingship as a return to a time when our government will protect us in all the ways we need, a Sukkah that will provide comfort, shade and security. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Kedoshim, Ezekiel 22; 1-16

(Note: this *haftarah* is read rarely, only when Aharei and Kedoshim are separate and Aharei is not Shabbat haGadol. Some communities read **Ezekiel 20;2-20,** instead of this one, but that is largely a gentler, less specific version of this one).

Unflinching Looks Are Not So Easy To Take

At a simple level, the *haftarah* tells us of Ezekiel being told to "judge" Jerusalem, telling her her various failings in the time just before her destruction. Before we get to the substance of that critique, we note that God hints that doing so will be no easy task.

God says "התשפוט, will you judge?" a rhetorical question that indicates-- at least according to Nachmanides—a sense of the difficulty of an endeavor, not a lack of belief in its outcome. Applied here, God would be saying to Ezekiel "Prepare yourself for this hard, but doable, job of telling Jerusalem all her sins." Radak says the word is doubled for emphasis.

Metsudat David and Metsudat Ziyyon (late seventeenth century commentators on the Prophets) here translate the word התפשוט as argue or dispute, rather than to judge. In that reading, God is calling Ezekiel to dispute with Jerusalem over her character, as if she, the city, was arguing, right up until the end, that her virtue had not been lost. The task for Ezekiel was harder than to recite Jerusalem's sins; it was to find a way to judge the city, to get the city (and its inhabitants) to comprehend, to accept, to recognize, the enormity of their perfidy.

The Whole Is More than the Sum of Its Parts

Rashi notes that the twenty-four sins mentioned in these sixteen verses match the ones that God warned us about in the Torah reading. I am unused to seeing Rashi make

such comments, so it makes me wonder whether he was trying to implicitly explain why we read this *haftarah* on that week. Even if not, Rashi is correct in noting that the sins here are all included in this week's Torah reading.

That idea adds an interesting twist to the endeavor the Midrash and some commentators set for themselves, trying to figure out which of these sins was "the worst" or the one that was the final piece of the puzzle that became the Destruction. As important as those questions are, they risk neglecting the bigger picture, that the people of Jerusalem had in fact violated *all* of the central principles of Parshat Kedoshim.

Rashi at the beginning of the Torah reading notes that the verse has God telling Moses to speak to the *entirety* of the Jewish people (not the usual locution), because this part of the Torah was read at the ceremony known as Hakhel. Celebrated once every seven years, on the Sukkot following a *shemittah* year, the ritual involved gathering as many Jews as possible and reading the Torah together. Rashi explains that Kedoshim was selected for that occasion because the Torah's central principles are entioned in it.

Ezekiel's list thus tells us that the Jews' disobedience went beyond the ordinary wrong of not listening to God. They had managed to cast aside the bulk of Torah; exactly that list of sins God designated as the ones Jews most needed to be reminded of at national gatherings, was what the people had chosen to violate.

The Final Straw as an Organizing Principle

Our recognition of the list of sins being a kind of unit does not negate the project of figuring out which sin was the final straw that produced the Destruction. We can note that the Jews had rejected the majority of the body of Torah and still wonder whether one of them in particular spurred Divine retribution.

Tanhuma Shoftim 2 suggests that it was perversion of justice, because verse 5 refers to it as defiling of her name. Rashi notes that Jerusalem was known as a city of justice, so this defiling means forsaking the legacy that was central to her character. Leviticus Rabbah 33;3 offers a similar idea, noting that the last sin enumerated was armed robbery, a different but related example of Jerusalem failing to be a city of justice. Sifrei Numbers 116 thinks it was the mistreatment of the sacrifices.

Murder as a Gateway Sin

I would expound on the idea of the final straw but for Radak's convincing note that murder is central here. Radak points out that Ezekiel is told to address the "city of blood," and that verse 3 says that it was murder that caused the city's time to end (we can reconcile that with the Midrashim above—Radak, e.g., notes that armed robbery was mentioned last-- but it would take too long here).

In addition, Ezekiel mentions murder in seven of the fifteen substantive verses in the prophecy. More than that, murder is a problem here beyond the murder itself; it is a crime that serves to spur other crimes. When the prophet mentions the corruption of the leadership, the presence of bribery, the use of slander, all are seen as ancillary to the murder for which they intend to pave the way.

The Intentionality of the Sin

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2;21 uses our verses as a prime example of the intent to anger God. Verse 11 mentions adultery with a married woman and then incest with one's daughter in law. In the Midrash's reading, this reflects the Jews of the time working to violate the worst sin they could imagine.

Depressing as it is to think of a Jewish people who sought so assiduously to rebel against God, who defiled themselves with all sorts of sins (Radak notes that we sometimes think of defilement as coming from touching certain objects, but that in fact improper sexuality and worshipping idols defile more thoroughly than that), there are two pieces of comfort we might find in this *haftarah*.

First, as Radak notes, the non-Jewish nations are portrayed here as disdaining us for abandoning our traditions. While this is not as true in Western countries today, Jewish history has generally shown us that we do best, and earn the most admiration when we keep to our legacy.

Second, the reminder of that time can serve as an alert, reminding us to be aware of our national tendency to abandon and/or reject what God wants from us. Forewarned is, we can hope, forearmed, and we can use the *haftarah* of Kedoshim as a spur to better observe the obligations of the Torah reading itself. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Emor, Ezekiel 44;15-31

Ezekiel, the Future Temple and How It Explains Modern Orthodoxy

This week's *haftarah* focuses on how priests of the future will conduct themselves. While the match to the Torah reading's opening discussion of the rules for priests is clear, these chapters challenge us in their portrayal, since it differs in important ways from what we see portrayed in the Torah and the Book of Kings, where King Solomon's Temple is described.

Commentators approach this divergence in two main ways. Rashi, echoing the Talmud, tries to reconcile Ezekiel's words with Jewish law, as recorded in the rabbinic literature. This is most obviously necessary for those verses where Ezekiel seems to prophesy that the 3rd Temple will violate well-accepted laws.

Since tradition held the fundamental belief that the Torah given to Moses on Sinai would not change, it also could not imagine Ezekiel predicting an abrogation of those laws.

We might limit that rule, however, by noting occasions when later events reveal that an apparently unequivocal law had room for adaptation. One famous example is Nachmanides's explanation of our commonly using Babylonian names for the months of the calendar, despite the Torah's requiring us to make the month of the Exodus the first of the months. He says events showed that the Torah actually meant we should have the calendar reflect our various redemptions, not just the first one from Egypt.

It might be possible, then, that when the 3rd Temple is built, the Sanhedrin will discover that Ezekiel's words don't actually contradict earlier statements of Jewish law as much as show a new range of permissibility that was always latent in that law. Within

the Rashi/Talmud view, then, we might see Ezekiel as fully within tradition, or demonstrating new room for what tradition meant.

Radak: The Rules of the Game Will Change

I find Radak's approach more textually compelling while also more theologically challenging. Radak assumes Ezekiel is regularly noting deep differences of practice between the 3rd Temple and the first two.

Some of those are fairly banal, such as the dimensions of the Temple, which he sees as larger than the others. Since King Solomon's Temple was much larger than the Tabernacle in the desert, we already know that the dimensions were not fixed numbers, but proportions. I have long wondered whether even Ezekiel's dimensions would suffice for what will one day be the third Temple, given how many more people there are in the world.

Numerous sources suggest the first Temple simply didn't service all that many people. The Mishnah in Pesachim speaks of offering the Passover sacrifice in three groups of at least thirty animals in a group, and the Talmud speaks of years when they could not get that many. Granting that as many as fifty people might have shared a lamb, that number represents only 4500 people. Assuming in a good year you had three groups of 100 animals, that's only 15,000 people. While I would never want to underestimate the possible apathy of world Jewry, I still imagine a future Temple would have more than 15,000 people coming to Jerusalem for Passover. So, it seems to me, it'd have to be a lot bigger than it was.

Our *haftarah* might also be referring to voluntary change. If, as Radak reads it, the priests of the future voluntarily decided to only marry women who have never been

married before or the widows of other priests, that would also pose no problem of Jewish law (as long as they did not confuse it with Torah law). We would only wonder why they would make this choice, the value they would see in this.

Roles Can Change Over Time, Within Traditional Models

Since I find Radak so much closer to what the text seems to mean, if I can find a theologically sound reading of the text within his framework I would prefer it. Here, Ezekiel refers to the priests both as Levites and as בני צדוק, sons of Zadok, the first priest to actually serve in a Temple.

Other aspects of the *haftarah* suggest the future Temple, for all its importance, would be largely separate from the ordinary life of most people. If so, while priests will still perform the Temple service, they might identify other aspects of their job as more central, such as teaching the nation (a Levitical duty as well). Zadok, who started life only as the teacher kind of Kohen, but then became part of a Temple, serves as a model of bridging the two worlds.

The Separateness of the Kohanim

While this would place the priests more frequently among the people, their strong connection to the Temple—both professionally and as an identity issue—might instill in them the need to maintain a distance from the regular populace. Some such ways might be by marrying only women who have never been married, or who are firmly within and accustomed to the Kohen lifestyle. In both cases, the priest can expect the woman to be flexible enough to adapt and adopt the very different lives of a priest.

Ezekiel's stress on Kohanim having no share in Israel of their own, their reliance on God's gifts for their sustenance, shows us the other half of this problem. In a future

Temple, if the service itself is not to be the high point of religiosity, the priests will be forced to be more involved with people while also maintaining their separate identity. Money issues challenge them in that way as well, since they will be relying on others for sustenance even while working on their separateness.

The closing verse of the *haftarah* offers a similar puzzle, stating that priests cannot eat unslaughtered animals or birds, which is true of all Jews. Rashi argues that it needed to be stressed to them because in the Temple, they were allowed to eat some sacrifices that were not killed that way. Here, too, we see the question of balance that will face the future priests, knowing when they are separate from other Jews by virtue of their Temple service, and when to mix in and join the rest of the community. A challenge we can all hope to struggle with, and to help them reach conclusions on, soon, speedily, in our days. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Behar, Jeremiah 32; 6-27

A Bifurcated *Haftarah*: Introduction and Summary

This *haftarah* tells of Jeremiah's buying a field from his cousin, Hanamel, as God had told him to, his prayer after following God's command, and the first verse of God's reply. In the sale itself, Jeremiah announces that God had told him, a day before, that Hanamel would come to ask if he wanted to exercise his right of redemption. Jeremiah does, taking pains to insure the record of purchase will last a long time.

Jeremiah's prayer notes God's greatness, both in general and to the Jewish people, concedes that the Jews had violated the covenant with God, and are about to be correctly punished by the conquest of their city. He closes by saying, and yet You have commanded me to buy the field. The first verse of God's answer only has God say, rhetorically, "I am the Lord of all flesh, is there anything I cannot do?"

Problems You May Already Have Noticed

Verse 15 seems to hold the key to the several problems our summary should have raised. The traditional text sets it off from those before and after, and Jeremiah prefaces it with its own "For thus saith the Lord of Hosts," when he had done so in verse 14.

Further, Jeremiah's puzzlement confuses us. He wonders why God was commanding him to buy the field at such a dire moment in Jewish history, when he should already know the answer— God is having him perform a public act of faith in real estate, to stress that the upcoming exile is not permanent, nor does it imply complete abandonment by God.

God's response does not fully enlighten us, either the part we read or its entirety. He pretty much repeats ideas even we know, since they appeared in the text already—the

Jews are about to get their deserved punishment for their sins, but will, in the future, be restored to their Land.

The one line of God's response that we do read highlights the problem, since God says, "I am the Lord of all flesh, is there anything I am unable to do?" language Jeremiah had explicitly used in his prayer.

Jeremiah's Uncertainty

Early in the *haftarah*, when Hanamel comes, Jeremiah notes that he *then* knew it was דבר ה', the word of God. This seems odd coming from a prophet—the previous day, he had a vision of his cousin coming, and only when it comes true does he know that it was from God!?

Radak suggests Jeremiah was saying he only realized God wanted him to *buy* the field when Hanamel came. Radak is noticing that the day before, God only told him Hanamel was coming to ask him to buy the field, not how he was supposed to react. If he is right, it would seem to mean God requires prophets to figure out some aspects of their missions on their own, a stimulating idea that can be applied to many parts of Scripture.

For it to work here, we would have to assume that verse 14, which says that God told Jeremiah to put the deed in clay vessels, happened at that moment (in front of everyone), after Jeremiah had decided to buy the field himself. That would leave us to figure out which parts of a prophecy God tells, and which are left for the prophet to figure out on his own.

The Veil Pulls Back Slowly

Radak's suggestion that Jeremiah was not told to buy the field affects our understanding of prophecy in general—what does God tell prophets, how do they

understand what they are told, etc-- but are not central to this *haftarah*. The idea that God only slowly revealed what was going on to Jeremiah does, however, offer an explanation of the prayer and the piece of God's response we read.

One reason God might reveal the plan slowly to Jeremiah is that it was inconceivable, even for a prophet. Jeremiah understands what he is being told at each step, and obeys, but it is literally unbelievable to him. His prayer (and now we understand his hesitance) is not meant to question God's power, but the sense of what he, Jeremiah, was being told.

Rehabilitation After Destruction: A Radical Idea

Jeremiah could understand that God creates the world, and does initial kindnesses to all. Part of that world, too, is a system of justice, and Jeremiah does not, at this point, see how God could plan to rehabilitate a people who are about to get the proper punishment for their many and repeated sins.

God's taking Jeremiah's words as the opening of His response now becomes even more pointed. Jeremiah meant only that God can do, *physically*, whatever He wants, whereas God is informing him that God's conception of the world, of right and wrong, also vastly outstrips (really, is incomparable to) the human one. The prophet cannot see why God would return the buying and selling of land, but that is because even he does not fully understand the Holy One.

This also yields a deeper connection to the Torah reading than being examples of redemption of land. The Torah premises those laws upon the assertion that we cannot sell the Land permanently, since it belongs to God. We probably tend to overlook that as

hyperbole, and to explain the laws of the Jubilee year as examples of a Jewish concern with social justice.

It might be, though, that theTorah means what it says, that these laws emphasize that the Land is God's, and the Jews tenants. Their tenancy explains why they'll be brought back to the Land even though, by rights, their sins might have doomed them to disappear from the face of the earth. Their role in the Land, though, did not depend only on their own rights and merits, it also stemmed from their assigned place in world history.

The *haftarah*, in this reading, builds on the Torah's emphasis that the Jews' handling of the Land is a way of giving physical reality to God's connection to the world. It is to give physical meaning to that idea that we are prohibited from ever experiencing the Land as fully enough "ours" to buy and sell in perpetuity, and which also saves us from the permanent oblivion our actions otherwise deserved. And it was that mystery Jeremiah did not at first understand, leading to his praying to God in our *haftarah.*

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Behukotai, Jeremiah 16;19-17;14

This week's *haftarah* has many verses that are justifiably famous and could lead to full-scale discussions of their own. Instead of covering the whole *haftarah*, then, I am going to here try to take just a couple of themes I have not belabored before.

What Leads Us to Miss Truths Other Nations Might Figure Out First

The first two units of this week's *haftarah*, meaning the last three verses of chapter 16 and the first three verses of chapter 17, have different thrusts but combine together to make a surprising point. The first unit consists of Jeremiah complaining about the possibility that in the future other nations will come to realize the emptiness of their objects of worship (whether they are actually idols or not), while the Jews will still not fully repent of their sins.

The next unit speaks of how deeply entrenched the Jews are in those sins, but the Talmud cites the opinion of R. Yehuda in the name of Rav, that the Jews began worshiping idols only as a cover to allow them to engage in wrongful sexuality. Whether that means they were willing to commit a worse crime in order to avoid being rebuked for a lesser one- a sad choice people make today as well, working so hard to avoid facing their wrongs they end up committing much worse ones—or that idol worship provided good opportunities for illicit sex, the Talmud is telling us that the original motivation for the idol worship was not the worship itself.

However it started, the Talmud then interprets the verse as saying the Jews eventually developed deep and honest affection for those idols, as if they were close relatives. This reminds us that once we start certain actions, for whatever reason, they can easily become a pull of their own, long after the original stimulus faded. So, for

example, psychologists point out that people who eat, smoke, or watch TV to escape stress can often find themselves still enmeshed in those activities long after the stress is gone.

Taken together, these first two units imply that at least one possible future of the world involves the Jewish people getting so caught up in some idea—one they originally took on for a subsidiary reason, such as greater access to social interactions they desired—that they adhere to it even after the non-Jews who originally promoted it have abandoned it for its falsehood. Truly a frustrating experience for Jeremiah to contemplate.

Turning Theory Into Practice and Trust in God

Two of the next four verses are well-known to students of Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, because Avot 3; 18 cites them as the prooftext for its claim that one whose "wisdom outstrips his actions" is like a tree with too many branches for its roots.

Seeing the verse in context makes the Mishnah problematic, since the prophet refers to one who puts his trust in people and turns his heart away from God; it is such a person whom Jeremiah says will be like a tree living in inimical conditions.

Faced with situations like this, we have two valid choices: separate the two comments, saying that Jeremiah made one point and the Mishnah a separate but also legitimate one, or we can find a greater unity between the two. I prefer the second strategy when possible, for its greater elegance.

The person whose wisdom outstrips his actions, I suspect, has misunderstood the value of wisdom. While many people in the world continue to assume that scholarship, intelligence, and knowledge are inherent values, Avot is telling us that the point of

wisdom is to apply it to improving the world. One who does has given root to his wisdom, grounded it in the real and important matter of improving this world.

That perspective of wisdom, it seems to me, extends from a faith-based worldview. Those who leave God out of their analysis of life and the world are more likely to be those who see the value of wisdom in what it does for that person; the jump from having wisdom to putting it into practice confounds philosophers (look, for example, at contemporary academic discussions of the end of Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed, where academics struggle to understand how or why Maimonides would have moved from the pure intellectual plane to seeing the highest level of perfection in taking one's intellectual understanding and putting it into practice).

If linking wisdom to action is a sign of faith, we understand what Jeremiah was saying, as well as how Avot applied it. Jews of Jeremiah's time did not construct their picture of the future with God centrally in mind. Security, wisdom, wealth were all issues to be taken care of by people, and often for themselves, without any broader picture to consider. That would also fuel a focus on wisdom over actions, since how wise one was would determine personal safety and security. Jeremiah is urging his listeners to do otherwise, as were the Sages in Avot, and as we can learn for ourselves today.

Money and Trust in God

The last Mishnah in Peah cites the verse about trusting in God to support its assertion that one who struggles not to take charity even when he is allowed to (but can, with effort, live without it) will eventually become wealthy and support others. Part of trust in God involves avoiding making others one's source of sustenance. Verse 11 also speaks of one who gets money wrongly, only this time by misleading others.

Taken together with all that we've seen here, we see the issue of trust in God, of guiding our actions by our belief in God and by no other standards, as a key to securing the kinds of outcomes we want. Whether it is in attaining money, wisdom, or other, there is a Godly way and a non-Godly way, and it is up to us to choose wisely.

God Will Help If We Ask

The penultimate verse of the *haftarah*, מקוה ישראל ה', speaks of God as a mikveh, a source of purification that involves immersing oneself. The late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once suggested that this signifies a self-purification in which the person plays an active role, the kinds of role laid out in the rest of the *haftarah*.

Our theme here, then, is finding the way to get in God's good graces through our own actions, through trust in God, and focus on God. **Shabbat Shalom**.

HAFTAROT OF PART III, LEVITICUS: RECAP AND RECURRING THEMES

First, as before, let us précis the *haftarot* of the Book.

Parshat Vayikra: Isaiah's complaints showed that he never intended to portray God as bothered by sacrifices themselves. Here, God criticizes the Jews both for failing to offer sacrifices of atonement and for worshiping idols. The two together showed that the issue was the Jews' continuing attempts to secure control over their lives, to worship idols they made themselves, to find atonement in the ways they chose. It was that fundamental religious error Isaiah sought to combat.

Parshat Tsav: The Jews' unwillingness to bring sin offerings at the same time as they were engaged in idol worship highlighted the challenge of Jeremiah's era, that the people were deeply religious, but insisted that they could make their own choices about what constituted proper religion. So, too, we saw that conquering oneself in the name of a religious act (such as circumcision) is only laudable if it is an act God has called for (as opposed to passing one's children through the fire).

Parshat Shemini: Several incidents of the *haftarah* showed the importance of accepting the limits of the human intellect when it comes to dealing directly with God. While Aaron and his two surviving sons managed to reason out a ruling, his sons' deaths as well as the incidents in our selection (Uza being killed, David's fear of the Ark, etc.) showed that this area is in general murky, best decided by direct consultation with God and God's rules.

Parshat Tazria: Two of Elisha's miracles showed us his style of miracle-making, extending Nature rather than creating something remarkable and astounding. This was the perfect form to convince Naaman, the Aramean general, since his polytheism had led

him to expect fireworks from gods; seeing the ability to control Nature was more convincing, bringing him to full monotheistic belief.

Parshat Metsora: The miracle of the salvation of Samaria, accompanied by Elisha's predicting it two days ahead of time, showed that many of God's miracles happen "in the dark," when humans do not see them. Only afterwards do we feel their impact, and recognizing them as miraculous is our responsibility in such situations.

Parshat Aharei Mot: We noted the emphasis placed on this reading, since we make sure to read it even when the Aharei Mot and Kedoshim are read together, and when Aharei Mot is Shabbat haGadol. We suggested that was because of its stress on realizing that God punishes in the world, that disasters that befall us are God's way of pointing out places where we have gone wrong. God also promises great bounty, but getting there can only come after understanding the less happy messages God sends us.

Parshat Kedoshim: Ezekiel is challenged to confront the Jewish people about their sins, a task whose difficulty the text recognizes. The catalog of sins he mentions matches those in the Torah reading, ratifying the tradition that these were central to our national identity. Even so, we also see tradition discussing which was the sin that tipped the scales to destruction, so that there can be more and less serious sins in this central group as well.

Parshat Emor: The *haftarah's* discussion of seemingly new rules for a future Temple led to one of two options. Rashi and the rabbinic literature preferred to assume that Ezekiel's statements actually fit known Jewish law, while Radak read Ezekiel as mentioning ways in which priests will voluntarily adopt practices not required by that

law. For Radak, we pointed out that it might be part of a broader question for future priests, when and how much to mix with ordinary Jews.

Parshat Behar: The purchase of the field from Hanamel, Jeremiah's cousin, led Jeremiah to seek information from God, since he did not understand it. We suggested that God only told Jeremiah what to do in pieces, since the prophet himself could not fully understand the possibility that God would return the Jews to the Land. That God would, we added, might be for the same reason as there is an obligation to observe the Jubilee year, to underline our recognition that the Land is God's, not in theory but in practice.

Parshat Behukotai: The *haftarah* raises the issue of trust in God, of guiding our actions only by our belief in God as a key to securing the kinds of outcomes we want. Whether it is in attaining money, wisdom, or other goods, there is a Godly way and a non-Godly way, and it is up to us to choose wisely.

More cohesively than in Genesis or Exodus, these *haftarot* revolve around a closely related set of questions, from only slightly different perspectives. Appropriately for a Book that deals with sacrifice, the *haftarot* again and again visit the difference between performing actions in an attempt to control God and performing those same actions as an act of subservience to God, of accepting God's Will and power.

In that light, discussions of Elisha's miracles being relatively naturalistic, or of the dispersing of the armies of Aram as having happened in the dark, contribute to the set of questions sacrifices raise. God's choosing to act in ways open to naturalistic interpretation, even in some of God's miracles, remind us that human life is meant to

balance direct encounter with God—as can happen with proper sacrifice—with faith and subservience to the Will of God as expressed in Scripture.

PART IV: THE HAFTAROT OF THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Bemidbar, Hosea 2;1-22

Hosea: The Unknown Story

This week's *haftarah* comes from the second chapter of Hosea. Pesachim 87b-88a offers necessary background, telling us Hosea was the oldest and greatest of four prophets who functioned in his time, the others being Isaiah, Amos, and Micah.

The Talmud also stresses his early attachment to justice. In their view, God came to Hosea saying "your sons have sinned." Hosea responded that God should drop them and take another nation. To teach him his error, God commands him to marry a prostitute, Gomer b. Divlayim, and they have three children.

Once his family has been formed, God reminds Hosea that Moses separated from his wife as he became more advanced in prophecy, yet Hosea was still staying with *his* wife. Hosea protests that he could not abandon the woman who has borne his children, nor the children themselves (the source of Moses' right to do that is an important question for another time).

This was the response God sought, much like Jonah and the plant. In both cases, the human has become attached to a relationship at the same time that he is advocating God's abandoning one that has stood for generations. In the Rabbis' reading, Hosea understands and accepts the point, and prays for the Jews to be saved.

The Talmud's reconstruction explains why our *haftarah* leads into the rebuke with two verses of comfort. It is Hosea's prayer for the Jews, his understanding that mercy must always serve as background, that allows him to administer the warnings God "really" wanted him to deliver. The comforting verses say the Jews will be uncountable

(the connection to our Torah reading, it would seem), will once again be known as God's children, that the Jews of the two Kingdoms will gather, make a single head, and leave their exile to return to Israel. (That all the Jewish people would ever agree on one leader may be the most utopian part of the vision).

The Uncompromising Prophet

In this reading, Hosea's prophecy, and life, was deeply affected by his stance in his original conversation with God. Until that point, his book might have started with the rebukes of chapter 2, our *haftarah*. It was only when Hosea responded so strictly that God decided to show him the lesson of marriage and children, after which he was ready for his real work as a prophet.

One explanation of this is that Hosea's comment showed God pressing matters that needed prophetic attention before even getting to his true mission. Related to that, we might suggest that even prophets can only hear that part of God's infinite messages for which they are ready. If so, the Talmud was telling us of the personal lesson Hosea needed to learn before he could deliver God's message. That his needs shape the Word that comes down to us is both a sign of his greatness and a sobering reminder of the limitations of even our greatest prophets.

The Rest of the Section

The rest of the *haftarah* consists of rebukes we all know. God complains that the Jews have not been faithful, in part by turning to other nations for assistance and ascribing the good in our lives to sources other than God. God announces that He will withhold those goods, which will (eventually) bring us to realize the many bounties God bestows upon us.

The Sages stress that this punishment is solely concerned with eliciting obedience. Berachot 7a cites R. Yohanan saying in the name of R. Yose that internal submission to God is as good as several external punishments. Berachot 35a contrasts verse 11, which says that grain belongs to God, to the verse in Shema that says ואספת דגניך, you shall gather *your* grain.

The Talmud's answer, that the grain is ours only when we do God's will, highlights the point of our *haftarah*: The road to freedom, wealth, and blessings beyond all imagining, is through honest and sincere submission to God's Will.

The Hard Way to Renewal

God then says that the Jews will need to return to the desert, to be spoken to and enticed by God. Exodus Rabbah 2;4 draws the obvious parallel to the original Exodus, seeing our future redemption, like our past, as starting in the desert. The prediction that our nation can only get back to focusing properly on God in a desert is a sad comment on us. A mature people would attach to the true and necessary even without being taken to a place where all competing factors have been removed.

We can hope that this and similar prophecies—such as Jeremiah 3;14, which says that God will gather us back one from a city, two from a family, describe only the most likely outcome (not the necessary one). That leaves us to hold on to the possibility we will find a way to waken ourselves and our brethren, to hear God's messages properly and appropriately, before it is too late.

Forging a Complete and Unbreakable Bond

The end of the *haftarah* predicts a day when Jews will no longer call God *baali*, but *ishi*. The plainest sense of the text is that the Jews will no longer use the term *baali* even

as a praise for God, since it reminds us of a form of idol worship that once tempted us away from devotion to God.

Similarly, in the next verse God promises to so fully remove the mention of Baal from the Jews' lips that they will not even remember the name of the idols they used to worship. It is only then that God will promise to keep us safe from all forms of danger—animals, vermin, sword-- to allow us to reside in Israel without fear.

At *that* point, Hosea speaks the three verses we say when wrapping the tefillin around our fingers, that God will betroth us to Him forever, with righteousness, justice, kindness, and empathy. The order seems clear: we reject idol worship, God helps us remove it from our lips and memories, and *then* we can forge a complete, lasting, and unbreakable bond, based on the qualities we know (from Scripture) to be the ones God values. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Naso, Judges 13;2-25

Finding the Middle, the Example of Physicality

One obvious connection between Samson and the Torah reading is that he was designated a "nazir," for which there is no good English word other than Nazirite, from before he was born; the laws of that status are outlined in the Torah reading. More careful reading suggests a connection that both better explains Samson's role in Jewish history and also the nature and meaning of being a Nazirite.

As with all people, Samson's parents are crucial to appreciating the drama and themes of his life. The Sages see Manoah and his wife as righteous yet also remarkably attached to the physical, which helps explain why God would make their son a Nazirite, and of the particular rules to which Samson was required to adhere.

The Righteousness of Manoah and His Wife

On the one hand, the Midrash sees Manoah as one of the leaders of the Jewish people Moses foresaw before he died. The comment both assumes that Manoah was a leader of his generation, and also that whatever function Samson performed in Jewish history was one that was already known to be needed in the time of Moses.

After the angel appears to Manoah's wife—which, if you hold to Maimonides's view of prophecy, already means she must have been at a high intellectual/spiritual level--Manoah prays for a reappearance and gets it; the ability to successfully pray for a particular outcome is usually a sign of spiritual sophistication. Numbers Rabbah points out that Manoah's wife runs to him when the angel returns, and sees her as a good example of how righteous people do everything with alacrity.

When dealing with the angel a second time, Zevachim 119a notes that his offering a sacrifice would seem to have been prohibited when there was a functioning Tabernacle in Shilo, at least according to one view. The Talmud explains it as an הוראת שעה, a short-term breaking of the rules scholars and/or prophets may initiate. This assumes Manoah had the authority and right to issue such rulings.

Finally, Manoah asks the angel's name, reminding us of the Patriarch Jacob, who also concluded his experience with an angel by asking for the angel's name. At the same time, this last example suggests that he had not realized the angel was beyond his comprehension, a point made by the name Peli, which means wondrous or inconceivable.

On the Other Hand

At least balancing their righteousness is the parents' excessive physicality. The woman describes the man she saw as "looking like an angel," words that reveal, as Radak points out, that she (and the rest of her generation) thought of angels as having a physical form. In addition, the Sages blame Manoah for "going after" his wife, especially if he walked behind her, an act they saw as too easily leading to improperly physical thoughts.

Manoah's concern that the angel eat and his certainty that they would die when he realized the angel was not human further demonstrate his difficulties balancing the physical and metaphysical. For him, sharing food was necessary to sealing one's thanks for a message brought, and surviving a conversation with an angel seemed beyond possibility for a human being.

The latter case is particularly striking, since the wife's point—that God would not bother to predict Samson's birth or give her rules of conduct if they were going to die—is

so clear that only a deeply held counterbelief could have led Manoah not to realize it himself.

Their focus on their physical lives may also explain the tension that several Midrashim see in their marriage, caused by their childlessness. While the angel notes that she was barren, when she repeats his words to her husband, she leaves that out (the Midrash thinks the angel allowed her to, to foster peace in the family).

Another Midrash suggests that the angel reappeared to her (rather than to him or them) to lead him to appreciate her more. One final Midrash to mention sees the angel as telling her she was barren so that she would stop blaming her husband for it. Each one, then, saw their lack of children as a deep wound in their marriage, and blamed the other for it.

Samson: What Kind of Nazirite?

The parents' having combined both great righteousness and attachment to the physical goes a long way to explaining their being given a son who would be required to weigh his attachment to the physical throughout his life. Especially since Samson was allowed to come into contact with corpses, an essential prohibition to ordinary Nazirites, his status as a nazirite seems focused on grappling with how to avoid excessive physicality, such as personal grooming (which has some aspect of concern with sexuality to it) and proper use of food.

Given what we know of Samson and his struggles with self-control, the preparation was not only necessary, it perhaps did not go far enough. His great physical gifts, which provided such salvation to the Jews of his time, were also the burden under which he eventually broke.

A Spirituality Bound by the Physical

The Midrash's assumption that Manoah and Samson were shown to Moses and that Manoah and his wife struggled to put the physical and spiritual in their proper places give a perspective of Samson and the institution of being a Nazirite that link the Torah reading and *haftarah* productively.

Once we refuse to reject either the physical or the spiritual, how to give each its proper due is no simple task (as Samson's ultimate failure shows). Thus, it is reasonable that God would know that the Jews would at some point need a leader like Samson, with a father like Manoah.

It also shows us the reason the Torah would establish the institution, even while preferring that people not make use of it. For those who need a period of intense training, nezirut can restore or inculcate an awareness of the physical that will then allow that person to put it into proper perspective in the rest of their lives. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Behaalotecha, Zachariah 2;14-4;7

Interestingly, this *haftarah* is the same as that for the first Shabbat of Hanukkah. There, we relate the reading to the holiday menorahs we light, in parallel to the one Aaron is told how to care for in this Torah reading. That cannot be the whole story, at the very least because the *haftarah* starts fourteen verses before the Menorah is ever mentioned, and stops before the vision is fully explained (the symbolism of the olive branches is elaborated just after we stop our reading).

Chapter 2, Verses 14-17: Particularism and Universalism in Zachariah

The first section of the *haftarah* has Zachariah telling Jerusalem to rejoice in her future redemption, when God will come and reside in her midst. The section closes with a call for "all flesh" to be silent before God, having said before that that "many nations" will come to see God as their deity as well.

Note the two sides—the other nations will be part of the future, and will accept our version of the One True God. At the same time, the Jewish relationship with God will continue to be different and special, as God is portrayed as residing in our midst. That mix of universalism, being concerned with all nations' sharing in the future for which we long, and particularism, being aware that we are and always will be special and different, characterizes Judaism and our view of the future.

The Midrash notes that verse 13 connects Jerusalem's rejoicing to God's residing in her midst, suggesting that the redemption will not be complete when people return to Jerusalem, the return of a Davidic kingship to Jerusalem, or even when the nations of the world come to accept our version of God and how God relates to the world. Jerusalem's full rejuvenation only happens when God's Presence is once again ensconced in the city.

Another Midrash, incidentally, understands the reference to God "awakening" from His Holy Place to say that God's Presence has in fact never left the Temple Mount, that it is now dormant, awaiting events that allow it to reveal itself. I find such a picture stimulating, reminding me of those who see prophecy as tapping into a Voice that is always present in the world, but only certain special people manage to hear.

Two Connected Stories: Joshua's Rejuvenation and the Menorah

Moving on to the rest of the *haftarah*, chapters 3 and 4 seem to tell of two different prophecies, one in which Zachariah sees Joshua, the High Priest, with Satan standing on his right and dressed in soiled clothing. The second, the Menorah vision, chapter 4, tells of the Menorah that Zachariah saw. The traditional grouping of the text splits the visions differently, grouping the High Priest with the vision of the Menorah and its symbolism. After a full break, we are given the interpretation of other aspects of the Menorah vision.

In the first story, Joshua has two problems that need to be solved, Satan and the clothing. While God takes care of the first, the clothing remain, a reminder that even after we overcome our evil inclinations, the distractions that lure us from serving God, we still need to cleanse ourselves of the dirt of those past sins.

The Imperfect Priest: Does It Affect His Service?

To explain why the High Priest's clothing is soiled, Rashi says it refers to Joshua's descendants marrying non-Jews. Rashi assumes that the actions of children and grandchildren reflect back on the ancestor. It is not enough to have children; raising them, setting them on a path where they will raise their own children properly, is all a part of what it means to have fulfilled the commandment of procreation.

An alternate view thinks Joshua's clothing was dirtied when he was thrown in the fire. In that story, following the successful escape of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar challenged the two false prophets, Ahab and Zidkiyah, to reproduce that feat. They protested that there were three when Hananiah and the others were thrown in, and the numbers provided safety; Nebuchadnezzar agreed, and threw Joshua in along with them.

In the Talmud's view, the two were burned up and Joshua saved, but singed by having been thrown in in such proximity to evil. Here again, Joshua is seen as a person of great personal piety caught up in surrounding events that leave him damaged, with dirty clothing as the metaphor.

Human Input into the Future

In the vision, the angels replace Joshua's dirtied clothing with clean ones, and Zachariah adds that they should put a צניף טהור, a pure hat, on him. Worth emphasizing is that *Zachariah* says to do it; he is not just a witness, he is an active member of the team remaking Joshua. So, too, Joshua is told that he and his descendants can guarantee a positive future, as long as they do what God wants.

Zachariah's readiness to make a suggestion perhaps explains why he is expected to understand the vision of the Menorah on his own. The angel tells him that it shows that God's spirit is what guarantees success, which does not quite explain the whole vision. The *haftarah* then closes by saying that no mountain can stand before Zerubavel, and that the foundation stone will be turned into a building of remarkable beauty.

Since Zachariah's prophecy occurs during the rebuilding of the second Temple, his words could be seen as a reaction to the building of a House not nearly as magnificent as

King Solomon's. The Menorah is a sign of the Spirit of God, the key ingredient to any kind of future success, whether it be Joshua's, as in our *haftarah*, or Zerubavel's, the political leader of Zachariah's time.

Conclusion: The Menorah as a Central Sign of the Priests' Service

Although there is much more to be said, what we have seen already explains why this Menorah vision connects so well to the Torah reading. As Rashi tells us, Aaron was disheartened by the gifts offered by the heads of the tribes, since he could not give one. The insights about the Menorah in our *haftarah* tell us what God meant by reminding him that he was given the service of the Menorah.

The people in the outside world have much to accomplish, and donate some of that in impressive ways to the service of God, but Aaron and his sons, forbidden by God from being ordinary, hold the key not just to the Temple but to the success of the entire people. Certainly as great a legacy. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Shelach, Joshua 2;1-24

Ignore Those Spies, They're Not the Real Story

Despite the temptation to see our *haftarah* as merely a story of spies who contrast with the ones in the Torah reading by doing their job correctly and faithfully, the *haftarah* foregrounds Rahab so much that we would be remiss if we did not examine her role here.

The spies, whom tradition identifies as Caleb and Pinchas (and who we would therefore assume are competent at the main task of spies, not being noticed), are detected almost as soon as they arrive in the city and then appear to be at Rahab's mercy--it is she who saves them from the king's men, tells them the information they need to bring back to Joshua, gives them their escape route, and tells them how long to stay hidden before returning to the main camp of the Jewish people.

Explaining the *haftarah* fully, then, must include some understanding of why the prophet stresses her role so much. It seems relevant to note that the prophet also mentions her profession, a "זונה," usually translated as prostitute." Rashi translates the word as innkeeper, even though he assumes she was also a prostitute. Seeing her as an innkeeper explains why the spies would have gone to her, but I think it also explains her centrality to the story.

The Lower the Person, the More Impressive the Faith

Rahab will serve as an example of faith so pure that it overcomes everything about her background, turning her into a model of service of God. The lower she starts out, the more impressive the turnaround her faith brings. A woman with a fine livelihood who still turns to prostitution is lower, morally, than an ordinary prostitute. The Talmud in Megillah also details her proficiency at this latter profession, lowering our expectations

of Rahab further. She seems, when we meet her, to be so caught up in vice as to be irredeemable.

Her determined and complete turn from that life captures our attention. In Scripture as a whole, the term "zonah" signifies faithlessness, unwillingness or inability to commit to a relationship, so the contrast between her description and her actions not only surprises us, it draws attention to that theme as important to the *haftarah* as a whole. Rahab learns the lesson of Sihon and Og's loss, in sharp contrast to the king and the rest of the inhabitants. She protects the spies, makes a pact to which she adheres rigorously, and insures their safe return, so the message can get back to the rest of the Jewish people.

The Purple String and Its Significance

To my mind, this also explains the end of the story, where Rahab is lowering the spies from her window. They decide to tell her about the sign of the purple string, and do so in a way almost calculated to frighten her, starting their statement with "We are free of the oath you made us take. Unless…"

Why do it that way, I have often wondered, and why demand it at all. Seeing Rahab's faith as a linchpin of the story offers a part of an answer, that the spies were putting her to a final test. By leading off that way, they could see how much she trusted them, and by having her put a purple string in her window, she would already be signaling, to all who paid attention, her belief that the Jews would win this war.

This Time, It's About Showing God's Power

Understanding Rahab as a model of finding faith in God shows how this spies' mission contrasts with the original one. Those earlier spies took action on their own, and

were preparing for a natural process of wars of conquest (as Nachmanides notes when he defends the idea of sending spies; to him, the sin lay in how they executed their mission).

The spies of Joshua's time take a more passive approach, relying on outside forces (read: God and agents thereof). Where the first plan of Conquest might have been for the people to take matters into their own hands, to break somewhat free of the the God Who had done all else for them—taking them out of Egypt, splitting the Sea, appearing at Sinai. The failure of the first spies altered reality, changing at least the first stages of the Conquest to one where the Jews were expected to completely rely on God.

Why the shift? Perhaps because of the death of the generation that had seen the miracles of the Exodus. The victories over Sihon and Og were certainly impressive, but the Torah gives us no reason to assume they were supernatural. Since part of the point of this stretch of Jewish history was to make God's power known to the world, the gap between the Exodus and the Conquest may have led to a need to have the Conquest, at least at the beginning, again demonstrate the possibility of Divine and supernatural intervention in history.

Back to Rahab

The centrality of faith might also explain why we care so much about Rahab. Megillah 14b assumes that Hulda was a descendant of Rahab because the later prophetess uses the word "tikvah," the word used here for the purple string. The Talmud goes on to claim that 8 prophets, all priests (who are required to maintain the highest level of sexual purity) descended from Rahab, and that Joshua and Rahab married, parenting the girl who became Hulda's ancestor.

The connection of Rahab to prophecy and priesthood seems part of tradition's recognition that her faith transformed her from a woman sunk in the most physical and faithless of pursuits, ordinarily also a barrier to being able to recognize God or His Presence in the world. Having changed, she is the one who sees God in the events around her, and acts to further that Presence.

Our story thus contrasts to the Torah reading both in how the Jews and Rahab experience it. Whereas the original spies were unable to muster enough faith to believe that they could conquer Israel with God's help, Rahab was able to understand how to act based only on the reports of much lesser miracles. She serves as a heroine not just for the *haftarah* but for much of Jewish history because her abilities and actions were in exact counterbalance to that earlier nadir. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Korach, I Samuel 11:14-12:22

Two vital realizations make this week's *haftarah* more understandable. First, almost everyone, if not everyone, has an internal justification for what they do, no matter how evil they may actually be in fact. It is not true that evil people—substitute your favorites, Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein being the usual suspects, but with plenty of competition (Pol Pot, Kim Jong Il, anyone?)—wake up in the morning and say, oh, wow, what evil can I commit today?

No, they wake up wondering how they can make the world a better place, as do you and I. The difference between us is how we define the words, who is part of the world we care about, what "better" means, and the acceptable methods of getting there.

The second necessary tool to decipher this week's Torah reading and *haftarah* is the knowledge that many people are in such thorough denial they do not have a clue as to how self-contradictory and self-destructive their behavior is. Recognizing those two truths, we can understand what was happening in our *haftarah*.

Saul is Now Accepted As King

Having defeated Nahash, Samuel opens by calling for a celebratory renewal of the coronation. This was needed because when Saul originally was chosen, בני בליעל, worthless people, questioned his fitness for the job.

Step One in oxymoronic behavior: The Jews have a prophet they believe in, they go to him for a king, he draws lots through the Urim and Tumim, finds the answer, that guy is hiding, the Urim tell where to find him, and there's still a sizable minority of people who do not believe he's right for the task. (I say sizable minority because I do not imagine Samuel would call for another ceremony to convince a few crazies).

The people's following Samuel to the ceremony and reveling in it suggests they had forgotten his original reaction to their request for a king. One possibility is that Samuel was happy to celebrate Saul's success and re-coronation despite his negativity towards the whole process that led to his being made king.

That may be true, and the choice of Gilgal—as opposed to Mitspah-- suggests sincerity on the prophet's part. Radak points out that Gilgal was where the Ark and Tent of Meeting resided when the Jews first entered the Land, indicating, I think, that it was the first spot of the people's residence in the Land (like Plymouth Rock). This would mean that Samuel was telling them that the choice of a king should join their national narrative of their roots and formative events, going all the way back to their first entry into the Land.

But the people's easy acceptance of Samuel's positive attitude jumps out. Did they not remember that he was unhappy with them? Did they not know?

Suspicion of Samuel, Part of the Package

Another example of odd (and, perhaps, evil) behavior by the people is suggested by Samuel's feeling he had to fully verify that he had never used his office to personal advantage. Unless we see him as paranoid, he seems to understand that the people are not fully behind him, would not easily accept the words of admonishment he is about to give them. He may have been their prophet for a lot of years, consistently spread God's Word, but he can never be sure they will accept what he has to say.

To the Meat of the Matter

Having verified that they have renounced any suspicions of him, Samuel can get to his real point, emphasizing the evil of their actions. Readers of the book up until this

point would not have known that the people's call for a king was primarily stimulated by the threat of Nahash, not by the flaws in Samuel's sons, as the people expressed it to him. (This also clarifies why Samuel waited until Nahash had been defeated to renew the kingship—Saul has now fulfilled the prime directive underlying his rule).

The call for a king also broke a pattern that had been itself distressing, but at least always brought the people back to God. As the book documents, the story of Jewish history up until his time was the Jews' forgetting God, getting into trouble, returning to beseech God for salvation, getting a leader who does so, and then forgetting Him again, starting a whole new cycle.

Even though the cycle was still in force in Samuel's time, with the arrival of Nahash, they insisted on a king, hoping, apparently, not to need to turn to God each time, to already have a leader in place to protect them.

But, as the saying goes, you can't get outta the game. Samuel is here to tell them that their success in this world, at least as a nation (deep breath, because few accept this today) depends on whether they follow God, king or no. To back up his point, he brings a rainstorm in the middle of summer.

I find it endlessly fascinating that the prophet Samuel— thought by the Sages to have approached Moses and Aaron in his level of prophecy-- still could not count on his audience believing or accepting what he had to say, needing miracles to back up his claims.

The people get some of his point, admit they've sinned, and ask him to pray for them. Of course, the job of a leader is to accept whatever signs of penitence the people

exhibit, and to encourage more, which Samuel does, so the *haftarah* ends on a relatively happy note.

Read this way, though, the *haftarah* highlights for us the recurring truths of the Jewish people's behavior throughout history, especially in the Torah reading. Remember that a day after the earth swallowed up Korah and his gang, presumably proving that Moses did not act on his own, the people complain that Moses and Aaron had killed too many people. And God decides to have one more test to prove to everyone that Aaron was Divinely chosen to be Kohen Gadol. We are, apparently, a people who take a long time to learn our lessons. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat Chukkat-- Judges 11;1-33

Why Are The Sages So Down on Jepthah?

We ordinarily delve into *haftarot* trying to understand the connection to the Torah reading or by noting that it starts or ends at an odd place. This week, I want to come at those questions by analyzing tradition's negativity towards Jepthah.

In last week's *haftarah*, when Samuel rebukes the Jews for rejecting God's leadership in favor of a king, he lists six leaders who had saved the Jews. The Sages think the list is divided by great and mediocre leaders, and put Jepthah in the latter group. So, too, Rosh haShanah 25b phrases our obligation to listen to the leaders of our generation by saying, "Jepthah in his generation is like Samuel in his." Tracking how the Sages came to be so negative about Jepthah will also answer our usual questions about the connection between the Torah reading and *haftarah*.

A Problematic Family Background

The text describes Jepthah as the son of a *zonah*; like with Rahab, there is some question as to the meaning of the word. Targum Jonathan assumes it means innkeeper (rather than prostitute), while Radak assumes she was a concubine, a quasi-marital relationship which does not involve the full protection of Jewish marriage, particularly a *ketubbah*.

A *ketubbah*, let us recall, protects the woman from capricious divorce, since it would cost the husband money. (In the Sages's time, we should note, people either lived together or got divorced; there was no tolerance for men refusing to live with their wives and yet also withholding a divorce). In a relationship without a *ketubbah*, the woman's security depended wholly on her ability to constantly please her husband. Phrased that

way, we see the element of prostitution, since a prostitute as well is only kept around for as long as her services are required.

When Jepthah's brothers deny him an inheritance because he is the son of a different woman—a meaningless statement in legal terms, since all of a man's sons inherit, regardless of mother—Radak quotes an opinion that that they objected to her having been from a different tribe. This only adds to the evidence that Jepthah was raised with a poor or absent sense of familial belonging.

Jepthah leaves, and goes to the land of Tov, where the verse tells us that empty people gathered to him. Baba Kama 92a cites that as an example of the popular saying that bad trees grow near bad trees. At first glance, it is not clear why the Talmud is so negative; when King David flees Saul, he is also joined by people who have problems, owe money, or are bitter of heart, descriptions that do not sound significantly better than "empty people."

The Oath and Its Aftermath

The Sages also lay into Jepthah for the oath he made, in which he promised to offer God whatever came out of his house first, should he return successfully from war. We know that that ended up being his daughter, but Taanit 4a notes that Saul and Eliezer made similarly inappropriate requests. Each could have produced problematic outcomes, such as an inappropriate wife for Isaac or a poor husband for Michal. Yet only Jepthah faces the consequences of his poorly phrased oath, and bears it in terms of losing a member of his family.

One final example clinches our view of Jepthah as flawed in family connections. One group of Midrashim assumes his daughter was actually killed (shocking for several

reasons, among them that *halachah* does not allow this), and blames Jepthah and Pinchas, who each refused to go to the other to annul the vow. In that reading, both men were too arrogant to forego their honor, but we recoil even more from Jepthah, since he allowed his sense of himself to get in the way of saving his own daughter!

Jepthah's Sense of History

Jepthah drives a hard bargain with the elders who seek his assistance. We see that his brothers' mistreatment—and the local elders' failure to protect him from them—irks him still. Once he secures their agreement that he will be their leader, he sends messengers to the Ammonites, who claim the Jews took their land on the way up from Egypt.

Jepthah, despite his upbringing, knows the details of a history that happened three hundred years before. His knowledge is, I think, a central point of the *haftarah*, that these events were so well known, even *he* knew them.

Aside from denying that the Jews had taken Ammonite land, Jepthah tells them they should be happy with what their god gave them, as the Jews would be happy with what God gave us. The implication that Kemosh might actually be the source of any military success seems so beyond the pale of acceptability we can only wonder how it got into Scripture.

A Lost Opportunity

Especially galling is that Jepthah does not speak of the Land having been given by God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, making original ownership irrelevant. Had he dones so, instead of the ensuing war being a test of whether God would answer Jepthah's prayers, it would have been a reconfirmation of the truths of the Exodus.

His failure stands out more when we consider the familial aspect I mentioned earlier. Nachmanides understands the Torah's decision to prohibit Ammonite and Moabite men from marrying into the Jewish people as a result of their failure to return the hospitality Abraham had given Lot.

If so, Jepthah was poised to deliver a lesson for all times. A man of flawed and difficult familial background has been put into the crucial position of leading a segment of the Jewish people when they must confront "cousins" who refused to honor their family connections. He succeeds partially, but had he been able to respond to the elders' request magnanimously, had he been able to see the good of family even without a personal experience of it, he might have delivered the kinds of messages about God that Samuel delivered, where God's centrality would become clear not only to Jews but to non-Jews as well.

He fails in that he only does ok, when he stood on the threshold of greatness. Unable to transcend himself, he goes into history as a leader (as he demanded), but not one who leaves the legacy he might have. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Balak, Micah 5 ;6-6;8

Other Nations, Who Needs Them?

The opening of this week's *haftarah* echoes a question I've long had about the Torah reading. None of the events with Balak and Balaam happens to Jews or involves them, raising the question of why it's included in the Torah. The *haftarah*'s call for us to remember what Balak intended to do to us, and the advice that Balaam gave him suggests that the *haftarah* is meant, at least this week, to explain some of what is unclear about that Torah reading.

The first three verses focus us on the central question of the *haftarah* and Torah reading, how we are supposed to relate to non-Jews. The prophet describes the remnant of the Jewish people as dew that comes from God, which does not need to wait or hope for any human help, as lions among animals, cubs among sheep, meaning that if they chose to run amok no one could stop them, with the last of the three saying that our right hands will be strong and powerful over our enemies.

My instinct is to read the verse as meaning that the Jews will be like the dew *for the non-Jews*, bring them some form of blessing. Dew is a naturally occurring phenomenon that Scripture views a sign of God's beneficence to the world. If the Jews are like dew, our being spread among other nations, whether physically or by social and economic interactions, seems to mean that we provide a service.

That service, one we and they have denied for so long we cannot even imagine it, is to remind non-Jewish nations (read: the world) that success depends on a person's or nation's connection to God, Whom we as a people symbolize. We have given up on this because of how far much of the world has gone from believing in a God Who affects

events here on Earth (and many of those who do are Christian fundamentalists, who make many uncomfortable for other reasons).

Destruction Right After Bounty?

Given the importance of the Jewish people's role, the next six verses jar, since they seem to predict destruction and collapse. While Micah may have simply switched gears, Rashi and Radak agree that, at least for the first two verses, he meant that the Jews will not *need* horses or fortified cities, giving them the kind of independence (whether we are living among them or on our own) that allows for true influence.

In that reading, self-sufficiency is a religiously valuable move, aside from its economic advantages. Just as a prophet and/or judge is supposed to be free of monetary concerns, to impress those around him and/or to avoid possible influence from them, so too the Jews. If we are dependent on other nations, militarily, economically, perhaps even culturally, we are less able to point out to them how much they miss by refusing to recognize the truths of our God.

Independence need not mean separation. Micah is not arguing for a lack of contact, or protesting the people's becoming intertwined with them. He is only pointing out that we at the same time should be striving for the kind of independence that allows us to speak truths that need to be spoken. Foremost among them is the existence of a God Who is involved with the world, Who "cares" about our actions, and Who rewards and punishes based on those actions.

Since that only explains the verses that speak of not having fortified cities, whereas the prophet goes on to speak of a broader destruction, let me suggest that Micah was pointing out two other truths of Jewish history. First, God "needs" us to serve as

emissaries before we've completed the process of self-perfection. If so, God might punish us at the same time as sending us on our mission. Indeed, it may be that our failure to perform our mission led to our exile, confronting us more regularly with that mission.

Second, exile may have been the only way God was able to convince us to undertake that task. Too often, when Jews are comfortable, they assume that that comfort is their right, and allow it to foster a closing-in on themselves. If I live in a community where Judaism is well-set-up, can have my kosher food and Shabbat services, I may allow myself to ignore those others—Jewish and not—"out there."

Sadly, then, we may force God to cast us out of our comfortable surroundings, to force us to engage with the others we were always supposed to. The middle verses of the *haftarah* would then connect well with what came before—we are meant to be dew to the other nations; we can do that from the comforts of home if we try, but are likely to need to be shoved out of the nest before we'll be willing to.

How to Get Back to That Role

Speaking of errors in how we try to represent God, the next verses point out similar problems. Aside from a stubborn tendency to turn to other gods, Jews of Micah's time also mishandled God's commandments. Forgetting Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Jews insist on focusing on rituals such as sacrifice, when God was concerned with "doing justice, loving to perform kindnesses, and walking humbly with God." As Makkot 24a reminds us, this was Micah's way of encapsulating all mitsvot, meaning that our performance of mistvot must always reflect these lessons, or we'll be getting it wrong.

To bring us back: We might include the Balaam-Balak story as an example of the Jewish people's affect on the nations around them, a reminder that that is meant to be part of our role in the world, and the *haftarah* is a call to return to that mission, and suggestions on how to do so. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Pinchas, I Book of Kings 18:46-19;21

The Twilight of a Great Career

This *haftarah* tells of the beginning of the end of Elijah's career as a prophet, soon after its climax on Har haCarmel. The *haftarah* actually continues that story, which we read as the *haftarah* of Parshat Ki Tissa. We skip some middle events, such as Elijah ordering the people to kill the idolatrous prophets and priests, and of his warning Ahab to get home before the drought-ending rain hits.

We start with Elijah running before Ahab all the way to Jezreel, where Ahab tells his wife what had happened on the mountain. Instead of conceding his theological victory, she tells Elijah he will die in the morning. He flees to Beersheba, leaves his servant, and goes on alone for a day's journey into the desert.

He sits under a tree and longs for death, saying "better to die than to live, for I am no better than my forefathers." Dying at Jezebel's hands was intolerable, perhaps because it would give a Baal-worshiper victory over a prophet of God. Death itself, though, was attractive at that point.

Elijah does not get his wish. Instead, he goes to sleep and an angel rouses him, offers him a cake baked in the coals and a jug of water, and tells him to eat. He does and then goes back to sleep, only to have the angel re-awaken him, tell him to eat again, for he has a long journey ahead of him. He obeys, and, on the strength of that eating and drinking, went for 40 days, ending at "the mountain of God, Horeb."

Mimicing Moses

From here, the story repeats Moses's experience of "seeing" God at Sinai, an event he too preceded by not eating or drinking for 40 days. Rashi in Pesachim 54a explicitly

links the two prophets, telling us the cave where Elijah stood with the cleft in the rock in which God placed Moses.

Preparing for a clear vision of God apparently requires, among other things, 40-days of physical abstinence. Radak comments that Elijah had a last meal to keep him going, whereas Moses did not, suggesting that Elijah is being challenged to rise above himself, whereas Moses's experience was a more natural extension of who he already was. This may explain why Elijah, to some extent, fails at this juncture.

When God asks Elijah what he is doing there, we might dismiss it as another example of God beginning conversations gently, to help humans. Here, I think it is also meant to give Elijah the opportunity to define his presence, to say what *he* thinks he's doing there.

Elijah answers that he has been jealous for God— that he has striven to increase God's honor and Presence in the world—and the Jews have violated the covenant, destroyed the altars, killed the prophets, leaving only Elijah himself alone.

Rise or Fall, Elijah

God responds by telling him to go out of the cave, where a wind, noise, and fire came, each very powerful, followed by a קולדממה דקה, a still, silent voice. After each of the first three, we are told that God is not "in" them. Radak thinks God was telling that to Elijah, but one could also read the verse as saying that Elijah already knew that. When the Voice comes, Elijah wraps himself in his cloak and goes outside.

It would seem that God appears this way to teach a lesson. Moses merited his vision in this place by saving the Jews from the Divine Wrath at the sin of the Golden

Calf. Elijah got there by convincing the people to believe in God, at Har haCarmel, but there he also had the people kill the prophets of Baal.

The destructive side to Elijah's heroic act, I think, leads God to show him the wind, noise, and fire. Necessary as they are, "God is not in" them. God employs them in running the world, but they are not of God in the same way as the still, small voice.

God then asks the *exact same* question as before, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I can only understand that as God giving Elijah an opportunity to answer differently than before. The vision, which stressed that destructive forces are not as much "of" God as calm and quiet, and the repeat question, were attempts to break through Elijah's unyielding negativity, to get him to revive himself for another period as prophet, lovingly and patiently helping people find their way to God.

Fall

Elijah either cannot or will not. He answers word for word as before, and Elijah Zuta 8 thinks he stood there for 3 hours, insisting on his position. At that point, he is told to anoint three figures to exact the vengeance he had insisted on.

Rashi and Mechilta see this as a punishment, a way of telling Elijah he had failed. Unlike Moses at the Calf—where the Jews were no less wrong—Elijah cannot find a way to speak up on their behalf. Moses's ability to still identify the Jews' vital role in bringing God's message to the world stands as a rebuke to Elijah's despair.

The *Haftarah* Connects to the Torah reading

Elijah's attitude is quite possibly what Pinchas is warned about at the very beginning of this week's Torah reading. His killing Zimri and Cozbi was the right action at the time, but his reward, a covenant of peace, reminds him there is more than one way

to achieve a goal. As a priest, his general task would be contributing to God's goals for the world by acting peacefully and welcomingly. A violent act has its time and place, but he needs to know that that is neither the preferred nor the common way to bring people closer to God.

Especially if we follow the Rabbinic tradition that identifies Elijah as Pinchas, the *haftarah* tells us of a time when he reached the end of his rope, the end of his ability to look the other way at the Jewish people's many failings while working patiently to bring them closer to their Creator. Once he could no longer do that, his time on Earth was up, not as a punishment (he does rise to heaven in a fiery chariot) but as a recognition that his effective service o God had reached an end. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Matot (when it's not double; otherwise, this is read as the *haftarah* of Pinchas), **Jeremiah 1;1-2:3**

Note that this week's *haftarah*, and the nine after it, are chosen for their connection to the themes of this season of the year—destruction and comfort—rather than the Torah readings with which they happen to coincide. That is why, for example, we are reading this *haftarah* for Pinchas when it is printed after Matot; it is in fact neither, but the *haftarah* for the first Shabbat of the Three Weeks between the fasts of the Seventeenth of Tammuz and of the Ninth of Av. I have, however, left them in the section of *haftarot* for weekly Torah readings because they are *always* read at this time of year; there is no other *haftarah* for these selections.

The Tragedy in Jeremiah's Predestination

Jeremiah opens his book with the word "דברי, the words of," which happens only a few times in Scripture. The Midrash says that it signals a text of "דברי קינטורין, words of complaint and negativity." From his first word, Jeremiah is cast in the role of a complainer, whose message focused on the Jewish people's negatives.

His lineage highlights the poignancy of that fact. Radak notes that his father was part of the group that found a Torah scroll in the Temple and read it to Josiah, sparking a time of intense repentance. Jeremiah got his first prophecy five years before that incident and continued way after. That Jeremiah was the son of such a man, and was already serving as a prophet when his father had that great success, heightens the pathos in the people's refusal to be moved to similar improvement by his words, that he instead had to watch them decline to the Destruction.

The tragic aspect of Jeremiah's life becomes clearer if we recall that God informed him that he had been created to be this prophet. There are more minimal ways to read

this, such as Radak's view that it only means he was given the intellect and imagination necessary for prophecy, but the text seems to suggest that God is saying that Jeremiah's life was more predetermined than most of ours.

Asking a Boy to Perform a Man's Job

Sifrei notes parallels between Jeremiah and Moses's careers: both prophesied for 40 years and both rebuked the Jews for their failings. The idea that Jeremiah in some way is being given a task akin to Moses' heightens our understanding of his protests of his youth. Moses started his career at eighty, and even then only fully rebuked the people at the end of a career that involved leading them through many positive events, such as the Exodus from Egypt, the Splitting of the Sea, the giving of the Torah, and so on. Jeremiah is being required to go straight to rebuke with no chance to establish a positive relationship or even to learn how to remonstrate with the people in a way they might accept.

Verses 7-10 do little to assuage his worries. God rejects his complaints, tells him he has to go where God sends him, do what God tells him without fear, the whole time being confident that God is with him. Jeremiah was not given the right we cherish, of picking his course in life, nor even to enter his career when he felt ready.

Verses 11-19: Two Introductory Visions

The rest of the chapter tells of his first two visions, training runs for the ones to come. In each case, the message seems less significant than the vision's serving to prove to Jeremiah that he had the skill to interpret the visions sent him.

In the first, Jeremiah is asked what he sees, and he says a "מקל שקד, an almond stick." God praises his description, since it grasps not only the budding destruction, but that God is "שוקד, hurrying," to bring about His plans.

The second vision, of the boiling pot with its face to the North, tells us that the Destruction will come from the North, with Jeremiah again praised for the detail of his rendering of the vision. The emphasis on skill suggests that there is a skill to prophecy, that prophets could not simply record what they saw, in contrast to Moses, who had "only" to write what he was told.

Chapter 2, Verses 1-3: A Convenient Ending or a Substantive One?

The last three verses of the *haftarah* come from chapter 2 of the book, which might have meant they should be read as part of next week's *haftarah*, which picks up where this one left off. Leaving aside possible technical answers, I see these verses as providing closure to the section we've read. We have met Jeremiah, beginning to serve as prophet of doom long before it was even a possibility on anyone's horizon, predestined for a difficult life in which he is required to focus, more singlemindedly than the rest of the prophets, on the Jews' lacks, the reasons they will see the Destruction of the Temple.

Seeing God set up a prophet of such doom so far in advance of punishment would, for a human judge, imply a lack of openmindedness. By closing our *haftarah* with a reminder of our historically better relationship, we are being told that God takes no pleasure in the punishment being predicted, that God is being "forced" by our actions to adopt a particular posture and effect on our lives.

Jeremiah's Tragedy and Ours

If the evil coming to the Jewish people had already been determined, perhaps irrevocably, Jeremiah's role raises questions. It seems impossible that he would be forced to spend his life rebuking the people and predicting a destruction that had already been determined.

What we are meant to realize, especially as part of the Three Weeks, is that much of the destruction was not predetermined. Such issues as the fate of the Temple and whether the whole people would have to go into Exile were decidedly still open to better outcomes than came about. Indeed, had the Jews responded better to his prophecies, he might have spent more of his time focused on non-Jews.

So the point of the *haftarah* is to introduce us to Jeremiah, meaning a prophet sent forty years before the coming of a disaster, to help the Jews see and avoid as much of it as possible. As the Jews of that time failed to heed him, we are meant to read this week's *haftarah* and try to avoid a similar outcome. As Maimonides says, we fast today because our actions are like those of our forefathers. Rectifying those failings are the way to extricate ourselves from the Diaspora, to return to a rebuilt Temple, Israel, and Davidic Kingdom. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 10: Parshat Masei, Jeremiah 2;4-28, 3;4, 4; 1-2

Straying From the Normal

An overall question I think worth raising during the Three Weeks is: in what contexts are we, any of us, prepared for the unvarnished truth? I don't mean a debatable truth, where I experience an event one way, and the other person insists it transpired in another, with other connotations. No, I mean a truth that is clear—I worship idols, I drink too much, I mistreat my loved ones, something along those lines. What would be the circumstances that allow a person to hear someone telling him that and responding positively and sincerely, seeking to make amends?

It's an important question because the idea of prophets assumes a people able or prepared to respond to those kinds of calls. Prophets do not gentle us along, they do not sugarcoat our flaws so we can feel unthreatened by them; they tell us what we've done, hoping and expecting that we will admit it and repent of it.

In our time, I wonder whether a prophet could appear, since my experience is that we nowadays are unable to recognize relatively simple uncomfortable truths. Assuming we *can* be openminded enough to think we may have flaws that need changing, let's see which of those Jeremiah focuses our attention on in this week's episode.

Betrayal Can Be Unwitting, and While Sincerely Declaring Love

The first five verses complain that the Jewish people, particularly their leaders, have betrayed God. Aside from the lack of gratitude that involves, since God has done so much for them-- taken them out of Egypt, led them through a completely uninhabited land, and brought them to a wonderful Land-- their status as leaders adds to the culpability they bear for doing so.

Among the leaders named in this betrayal are the "תופשי התורה," those who study and know Torah. It seems to me astounding to contemplate that those knowledgeable in Torah did not "know" God**.** We could understand how other leaders might ignore God—prophets could be false, priests could focus on sacrifice rather than the God Who commanded it—but how can Torah sages not know God?

Let me float the following idea: The study of Torah itself, vital as it is to Jewish life (I stress), can at the same time distract one from hearing God's call. Over-focus on one area of Torah, for example, can mean that one spends one's whole life fulfilling the mitzvah of Torah study and yet still warps the kind of life God wanted from us (since God wanted the whole picture, not one section of it).

A Betrayal Even Other Human Beings Would Never Commit

The next five verses point out that God is not complaining about a failure to keep the minutiae of Torah, which would at least be understandable, but about the Jews' refusal to live up to the standard of fidelity kept even by nations who worship obviously false gods. For example, the Kittites and Kedarites worship fire and water, each of which has an obvious weakness as an all-powerful god, and yet remain faithful to their deity.

Despite all this, God stresses the goal of rehabilitation, not punishment. Although Jeremiah is the last of the prophets of the First Temple, with previous prophets having failed to stimulate change, God is trying again. At any point in this process, had the Jews fully and sincerely admitted their errors and resolved to change their ways, the future could have been altered for the better.

The Challenging Balance Between Self-Reliance and Trust in God

Skipping a few verses, Jeremiah upbraids the people for seeking assistance from Egypt and Assyria, since they should have relied on God. What he does not explain to us, but should be on each of our agendas, is when and how we are required to trust that God will take care of us and when we should rely on our own devices. How should the Jews have known not to go to Assyria or Egypt?

Perhaps the answer was clearer when there still prophets performing miracles, and the supernatural was more generally accessible than now. Or perhaps Jeremiah is signaling that the answer is always the same: we can and should take all possible self-protective measures as long as they do not mislead us into thinking that we are fully in charge of our destiny. Seeking the assistance of those nations might have been all right, had it not led to the Jews' adopting their culture and values.

Rashi adds a twist, noting that the Jews were turning to the Egyptians, who had drowned Jewish babies, and to Assyria, whose rivers flowed from Eden. Turning to them for help involved ignoring the past wrongs they had committed, which eased the way to assuming their way of life was as valid as our own.

Dispensing with identifying right and wrong is often useful in ending conflict, but carries the heavy price of teaching society that there is no need not confront or admit wrongs as long as we move away from them. Part of Jeremiah's complaint is that the Jews' blindness to Egypt and Assyria's wrongs lured them from focusing where they should, God.

Let me close by noting how verse 26's reference to the embarrassment of a thief when caught encapsulates the Jewish people Jeremiah has been addressing. The only thief who is embarrassed is one who thought he had fooled the rest of the world, who

thought he had convinced others, and often himself, that he was a fine, upstanding citizen.

The Jewish people, at least, despite being idol-worshippers (!!!) would, when the end came, experience exactly that same embarrassment. The tragedy of Jeremiah and his times is not that an evil people were finally punished for their sins, it is that, after hundreds (!) of years of warnings by prophets, focusing on the same issues (lack of social justice, overemphasis on sacrifices, refusal to abandon idol worship), the Jews were still shocked when the end came. Denial is not the name of a river in Egypt. **Shabbat Shalom**.

HAFTAROT OF PART V, NUMBERS: RECAP AND RECURRING THEMES

Parshat Bamidbar: The figure of Hosea reminded us of the Talmud's view that a prophet's own reactions to God's Call affect his prophecy and life. (In this case, Hosea's original suggestion that God abandon the Jews led to his being required to marry a prostitute and have her bear his children). Once God showed Hosea that God's commitment to the Jews was unshakable, Hosea could issue this prophecy, stressing the inevitability of the Jews' reconciliation with God. To get there seems to require a return to the desert, to the first principles of the Jewish relationship with God.

Parshat Naso: The prediction of Samson's birth helped us see that his parents combined great righteousness with great attachment to the physical. In Samson's own life, the question of that balance would recur, and his particular form of Nazirite status focused on that challenge. The *haftarah* thus suggested that the reason for the Torah's instituting Nazirites was for those who have precisely this struggle in their lives.

Parshat Behaalotecha: Aside from a balance of universalism and particularism, a belief that God in the future will be both the God of the entire world and yet still have a special relationship with the Jewish people and its Land, the *haftarah* spoke of Joshua, the High Priest, of the affect others' actions had on him (as shown by his soiled clothes in Zachariah's vision), and of his ability to control his future by bringing his actions into line with God's Will. This idea of human input was further ratified by Zachariah's taking the initiative in calling for new clothes for the High Priest, and his having been expected to understand aspects of his visions on his own.

Parshat Shelach: The story of Rahab, and her prominence, provided a first lesson about the availability of faith and commitment even to those who until then have been

involved in the most physical and faithless of practices (prostitution). In addition, we noticed that the spies of Joshua's time are more passive than the earlier ones, perhaps signaling that the Conquest was going to be more divinely directed than originally, to be sure that all members of *that* generation of Jews got the message that Rahab did, that God controls and directs all.

Parshat Korach: The story of the renewal of Saul's kingship revealed that the Jews had asked for a king out of a desire to feel independent of God, to feel they could meet dangers, such as that posed by Nachash, on their own. Samuel warns them against indulging the desire to feel a sense of self-control, reminding them that they will always need to be on good terms to succeed as a nation.

Parshat Hukkat: The story of Jepthah showed us that the Sages disparaged him as a leader of the Jewish people because he fails in his ability to care properly for family. First, he comes from a woman described as a *zonah* because of the weakness of her connections to family, he refuses to help his relatives militarily until he secures concessions from them, and he offers a member of his family as a sacrifice in case God gives him victory. The poignancy of this rises when we see that his challenge was dealing with Ammon and Moab, blamed by Jewish history for having failed to treat the Jews, their "cousins," properly on their way out of Egypt.

Parshat Balak: The reading from Micah reminds us of our mission, to spread recognition of God in the world. It is in that context that we are required to remember what Balaam and Balak tried to do to us, and it is in that context that we understand why exile might be the punishment for failing in our role—if we do not engage the world from

the safety and comfort of our own Land, God will force us to confront them on less pleasant terms.

Parshat Pinchas: Elijah's experience after Mt. Carmel, his seeing God at the cave on Sinai, showed us this his career came to an end when he could no longer recognize the positive in the Jewish people. In contrast to Moses, and as a lesson to Pinchas in the Torah reading, Elijah could not see that violent proofs of God, much as they have their place, need to be balanced with understanding and a readiness to argue for the defense of the Jewish people from the theoretical consequences of their actions.

Parshat Matot: The first *haftarah* for the Three Weeks of mourning between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av introduces us to Jeremiah, the prophet of the Destruction. Much of his life, we discover, was predetermined to involve haranguing the Jews on their way to Destruction; he was fated to watch the Jews refuse to heed his messages until they finally lost all that they valued. His being entrusted with this mission, though, also reminds us there was much room for outcome to change over his career. Sadly, the Jews took advantage of few of those opportunities.

Parshat Masei: Jeremiah's complaints to the people show they were transgressing the most fundamental commandments- idol worship—and yet saw themselves as religious, as connected to Torah. The tragedy is that as they turned to Assyria and Egypt for help, as they absorbed many of their values and ideas, they still saw themselves as observant Jews, and could not understand the destruction when it came.

Even with the wealth of themes these *haftarot* present, the idea of balancing extremes captures most of what they talk about. Those extremes included the balance

between Heavenly concerns and earthly ones, such as Elijah's insistence that he had been zealous for God at a time when it might have been more appropriate for him to see ways of defending the Jewish people; between conern with the physical and the spiritual, a challenge for Samson's parents and for Rahab; between a private life and one of public service, such as Jepthah's difficulties with family relations or Hosea's being obligated to marry a prostitute in order to learn about how to defend the Jewish people; or between focusing on the essential aspects of Judaism or the entirety of the religion, as seen in Jeremiah's complaints to the Jews.

Here, too, the themes that come out of the *haftarot*correspond well to themes we might easily have noticed in the book itself. Numbers tells the story of the Jews moving through the desert toward Israel, both before and after the spies' sin delays their arrival.

As they shift from a life fully dependent on God to preparing for a more naturalistic one, it seems obvious that navigating the path between extremes is a theme that arises in multiple contexts. The *haftarot* ratify this, and emphasize the importance of arriving at the right balance in each situation that arises.

PART V: HAFTAROT OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

Haftarah No. 1: Parshat Devarim, Isaiah 1:1-27

Jeremiah was the New Isaiah

While Isaiah lived 150 years before the Destruction, and is better known as the prophet of consolation, the Midrash notes that he, like Jeremiah, was active during the reign of four successive kings. While the point seems banal, the Midrash's raising it suggests it saw a parallel between the two prophets, the one of consolation and the other of destruction.

Noting that Isaiah's last king was Hezekiah, held up by tradition as the paradigm of how a king should act, one who convinced/coerced the Jews to worship God, I wonder whether Isaiah's career might have been different had he not had the good fortune of associating with Hezekiah. Possibly, had Hezekiah not acted as he did, Isaiah would have had to have been Jeremiah.

Remember that the Northern Kingdom was exiled by Assyria in Isaiah's time, and that the defeat of Assyria around the walls of Jerusalem was a dramatic miracle, not an expected result. If so, the Destruction of the Temple was the culmination of *hundreds of years* of the Jews' failing to listen to their prophets, failing to adhere to even a minimal standard of observance. This week's *haftarah* lists a few of those failings, making clear that God was not nitpicking, God was complaining about the Jews' ability to see themselves as righteous despite obvious and glaring flaws.

A Pause to Consider a Corollary to Sherlock Holmes' Rule

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had Sherlock Holmes tell Watson his famous rule: eliminate the impossible, and whatever remains, no matter how improbable, is the truth.

Rothstein's not-so-famous corollary is: be careful what you define as impossible, because you might eliminate the truth.

Perhaps a non sequitur, I bring it up here because Isaiah faces a people so confident in their rightness that he fails to budge them, despite speaking in the name of God. The people he addresses "know" that sacrifice and other purely ritualistic aspects of the religion are what God cares about, more than social justice or caring for society's legitimate neediest.

It is this failing Isaiah characterizes as not knowing God. His call to Heaven and Earth, in terms that are meant to remind us of the Torah reading in Haazinu, obliquely feeds into three other themes that appear here. Since Moses had set up Heaven and Earth as witnesses and guarantors of our pact with God, it is their job to administer punishment as well. We are supposed to recognize that punishments and bad times stem from our abandonment of God, a challenge for people, such as in Isaiah's time who do not even agree that they have abandoned God. Note, too, that abandonment did not mean that they left God completely, only that they left the Torah's desired path enough for God to deny the value in what they were doing.

The Comparison to Sodom

Isaiah's striking use of Sodom and Amora as a metaphor for his audience was sure to catch their attention, but also focused on the central failing, their dealings with the poor and underprivileged. In this context, we can see how their sacrifices might be rejected as service of God. The ability to compartmentalize one's ritual life, walling it off from the other actions, shows the ritual itself is so flawed as to be almost useless.

Any time observance can comfortably coexist with glaring inadequacies, the rituals are not as whole as they could be, and may lose their meaning completly.

Yet the people observing them assume they are better than okay with God, they are doing what God wants. Imagine the situation Isaiah depicts, a Jew coming to genuflect before God, arms outstretched beseechingly, when he has *killed* someone. While we may not know people who embody quite as glaring a contradiction, a little honest reflection, I suspect, will give many examples from within segments of the Jewish community we think of as our own.

As a side note, the comparison to Sodom also reminds us how rare it is for evil people to think of themselves that way. Even in Sodom, perhaps, the people thought they had a workable morality, and were shocked when destruction rained down on them. Evil is not always obviously so, and sometimes it is the reverse—the evil morality is more obvious and intuitive than the one upon which God insists.

That same problem bedevils our ability to rise to the challenge Isaiah offers, in which God guarantees inconceivable forgiveness if only we hear God's true messages. Since everybody *thinks* they're listening to God's messages, how do we separate the true from the false or flawed ones, and then convince others of that truth? Like I said before, beware what we eliminate as impossible, because sometimes that is exactly what God seeks.

Two final points are all I have space for. First, the Talmud uses a verse in our *haftarah* as proof that the Jews of Isaiah's time would reject rebuke by pointing out similar flaws in the person raising the point. The tragedy in that scenario is a) that everyone had the flaws, so no one was free of taint, but more importantly, b) that people

could not accept criticism that accurately captured their flaws, because of the failings of the person bringing it up. It is never pleasant to deal with a hypocrite, or someone so in denial they do not realize the irony in their criticism, but if the point they make is true, it behooves us to learn from it anyway.

When God Does It, It Will Not Be Nearly as Much Fun

The last point, vital to stress repeatedly since so few recognize its truth, is that the other option always out there is that God will bring the redemption by cleansing us of the sinners in our midst. That cleansing, which may not happen all at once, will be painful, with segments of our nation being killed or punished for their wrongs.

If we repent without denial, we can find the God of Mercy. If not, the God of Truth (same God, different modes) will purify the nation, actualizing truths we have been avoiding all these years. We can get to redemption ourselves by meriting it, or have God drag us there. As we face yet another Tisha B'Av without having taken the first road—not an easy one either, since it involves giving up our self-serving untruths-- we can hope that this will be the year we absorb the messages we need to, and merit the true and complete return for which we all long. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Vaetchanan/Shabbat Nachamu, Isaiah 40:1-26

A Difficult *Haftarah*

Haftarot like this one raise a thorny problem. What if important truths about how the world works, how our relationship with God should work, how our future as a people and individuals can, should, and will go, was embedded in a difficult text?

I ask because I recognize the difficulty in reading certain sections of Scrpture, especially Isaiah. Grappling with how to present a *haftarah* such as this one, and to do so in a thousand words, reminds me that the vast majority of Jews will not get much out of this week's *haftarah*. How can the truth reach them if they refuse to hear?

Comfort: A Hard Topic, Even for Isaiah

Some help comes from remembering that tradition divides the *haftarah* into small sections, each with its own perspective of comfort. That comfort is not of the kind we like to read, where the prophet waxes rhapsodic about the future (although Isaiah knows how to do that—see the coming weeks' *haftarot*). It seems like a first stage of comfort is figuring out how to bring it, dealing with such issues as what background will shape it and who will be the major actor(s) in inaugurating it.

By background, I mean Isaiah's statement that Jerusalem will be comforted for having taken "double" for all her sins. While some commentators minimize the implications of this (such as Targum Jonathan, who reads it as meaning we will be comforted *as if* we were punished double what we deserved), Rashi understands it literally, that we will have been punished both for our actual sins as well as for having continued the sinful ways of our forefathers.

That latter concept is so foreign in our times that it bears explaining. Rashi assumes that we bear culpability not only for the evil we create, but also the evil we continue. According to Rashi, if I was taught at home that it was proper to focus on sacrifices rather than the poor, my responsibility is to learn that that is incorrect and change. Failure to do so, Rashi is telling us, will itself be a whole new level of guilt, incurring punishment of its own.

For the minimizers, our punishment will have been within reason, so the Redemption will only mean an end to that understandable process. For Rashi, who in this case represents the more literal reading, we will need comfort for having borne the burden not only of our own sins, but those of our forefathers' sins that we made part of our lives. (Rembmber the verse in Lamentations that speaks of us bearing our forefathers' iniquities), which would then need a comfort that differs in kind and degree from that of the other commentaries.

Flattening the Way Physically or Metaphorically

Isaiah is told in verses 3-5 to predict that the way will be flattened before God. Rashi and some Midrashim read the verse as telling us that at the time of the Redemption, the roads will be flattened to ease the path home. Since Midrashim think that happened when the Jews left Egypt as well, this reading sees the Exodus as a first example of the kind of progression to Israel we will experience in the future. The implication, I believe, is that had we only acted properly, that might have been the *only* time we entered the Land of Israel.

Befitting the rationalist he was, Radak assumes the verse should be taken metaphorically, that it means the road back will be as easy as if it had been flattened.

That ease, according to Radak, will itself lead Jews and others to recognize God's hand (with interesting ramifications for whether going back on a plane, almost at one's will, counts as redemption).

Verses 3-11: The Link Between Our Involvement in Redemption and God's

These nine verses contain three versions of how the Voice will go out to announce the redemption, each assuming a different level of Divine involvement. At first, we are told of a Voice calling from the desert, a distant Voice, to speak of the flattening of the roads. The distanc means the involvement of God will only be perceivable to those who pay attention.

Then, the Voice tells Isaiah to call out, confusing him as to what he, a human, could have to say. At the same time as he is being encouraged to issue his call, he is told that the Jews should only rely on God, not other peoples. After that, in the third version, the harbinger of Zion is told to call out, with no details at all, seeming to leave up to him how to phrase it. It is precisely here, however, that God speaks most directly of coming "Himself" as it were.

The verses don't say it explicitly, but seem to me to hint at a linkage between how active we are in bringing redemption and how involved God will be. Counterintuitively, the more active we are, the more direct a Divine role we can expect. As the Midrash says elsewhere, if we make a small opening for God, God will expand it almost immeasurably.

The Might of God: Believing is the First Step

The rest of the *haftarah* focuses on God's power, His not needing advice or assistance, His plans being largely beyond human ken, implicit discussions of how God created the world, the nature of the Heavens and His relationship to the world through

those Heavens, and other esoteric matters of God's power as compared to the powerlessness of the idols.

At the close, the last two verses add one more element to that discussion, speaking of how God knows the stars by name. The idea that the Divinely Other also relates directly to aspects of Nature stresses the tension between transcendence and immanence that characterizes so much of Judaism.

In our context, it perhaps explains why the comfort message is muted. The physical appurtenances of comfort that we seek can only arrive after we solve our faith and practice challenges. How we will get back, how we will have experienced our punishment, how we can gather the necessary faith to act ourselves and see God's acting, and how we can experience a God both other and close, are all the building blocks of the redemption we once again remind ourselves is out there, we hope arriving speedily. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Ekev, Isaiah 49;14-51;3

Verses 14-21: Repopulation, A First Comfort

The first section of this *haftarah*, the second of the seven of comfort, stresses the repopulation of Jerusalem as a vital part of her rejuvenation. Zion thinks of herself as abandoned, which the Prophet vigorously disputes by telling us that our connection to God is stronger than a mother's to her child or nursing infant, that Zion is inscribed on God's "palms", her walls before Him constantly.

That connection will show itself in the return of Zion's children from all over, turning a desolate city into one where people complain of a lack of room to live, astonishing the city itself. Repopulation's centrality to assuaging the wounds of destruction suggests that a significant aspect of Jerusalem's role in the world—its status as a city of God-- can be fulfilled even before we have a return of a Temple, king, or Sanhedrin, but not without a bustling successful city. Her mourning is not just sadness at her decreased state, but at her ineffectiveness; the return of citizens will allow her to serve at least some of her functions.

The Exodus as the Unbreakable Bond

When the verses refer to God not forgetting us, various Midrashim read God as "remembering" aspects of the time of the Exodus. That time, including the Giving of the Torah at Sinai and the construction and utilization of the Tabernacle, are what the Midrash looks back towards as the source of God's indissoluble bond with us. The Exodus and all that came after-- up to and including the Conquest of Israel-- were signs of our having been chosen by God as agents of His Presence in the world, a choice and connection that will never be broken or forgotten.

Verses 22-23 record God's promise that non-Jews will bring us back to Israel on their arms (does paying for our flights count?), that their kings will raise us, will bow down to us, and lick our dirt. Seeing their obeisance will fully convince us that those who follow God will never be lost or wither away.

We might mistake these verses for joy in returning to non-Jews some of the abuse they've given us over the years. Sifrei Deuteronomy 314, however, relates their actions to those God did for us during the Exodus. We care less about their subservience than about their conceding on the importance of enhancing God's Presence in the world.

Rather than envisioning non-Jews as slaves, Isaiah was prophesying that significant numbers of them, especially their leaders, will come to appreciate our unique role in the world, and will *want* to assist us, not out of *fear*, but out of respect for our status, for our position as representatives of God.

Chapter Fifty, Verses 1-3: Hope is Vital to Sustaining Religious Engagement

The opening of chapter fifty goes back to the theme of abandonment, with God questioning what bill of divorce He ever gave the Jews, who *act* as if they have been written out of God's picture. We here see the danger of disillusionment, since it may lead people to cease even trying to secure a better future. Disengagement starts with a lack of hope, a sense of being shut out of God's concerns.

Verses 4-11: Sustaining Hope

The next eight verses might seem to move on to a different topic, Isaiah's boasting about his prophetic prowess. He tells of his confidence that God will protect him, notes that God gave him the power to speak in a way that shores up people's energy, and says that God gives him new messages every morning. He closes by predicting that his

attackers will dry up like moths, so that those sensitive to God's Word should believe in him, join him, and listen to God.

Radak thinks Isaiah was telling us that he was born with the power to accomplish the difficult tasks set for him. If so, what might look like self-aggrandizement is more him trying to convince a discouraged people they could seek God and His Word from this prophet. That Isaiah has daily updates, that he is naturally endowed both with the ability to hear God's messages and to transmit them in an encouraging and invigorating way, would ideally have led the people to listen to him and adjust their lives according to what he says they should do.

Incidentally, the revelation that Isaiah had prophecies every night means that his 66 chapters of Scripture is a sort of "greatest hits," highpoints of his forty years of daily prophecy.

Chapter 51, Verses 1-2: Abraham and Sarah as Our Sources

The next verses urge us to look back to the rock and pit from which we were taken, traditionally read as a reference to Abraham and Sarah. Part of the comfort in remembering Abraham and Sarah, I believe, is Abraham's legacy as one of the few humans with whom God chose to consult about how to run the world. Abraham became an active partner in running God's world, a legacy we are supposed to find comforting and inspiring, suggesting we could do the same if only we adopted the right motives and strategies.

Summary

This week's comfort—better than last week's, for sure—comes from a return to the Land not just in population but in status as the source of God's Presence. Non-Jews will recognize that and eagerly assist us in accomplishing it (talk about Utopian!!!).

In his own time, Isaiah's presence could have eased the way for the Jews to accomplish what they needed; with his passing, we need to look to our roots, particularly Abraham and our time in the desert. Remembering all three of them—prophet, Patriarch, and passage-- should help us remember the bright future that is available to us whenever we get serious about reaching for it. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Re'eh, **Isaiah 54;11-55;5**

Stones and Water: An *Haftarah* Richer in Metaphor Than In Content

The two parts of this week's *haftarah*, verses 11-17 of chapter 54 and 1-5 of Chapter 55, seem distinct from each other. In addition, their literal content is less rich than the meaning the Sages find in it, so I will focus more than usual on their themes.

The first section finally, in our third week of *haftarot* of comfort, gives us a prediction of how the rebuilt Jerusalem will look. The streets will be paved with jewels, gates made of precious stones, and the city so bright that nations will follow that light.

Moving from the city itself to its inhabitants, they will all be "learned of God," a phrase that means something different than being learned. Learned implies knowledge, learned of God means having built a certain kind of relationship with the Holy One.

Further, the city will be full of peace (remember that those learned of God create peace, perhaps the most famous verse in the *haftarah*). Part of that will be the city's firm foundation of charity and good deeds, acts that help produce peace. Note that the prophet ascribes the people's ability to act so well to a lack of fear; that claim assumes that crime and wrongdoing stem from fear. If so, eradicating fear becomes a religious endeavor, a contribution to hastening a Jerusalem of peace.

Another claim we might need to educate ourselves to believe is Isaiah's statement that others will not be able to attack the Jews because God can make their weapons fail. This is a different and more metaphysical claim than that God can protect us, one I think it would take some work to come to believe in our times.

Rejecting Converts in Times to Come

One of the verses in this section says that those who have already joined the Jewish poeple will stay with them. The emphasis on those who *already* joined leads Yebamot 24b to deduce that we will not accept converts in the times of the Messiah.

We have a similar tradition about the times of David and Solomon, raising many interesting questions. Did David and Solomon—and in the future, will we-- reject converts because of suspicions about their sincerity? Is it fair to bar sincere people from getting closer to God to protect ourselves against the insincere? Why do motives matter at all, if the person will stay Jewish and keep mitsvot? Or, from a different perspective, was conversion perhaps unnecessary in David and Solomon's time? Would that mean that it is as good to be a faithful non-Jew (גר תושב or בן נח, a resident alien in Israel, or a God-fearing non-Jew) as to be a faithful Jew? How could that be true? These are too complicated to answer here, but deserve thought.

The Stones of Jerusalem: A Heavenly or Earthly Matter?

Two comments in Baba Batra 75a attach a significance to the stones of Jerusalem's future that we might not have realized. In recording a debate about which stones the prophet intends, the Talmud mentions that it was not sure whether the debate was between two Talmudic rabbis or between the angels Micha-el and Gavri-el.

That the Talmud could imagine angels debating the nature of those stones means it saw the details of the rebuilding as of cosmic importance. Only then could we see the endeavor as worthy of the angels' time, since then it means that the rebuilding is part of understanding God. As we have the privilege of watching what would seem to be the early stages of that rebuilding, remembering the importance the Talmud attaches to it can help us reap the maximum religious benefit.

Belief in the Words of the Sages: Another Lesson of the Stones

That same Talmudic selection tells of a person who mocked R. Yohanan's claim that the stones would be incomprehensibly large; the "*apikoros*," which originally meant one who doubts or ridicules the Sages, noted that in his time, there were not even small stones of that type, let alone big ones.

In the Talmud's telling, he then went on an ocean voyage and was shown angels hewing exactly such stones, to rebuild Jerusalem. When he got back to land, he excitedly told R. Yohanan of what he had seen, happy to have confirmed the rabbi's teaching. Rabbi Yohanan's reply—the reason I find the story worth retelling—is to upbraid the man for basing his acceptance on having seen it. We need to accept authoritative traditions, R. Yohanan says, because they were said by figures of authority, not because we already understand their truth ourselves.

Torah As Water or Fire: A Most Flowing or Explosive Metaphor

The last five verses call for all the thirsty to go to the water, which we can get for nothing, adding the rhetorical question of why we would pay for meaningless banalities when we can get Torah free. Aside from its being free, Torah brings with it the return of a Davidic rule, and of a time when nations we do not even know will see the truth of our position and join us.

Sukkah 52b notes that other verses compare Torah to fire, which it explains by differentiating between two types of evil inclination, each of which Torah can remove. For the stone-like one, Torah acts like water, with a melting action; with a metal-like evil inclination, Torah acts like fire, explosively.

The Talmud implies that there are two central ways we can struggle with ourselves: we can notice a psychological/spiritual lump that blocks us from acting as we should, or we can struggle with desires that burn inside, pushing us to act wrongly. Torah can help us avoid or resist each.

Moving back to the water metaphor, the Talmud understands our verse to be only one half of the story, since another calls on us to pour water for the thirsty. In the Talmud's explanation, we are supposed to pour the water for a proper student, but can wait for other students to come to us. A teacher's obligation, in this reading, depends on the student's interest and readiness to work. Without that commitment, the teacher bears no responsibility to spark such interest, although the Talmud clearly would not have objected to his doing so.

This is a *haftarah* easily read superficially, as a prediction of Jewish power, invulnerability, and renewed relationship with God. The Sages alert us to its deeper ramifications, some of which I hope we have seen here. May we soon see all of the prophecy, and all of its implications, realized before our eyes; **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Shoftim, Isaiah 51;12-52;12

INTRODUCTION: Although one of the seven *haftarot* of comfort, this week's selection also presents a challenge, in that it makes clear that our level of comfort depends on our actions. The *haftarah* shows an inferior kind, less good than we might get otherwise. While better than what we have now, Isaiah is letting us know we should be reaching higher, hoping for better.

A Doubly Certain Vision of Comfort

Isaiah doubles the first words of our *haftarah*, "אנכי ,אנכי, I, I," am the One who comforts you, says God. The prophet does this elsewhere as well, such as in "נחמו ,נחמו, be comforted, be comforted" or "התעוררו ,התעוררו, awake, awake" later in this *haftarah*. Leviticus Rabbah points to this as an example of his greatness, a reward he got for seeing the positive side of the Jewish people and arguing for them.

The Midrash does not explain how the doubling of a word shows a higher level of prophecy, but I would guess that it is because the doubling emphasizes his greater than ordinary certainty that his visions would come to fruition. That would explain the connection between his reward and his having argued on behalf of the Jewish people—Isaiah plumbed reality to see the good in the people (sometimes a challenge), in contrast to most others, so God allowed him to see the future more clearly than most.

A Cold Comfort Nonetheless

When we move from that first set of words to the actual promises, we find little to celebrate. The prophet upbraids us for fearing others, since God's promise that the Exile will not destroy us, that the Jewish nation will survive long after those other nations' passing, should have removed our fear.

The prophetic (and Midrashic) insistence that such a promise should calm our fears assumes that we only care about national survival, which is not true at all today. Most of us would fear death at the hands of a persecutor independent of any concerns for national survival. Apparently, Isaiah means to argue that personal fear should be different than fear for the nation as a whole. Knowing the nation will continue in a person's absence should shape the reaction of the individual.

I suspect Isaiah is trying to remind us that we are supposed to subsume at least some of our sense of self-worth in our membership in the broader community. Once a person sees him or herself as part of a larger and more important whole, the death of the individual is not as crushing as otherwise.

Verse 16: Bearers of Torah

The Sages see our having been given Torah as advantageous independent of our special relationship with God. Different sources express the idea, one saying that Torah gives us God's protection even when God seems most distant, another that it makes us partners in the building of Heaven and Earth, and a third that it enables us to hasten the day of the redemption. Whichever, or all three, they agree that Torah itself empowers us, if we use it properly.

Verses 17-23: The Unavoidable Flip Side

The rest of the chapter calls us to awaken from our troubles, describing some of those. I do not want to expand too much upon these verses, since they really run counter to the mood of comfort and solace that these weeks are supposed to be instilling in us. I will note that the prophet predicts that these troubles will weigh so heavily on the Jewish people, we will be described as "drunk, but not from wine."

That term led R. Elazar b. Azaryah in Eruvin 65a to assert we are all currently exempt from punishment for our lack of attentiveness to prayer, since those who are drunk cannot be expected to pray properly. While he obviously did not mean the statement literally—we have to try to pray properly—his comment suggests we think carefully about the accuracy of our perspectives on life and the world, or whether we might be reflecting the "drunkenness" brought on by our sufferings in exile. Sometimes what seems true is a function of our warped perspective.

Chapter 52, Verses 1-10— Redemption Despite Us, Not Because of Us

These verses tell of a great redemption, worth longing for and anticipating. God reacts almost emotionally to exile, questioning why He's "here," where all day His Name is reviled. At that point, the whole world will know God's power, the prophets will celebrate, the ruins of Jerusalem will celebrate, and God's strong hand will be shown to all.

Yet this redemption comes for reasons other than that we deserve it. God will redeem us because He will "tire" of being there, of having the Name mistreated and unknown; Radak notes that it is only on *that* day that Jews will know the Name; only the prophets will celebrate at first, because only they knew the truth all along.

Sanhedrin 97b records a debate between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua about whether redemption depends on our repenting. In one version, R. Joshua argued that if the Jews fail to repent, God will send a persecution so terrible that it will necessarily elicit repentance.

Verses 11-12—A God-Centered Leaving

In verse 11, God says to leave exile and not to touch anything impure. At least Radak thinks the verse means we will not be able to take anything with us from the Exile, will need to see it as completely impure. This again contrasts with current experience; perhaps those who activate their own redemption can differentiate pure from impure aspects of Exile, while those who stay mired in it until God takes them out must see all of it as impure and prohibited.

Summary: Comfort or Warning?

As we have read it, several verses imply that we will not deserve our great future, and several others emphasize God's guiding events, rendering us powerless objects of the Redemption.

Some see such passivity in the face of the Divine plan a high value, but I do not. I read this *haftarah* as offering a vision of how redemption will go if we fail to secure a different and more positive one. In that sense, it is a warning that we do not have forever to shape our own redemption, that time might run out, and we will lose out on the remarkable blessings we might still reach. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat Ki Tetse, Isaiah 54;1-10

This week's *haftarah* is exceedingly brief; it is combined with the (slightly longer) *haftarah* for Parshat Reeh to make the *haftarah* of Parshat Noah. In ten verses, the *haftarah* focuses our attention on one aspect of the comfort of Jerusalem.

Highlighting this idea, Song of Songs Rabbah 1;1 notes that Scripture uses 10 terms of joy regarding Jews. Our verse 1 is the example of the verb *pitzhi*, whose meaning we will be defining. Rather than an overarching view of the comfort of Redemption as a whole, we are being told of a particular aspect of it, that of *pitzhi*.

Verses 1-6: Population and Its Contents, to Become the Throne of God

The basic promise of the *haftarah* is that Jerusalem will once again be filled with people, more even than the non-Jewish nations. The pressure of the population growth will lead to the city expanding far beyond where it was in Isaiah's time, to the Jews taking over other nations' land, and re-settling abandoned cities.

Verse 5 offers a reason God would see so much value in the city's growth. God will be our metaphorical husband, our redeemer, but will also become known as the God of the whole world. For Radak, the phrasing indicates that until then God will *not* be known that way, meaning that God's being acknowledged as the God of the world depends on our being redeemed. Along the same lines, several Midrashim connect the city's spread to its serving as a true "כסא ה', Throne of God."

There is a connection, we are being told, between what happens to the Jewish people and the status of God in the world. That helps explain God's interest in having Jerusalem, the seat of the Temple and therefore of God's obvious presence in the world, grow and overflow its boundaries.

Humans enjoy growth because we take it is a sign of success, but that is not a motive we could ascribe to God. For God, the growth of Jerusalem only becomes "interesting" when its success has an impact that matters, such as furthering the acknowledgement of God's rule. It is in its contributing to world recognition of God that the fate of Jerusalem should matter to us.

Does God Need to Become the Ruler of the Universe?

Nachmanides suggests that the verse is speaking of a time when God will take control of the world back from the forces that currently rule lands other than Israel, a statement that dares to assume that most of the world is now ruled directly by powers other than God. Those powers are certainly subservient to God, so Nachmanides does not doubt God's being the Master of the Universe, but that mastery is not as complete as it will be once those intermediaries no longer function.

Combining these two ideas, that other nations' recognizing God is vital to God's being known as the Lord of the Whole World and that other powers are given subsidiary control over lands other than Israel, offers the surprising hypothesis that it is non-Jews' acknowledgement of God that will give them the direct rule of God in their lives. Going a step further, I wonder whether it was those nations' lack of recognition that led God to set up the system in the first place. Instead of punishing idol-worshippers, God instead removed Himself, somewhat, from those nations.

To get to the kind of direct relationship Jews have—and which God would want all humanity to have—non-Jews need only accept His rule. Unfortunately for them, the prophet sees their resistance to accepting "our" God as breaking down only when we succeed so fully they can no longer deny it.

Verses 7-8: This Is a Little Anger?

Verses 7 and 8 characterize the punishment of God as having come in a small moment, and with a minimal anger, a difficult phrasing to accept for those who know Jewish history. To explain how a punishment that has lasted for thousands of years could be termed "minimal anger," Radak argues that that is how it will seem in retrospect, that the future good will wipe away or diminish the pain of past trials.

Radak also cites Targum Jonathan, who says that the days of anger will be small (short) in comparison to the days of redemption. This avoids the difficult idea that the good of the future erases the painful past, but assumes that Messiah will usher in a lengthy period where much has been accomplished—world recognition of God, rebuilding of the Temple—but more needs to be done before we meit the End of Days.

Sanhedrin 99a makes the same assumption, where one opinion reads our *haftarah*'s reference to כי מי נח, for as the waters of Noah, as כימי, like the days, supporting the claim that the time of the Messiah will be as long as from Noah until then.

Verse 9: Just Like the Flood-Promise to Noah

The last two verses of the *haftarah* have God verifying this promise by saying it will be as guaranteed as the assurance that there would never be another Flood. Isaiah's singling out that promise, when God has made others that could have served equally well as benchmarks of God's Faithfulness, brings to mind two aspects of it that make it the best to use here.

First, the promise to Noah had to do with the physical world; pinning the Jews' eventual redemption on that at least implies that our redemption is intrinsically linked to

the continuity of the world. Second, Noah's promise was explicitly given without regard to any evils human beings might commit; there may be the same implication here.

In verse 10, God fortifies the promise by adding that the mountains may move, but the promise is unchangeable. If the first of my reasons for the importance of Noah's promise is correct, we understand the relevance of the mountains. Just as they are a physical example of the world's steadiness, the promise is important to the world's physical well-being.

Rashi interprets the mountains as the Patriarchs; their merits may be used up and yet the redemption will still come. That view accords well with my second reason for connecting it to Noah, in that it tells us that the Redemption can come because of us or in spite of us, but it will come.

Luckily for our mood this Shabbat, that means that we can be certain of (and are perhaps already witnessingt) Jerusalem's growth, the influx of exiles to it, and its becoming a world-recognized, symbol of God's Presence. This is the future joy captured by the word "*pitzhi*". **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 7: Parshat Ki Tavo, Isaiah 60;1-22

Several years ago, I gave a speech in an Orthodox synagogue (whom I would have expected to be most likely to take Scriptural promises seriously) in which I asked my listeners to imagine a time when Jerusalem would be so central to the world's economy that non-Jews would volunteer gifts to the city. To accommodate the flow of traffic in its midst, the city would be open day and night. Its citizens, meanwhile, would *all* be righteous and God-fearing, and the world would visibly near a time when the rule of the One God was accepted universally.

After several minutes of that description, I noted my suspicion (later confirmed) that such ideas would be taken as pure fantasy, wildly impossible, not even realistic enough to qualify as utopian. Since this week's *haftarah* asserts that all of those will happen, I wondered, then as now, what it means when even Orthodox Jews, who claim to believe that God speaks through the prophets, do not believe these prophecies will or can ever come true.

The Light of the Future and Joining with the Non-Jews: Two Important Themes

As is so often true with a prophet rich in ideas as Isaiah, there are too many points of interest to cover all or even a representative sampling. I am instead going to focus on two of the central themes, the role of light, and the importance the prophet attaches to the participation of non-Jews in our future redemption.

Verses 1-3: Why Does Our Light Require Their Dark?

The *haftarah* opens with Isaiah telling Jerusalem to arise and shine (literally, and not the literally where we mean figuratively, the literally where we mean literally), for the

Glory of God will shine upon her. Verses 2 and 3 announce that our light will come at the same time as the non-Jewish nations' light disappears, leading them and their kings to follow us and our light.

I suspect many people read such statements as the triumphalism of a downtrodden people; they oppressed us all those years, part of our redemption is givng back as good as we got. Reading the verses carefully should show us that there is much more at stake here.

First, the verses link our getting light to the non-Jews losing it. The Midrash thinks that verse 1 implies that in the future, the non-Jews will be plunged in darkness. Another Midrash compares the future situation to Sinai, where we had light and they had dark. Even more explicitly, several sources, including Genesis Rabbah 6;3, Sanhedrin 99a, and the Ritva in his Haggada read verses 1-2 as telling us that the light of Jacob cannot shine when that of Esau is still around.

Those sources tell us of a connection, but give us no guidance as to why our light and theirs are inversely related. Baba Batra 75a gives us a clue in its claim that in the future, light will come from the remainder of the hide of the Leviathan. However it does so, it apparently is sensitive to the righteousness of the person using it, since the righteous get more of it than others.

Verses 19-20: Physical Light Can Also Come From the Spiritual

Skipping to where the *haftarah* next discusses light, verses 19-20 tell us that the Jews as well will no longer use the sun and moon, that God will be our light, and that our sun will therefore never again set. The cited material, and more, leads me to believe that the prophet means that following God can produce a physical light, not just a spiritual

one. Leviathan is a beast that in Midrash tried to compete with God; his hide signifies his death, and the defeat of ideologies that distract from God. Seeing Leviathan that way explains why the righteous will get a whole sukkah, a whole domicile, from his hide, while others get less.

It also explains why the light of Jacob cannot shine while Esau's does—these are not *alternate* sources of light, they are competing ones. As long as Esau's worldview and ideology are still around and attractive, there is little chance that people will find their way to Jacob's, and thus little chance that our worldview will shine forth.

In the future, we are being promised, those other nations' light, the attractiveness of the erroneous parts of their ideologies, will wane, and the Truth (remember that in our prayers, we speak of God giving truth to Jacob) will provide spiritual and physical light to the world, as it did at Sinai and the entire time in the desert.

Verses 4-14: The Nations Play an Active Role

Isaiah also predicts that the nations will actively participate in recognizing the truth of God's rule. That participation has an element of subservience, since they are envisioned as bringing us money, gold, livestock, and more. They will also help the Jews fully return to Jerusalem, bringing our exiles back with their belongings.

This suggests, by the way, that those Jewish communities whose countries allow them to leave without any of their possessions cannot be seen as a fulfillment of this prophecy; even those nations that allow Jews to take all their possessions are still not yet helping, a crucial aspect of this text's prediction.

That the non-Jews' interest in physically rebuilding our city is connected to their recognizing the constant hand of God also explains verse 14's belief that the descendants

of our oppressors will come to us with bowed heads, seeking our forgiveness. The fathers are gone, but oppression was a physical expression of their denial of God. The atonement for that lies in their returning to these Jews, hat in metaphorical hand, to admit to the Jewish version of truth. That admission also helps the rest of the world come to embrace God.

The Last Two Words: On Time Or Early?

Sanhedrin 98a cites R. Joshua b. Levi's famous inference based on the oxymoron of the last verse of the *haftarah*, where God promises to hasten the redemption at its proper time. R. Joshua sees the verse as offering two possibilities for how the redemption will come: if we merit it, it will come early; if not, at its time. That Isaiah first refers to "in its time," suggests it is unlikely we will merit the early Arrival. Let us hope that either I am wrong in reading it that way, or that we will beat the odds, and see the full Redemption speedily. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 8: Parshat Netsavim-Vayelech, (when the two are read separately, this is the *haftarah* of Netsavim, and Vayelech is Shabbat Shuvah), **Isaiah 61;10-63;9**

Rich Expression Can Be Confusing

The first section of this *haftarah* is both long and difficult, although giving a generally positive tone. Some of the difficulty stems from Isaiah piling metaphors on top of each other, so that we have to make choices about how deeply to delve into each. I'm choosing three central ones, clothing, marriage, and planting.

Isaiah opens by announcing that Jerusalem (or, possibly, the Jewish people) will rejoice in God having clothed it (or them) in redemption. The verse then moves into a wedding metaphor, saying that these clothes will be a "פאר," a sign of beauty or glory, like a bridegroom, or like jewels for a bride. The next verse takes us to planting, comparing the redemption to a field yielding its plants, a garden its seeds.

Later verses revisit these metaphors. 62;3 speaks of us (or Jerusalem) as a crown of glory or scarf of rulership in the hands of God. The first verses of chapter 63 focus on clothing, viewing someone (commentators debate whom, generally either the Angel of Esau or God, who was fighting on behalf of the Jews) as coming from Edom with dirtied clothing.

Verses 4 and 5 go back to marriage and planting, promising that we will no longer be called abandoned, we'll be known as "חפצי-בה, my (God's) desires are in it," and the Land will be called "בעולה, husbanded." Planting comes up again in verses 8-9, when God swears we'll never again have to see others eating our crops, that those who gather a harvest will eat and drink it, in God's holy places.

Clothing: Defining or Revealing

The clothing metaphor in two ways here. In the first verses, clothing seems to define the person. For example, the promise to clothe us in salvation guarantees its coming. Clothing also makes the man in the case of the priestly garments, without which a priest is considered a "stranger" to the Temple, and incurs the same liability for entering or serving as does a non-priest.

Clothing seems to reveal a person's already-existing character, such as the " חמוץ בגדים," the one wearing bloody clothes. Clothing, then, can either make the man or open him to the public, and is used in both of those ways here.

The other two metaphors, planting and marriage, express God's promise to be more involved with us in the future. We are being promised that we will once again merit the kind of attention farmers give their plants and spouses are supposed to lavish on each other, repeated care for the health and needs of the other.

The metaphor of planting offers another fruitful insight, since the prophet compares us to both a field and a garden. As Radak notes, a field (without crop rotation) has one long growing season, while a garden combines different species, and therefore always has something coming to bloom. Translated to redemption, it suggests both a single redemptive event as well as a continuing and repeated blooming, perhaps further aspects of that redemption.

End of Verse 2: A Change of Name for Jerusalem

Verse 2 speaks of the nations seeing how God will help us and, as a result, renaming Jerusalem. This change might be a way of repairing the city's image, identifying it more fully with God, or wiping away the embarrassing reminders of her sin.

This fits well with the other metaphors we've seen. Just as God promised to re-clothe us as evidence of greater connection, just as God promised we would be like a field, securing God's greater attention, Jerusalem's name will demonstrate that as well.

Verse 6 is perhaps the best-known of the *haftarah*, where God announces the placing of guards or watchers on the walls of Jerusalem, all day and all night. Whether these watchers are angels or people, God is saying that He has assigned someone the task of continuously crying over and praying for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, of keeping that part of the world agenda in an active way.

Verses 10-12: Again, the Participation of the World

God next calls for His messengers to pass through the Land clearing away obstacles to travel, which may be a metaphor for the evil inclination. Once those stumbling blocks are gone, the messengers are to go to the ends of the earth, encouraging the nations who live there to tell the Jews that the Redemption has come, to call them the Holy Nation, the ones redeemed by God.

Note how once again other nations matter to this future redemption, because, in Isaiah's vision, God "cares" about the whole world learning the truth of Creation and of the necessity of living in relationship with our Creator. Admitting that the Jews are the nation of God and redeemed by Him is a crucial first step.

Verses 1-6 of Chapter 63 have God noting that no one else was willing to join in bringing about the necessary salvation, so He will do it Himself. Like the original Exodus, grand redemptions make a point to the entire world, explaining why it would take God's direct involvement to make it as fully and broadly as possible.

The selection ends with three verses that stress the kindnesses of God, the great goods He has done (and will do) for us. A casual look at Jewish history can make this a hard message to absorb, since we might see it as one trouble following another. Isaiah is asking us to realize that suffering is never lightly brought on us, that God only brings our sufferings in the name of a vastly more important goal.

Conclusion: Comfort Isn't a Simple Process

As the last of the seven comforting *haftarot*, this and the others stress that we cannot expect our problems to magically and instantaneously disappear. Our *haftarot* remind us there is a blessed time awaiting us, but the road to that time takes varying kinds of effort on our part. Even if we fail to ever make that effort, God will eventually bring it about, but we will have missed an opportunity.

The truer comfort is knowing how much we can do to hasten that day, to insure that it comes as fully and beneficially as possible. *A propos* of this time of year, the beginning of the High Holiday season, we are reminded that worlds of bounty await us, if we only make the first and necessary steps. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Haazinu (not Shabbat Shuvah), **II Samuel 22:1-51**

Déjà Vu All Over Again

This is also the *haftarah* for the 7th day of Pesah, so it allows us to see how one text can have different emphases. We will summarize rather than try to analyze all fifty verses in depth.

One Long Shirah

This *haftarah* is all one long section of text, as is Shirat haYam, the Song the Jews recited after being saved at the Sea, Devorah's Song, and Haazinu itself. This suggests that Song in Scripture, even if it has a few pieces, represents an expression in which all sections can be woven together into one whole. We tend to live fragmented lives, with many commitments, concerns, and interests; the ideal songs to God, the result of having experienced God's salvation in a direct manner, bring together those pieces.

Since we worship a God Who is One in the sense of being absolutely unified (as Rambam stresses), our goal is to forge a unity as close to that as we can from the disparate components of our lives. (This is probably what the angels' calling out to each other to say *Kadosh* is about as well, as we noted in the *haftarah* for Parshat Yitro). In moments of our greatest salvation, we achieve a glimpse of that grand Unity, and our leaders are able to record songs of praise that merge separate elements into a single unit.

The Shirah: A First Look

A summary of this rather lengthy composition will show how it revolves around a central theme. Going by groups of verses, the *Shirah* consists of the following:

Verses **1-3—**God is my protection, etc. (emphasizing the stability of God's protection); Verses **4-7:** When I call out to God, He responds so I can praise Him, when

I am surrounded by troubles, including the threat of death, God saves me. Verses **8-16**: He comes down to save me and the whole world is turned upside down, with darkness, high waves, fire, lightning, all of them fearsome. Verses **17-20**: God saves me from stronger enemies, from water disasters; at the end of verse 20, David says it is because God is happy with me, which leads into the next section, a description of his merits. Verses **21-24—**David lists how he keeps God's ways. Verses **25-28**— God repays good and evil (rewarding David, also on a personal and national level). Verses **29-30**: God is my light, with His help I can chase a whole battalion. Verses **31-49**: God is generally powerful, with the end returning to how God helps defeat and destroy David's enemies. Verses **50-51**: Closing, therefore David has to thank God.

A first glance might lead to the conclusion that the song has many different parts, with no overall unity, opposite what I have suggested. While the last 22 verses before the coda speak about David defeating his enemies, the first half doesn't seem to.

It's All About Defeating His Enemies

I see all of the subsidiary themes as connected by virtue of one notable lack in David's life, the experience obvious miracles. David is forced to flee Saul, has to cope with Goliath, with the king of the Philistines, with the Amaleki tribes he defeats in battle, and with building alliances with surrounding nations, all without any direct Divine intervention.

In such a life, David's references to God stepping in and saving him are expressions of faith, not incontrovertible facts. Since Haazinu's stress is on the Jewish people experiencing their faith in just this way, David's Shirah complements the *parsha*. For example, Saul's getting a message that the Philistines have attacked, just as he is

about to catch David, and his decision to turn back because of that, are taken by David as reflections of God's Providence. The whole first part of the Song, then, is David making this faith statement over and over.

Two Brief Digressions

Midrash Tehillim 18;33 takes verse 42 to mean that non-Jews who pray to idols will, after their deaths, pray to God and not get an answer. Note that the Midrash does not say that when they get to Hell they will still call out to idols, or that they won't mean their prayers to God; it says that they'll pray to God.

The Midrash is informing us that this world and life are our only opportunity to build a relationship with God. Whatever the function of the next world, it is *not* a place where we grow and develop. In fact, the only convincing explanation for the resurrection of the dead in Maimonides' worldview (since he seems to think that the resurrected dead will then die again, returning to wherever they were before being brought back to life) is that it is another opportunity to further their relationship with God.

Tanhuma Pekudei 7 notes that David here refers to God saving him from Jews who would oppose him, apparently even other than Saul. I note that because I wonder whether we sometimes have a romantic vision of times gone by, assuming that Jewish leaders had only to express their good ideas and see them actualized. (As Harry Truman famously predicted Eisenhower would expect when he got to the presidency).

That King David had to struggle with opposition reminds us that very few of even our greatest leaders, if any, have had that kind of freedom. Imagining what David (or R. Yehudah haNasi, or Rambam, or R. Kook, etc.) might have accomplished without

opposition makes us soberingly aware that even our greatest leaders have failed to achieve what they might have, and that we are the poorer for it.

Connection to Haazinu

David's Song offers an example of an important Jewish leader relating his life story to God's intervention in that life. In that way, it contrasts with Haazinu's warning that there will come a time when the Jews refuse to accept that perspective. As the Song says, לו חכמו ישכילו זאת, if the Jews were smart, they would understand this, and realize the need to return to God with all their hearts.

Haazinu seems to require us to figure out what God is trying to tell us when things go poorly (it's easier when everything's going well), and to respond appropriately. David, who lived a life filled with both tragedy and blessing, offers a paradigm for how to bring it all together as part of one's relationship with God. **Shabbat Shalom.**

HAFTAROT OF PART V, DEUTERONOMY: RECAP AND RECURRING THEMES

Haftarat Devarim: The *haftarah* of Shabbat Hazon reminds us that Isaiah coped with many of the same challenges as Jeremiah, perhaps himself avoiding witnessing the Destruction only because of Hezekiah's religious reign. Too, Isaiah shows us that already in his time, people had turned away from God by making their own determination as to what God wanted, a determination often at odds with the truth.

Haftarat Vaetchanan: While this Shabbat is famous as "Shabbat Nachamu," the Sabbath of comfort, the *haftarah* itself focuses on how we will *eventually* secure comfort, less on detailing the comfort itself. As the *haftarah* sees it, achieving comfort depends on being cleansed both of our own sins (including those of our forefathers that we continue), as well as on how well we involve ourselves in acts deserving redemption. The more we do, and the more we recognize God's power to redeem us, the sooner and more fully we will ourselves see those blessed times.

Haftarat Ekev: The first step of the comfort discussed here is the repopulation of Jerusalem, which would help prove to the world that we are, indeed, bearers of a special message from God. In that light, we understand the prediction that non-Jewish leaders will bring us back themselves, as God did during the Exodus; it is not their subservience we celebrate, but their recognition and participation in our Redemption. The last points, of Isaiah's frequent prophecy and our having ancestors like Abraham and Sarah, underline that this redemption is close and ready for us, as soon as we are ready to follow their example of service of God.

Haftarat Reeh: The *haftarah's* discussion of the future stones of Jerusalem, and of Torah's comparison to both water and fire, showed us the metaphysical side of the

redemption. The Talmud assumed that angels themselves might debate how that redemption would look, and blamed those who could not accept at face value the traditional view of a metaphysical redemption.

Haftarat Shoftim: Although redemption is guaranteed, the *haftarah* speaks of it coming in spite of us, by virtue of our having failed to use the powers of Torah to secure the higher and better forms of redemption that were available. In those instances, national redemption will be more important than any individual's fate, and we will lose the right to take anything with us from the other nations' possessions.

Haftarat Ki Tetsei: The short *haftarah* focuses on the word *pitzhi*, exploding out, speaking of the future growth of Jerusalem as the spark for world recognition of God. It is only when the world recognizes God that God will become fully the ruler of the Universe (taking it back, at least according to Nachmanides, from the forces that currently rule). This promise is linked to that of the rainbow, perhaps suggesting that just as Nature will never be abrogated, God's direct rule will eventually take its place within the natural order as well.

Haftarat Ki Tavo: The *haftarah* stressed that some forms of light stem from spiritual rather than purely physical sources. In that context, the light of the Jewish people can only shine forth when the light of Esau is defeated; the two are necessarily in competition. A perhaps related point is that we expect the nations most active in oppressing the Jews to come to admit their error, to come to serve us as an expression of their concession to the rightness of our worldview. It is such events that can hasten the Redemption, bringing it before its set time.

Haftarat Netsavim-- Vayelech: The metaphors of clothing, planting, and marriage served Isaiah well in underlining the changes of the future. We, as a people, will change, also signified by Jerusalem getting another name, and that change will lead to our securing increased attention from God. As in other *haftarot*, these changes are seen as being noted and ratified by the other nations, part of reminding us that the goal of the Redemption is that *all* come to recognize God.

Haftarat Haazinu: David's Song shows us the king, towards the end of his life, reflecting on the many incidents he has undergone, and relating them all back to God. It is thus the exact opposite of the Torah reading's warning that the Jews would forget that idea, would forget that their national misfortunes come from God.

Seven of these *haftarot* were about comfort from our times of trouble, one was a prediction of punishment, and one was a response to the Torah's Song in Haazinu, and yet they are remarkably cohesive in their basic message: Good times and results come from recognizing God and seeing God's impact on the world. Punishment and times of trouble come from refusing to recognize that, and from the moral and spiritual deterioration that inevitably follow that failure.

On the road to recognition of God, these *haftarot* showed us a few important components. First, the health and wealth of Jerusalem is seen as a productive marker-point for the advent of God being recognized in the world. Second, non-Jewish nations, particularly those that have previously oppressed the Jews, are seen as particularly important to the process; their coming to admit the error of their ways contributes even more than most to the bringing of God's Kingdom in the world.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the Jewish people's willingness to ascribe events in their lives to God—good and bad—and to draw the appropriate conclusions from that experience is the essential piece that can bring about all the rest. The *haftarot* of Deuteronomy, then, revolve around the question of redemption, comfort, and how to contribute to its hasty arrival. The fundamental answer is that focus on God and recognition of His impact on the world are the central pieces of that puzzle.

PART VI: HAFTAROT FOR SPECIAL SABBATHS

Two kinds of special *haftarot* can intrude on the ordinary cycle of readings that are adjuncts to the weekly Torah readings. First, there are *haftarot* that replace the usual one because of some event or aspect of the day. Second, there are days beside ordinary Sabbaths which incur an *haftarah*. The *haftarot* in the first group, discussed here in Part VI, are only read on a regular Sabbath, pushing aside the usual *haftarah*, while the *haftarot* analyzed in Part VII are those special *haftarot* that are functions of that day regardless of when it falls.

Admittedly, this distinction is somewhat arbitrary, and need not yield the kind of thematic unity we have sought throughout this work. Nonetheless, in our quest for those themes that recur, we suspected that the *haftarot* for holidays, those days that in and of themselves demand an *haftarah*, were more likely to share ideas, and grouped them accordingly.

A last point to make is that these *haftarot* tell us more about the traditional view of Torah reading than we might realize. The usual pattern of connecting the *haftarah* to the Torah reading might seem like an exercise in Torah study; seeing that we allow the events of the day, including those that do not impact the Torah reading itself (such as our first entry, the *haftarah* for the day before the first of the month) tells us that the *haftarah* is meant to reflect the character of that particular Sabbath rather than just the Torah reading.

That, in turn, raises the idea that Sabbaths are seen as each h aving their own character. In the absence of a special event such as the New Moon, we are left to derive that character from the Torah reading. The Sabbath in which we read Genesis, then, is

apparently seen by tradition as different from the Sabbath in which we read Leviticus, etc. If so, these special *haftarot* remind us that our project in this book is, in fact, to uncover the deep character of each of the Sabbaths of the year, since we can expect them to be revealed in that prophetic reading.

Haftarah No. 1: When the New Month Begins on Sunday, **I Samuel 20: 18-42**

It's Not the First Words of the *Haftarah*

Like so many other *haftarot*, this text tempts us to trivialize its connection to the day, to see it as a function only of the *haftarah* beginning with the words "מחר חודש, tomorrow is the New Moon." One simple proof of the insufficiency of that explanation is that the speech that opens our *haftarah* follows (in Scripture) a similar speech of David's, in which he had used the phrase "חודש מחר, tomorrow is the New Moon (the Hebrew words being reversed). Had we only cared about the phrase, we should have started reading from there.

Three aspects of this *haftarah*-- how differently the people of Scripture experienced Rosh Hodesh, the New Moon, from how we now do so, Saul's struggles with himself, and Jonathan's actions in support of David-- offer a more fleshed-out understanding of how it captures the nature of the day before Rosh Hodesh. Together, they suggest that our *haftarah* portrays the day before Rosh Hodesh as a time for reconsidering, renewing, and rearticulating our commitments and devotions in life.

Erev Rosh Hodesh Depends on Rosh Hodesh

The background to David and Jonathan's plan, confirmed by Saul's in fact becoming infuriated when he discovers David's absence and hears Jonathan's explanation, is that the celebratory meal for the New Moon was a ceremonial state occasion, where attendance for high-ranking officers was mandatory. First, Saul's thoughts tell us that people ate on the New Moon "בטהרה, in a state of ritual purity," either because they ate sacrifices or just as an expression of the day's importance. Second, David's repeat absence is so upsetting to Saul he cannot refrain from asking

about it. Third, Jonathan assumes that a rational person would believe that David's brother had insisted he return home for the family celebration of the New Moon.

To draw from elsewhere as well, the husband of the woman of Shunem (whose son died and Elisha resuscitated) recognizes the New Moon as a day in which people would make special trips to see the prophet. Rosh Hodesh, these sources show, is a day whose significance to characters in Scripture is not experienced today.

Good and Evil Battle in Saul

We are perhaps so used to seeing Saul as the villain of David's life that we may not realize how tragic a figure he is. When David does not appear on the first day, Saul convinces himself that all is well, that some one-time event kept him away. Here is Saul, teetering on the brink of an obsession with killing David, but his instinct to explain away negative information is still strong enough to help him refrain from commenting on his absence.

Pesachim 3a points out another way in which Saul is still an example of positive behavior. In the course of a discussion showing how Scripture works to speak in positive terms, the Talmud uses Saul as an example, noting that he says David was "בלתי טהור, lacking in ritual purity," rather than "טמא, ritually impure."

Saul shows us that people are not one thing or another, a message especially relevant to Rosh Hodesh. After this chapter, Saul largely loses himself to the urges that will lead him to chase and try to kill David for just about the rest of his life. Yet even while in the grip of this awful fixation, examples of his admirable qualities break through. Aside from the two we just gave, later in the book, Saul is at one point on the verge of

capturing David, but pulls back when he hears that the Philistines have invaded, as we mentioned in the *haftarah* for Haazinu.

A lesser man might have assumed, especially given the state of transportation in those days, that an extra day or two taken to catch and dispatch David would not materially affect his response to the invasion, but the call of duty pulls Saul immediately away.

The battle within Saul seems to me also to explain the full stop in the text before he turns to Jonathan on the second day, after he notices that David's place is once again empty. I assume Saul, the man of duty, clean speech, and not jumping to negative conclusions, instinctively knew he was losing control to his demons. As he watches David's empty seat, his last moments of sanity slipping away, perhaps with the various people at the table making small talk or reporting on the national situation, that empty place looms larger and larger, until, almost against his will, the question bursts out of him, ushering in a new era in his, and David's, life.

Jonathan Makes, and Keeps, His Commitments to David

The third piece of our *haftarah* comes from watching Jonathan. He promises David to find out Saul's mood and report back. At the same time, he tries to stop his father from yielding to his delusions, in contrast to the rest of Saul's retinue. Even though they would be vital to Saul's pursuit of David (Jonathan, for example, never joins), we never see them trying to stop their monarch from his insanity. Jonathan's split loyalties do not show a diminution of commitment to either, since he is as upset over his father's folly as over the danger to David, Scripture naming both as why he did not eat on that second day of the Hodesh.

Jonathan Follows Through on his Commitment

The end of the story shows Jonathan living up to his commitment, getting David the message he had promised, but then also staying around to assure him that their bond would remain strong in the face of the coming times of adversity. To me, that suggests that an undercurrent of the *haftarah* is Jonathan's making and keeping a difficult commitment.

Erev Rosh Hodesh, the day we will read this *haftarah*, becomes a day of making commitments on which one can follow through. This relates, perhaps, to the custom of Yom Kippur Katan, a "small" Yom Kippur, on which some people fast in preparation for the atonement of Rosh Hodesh itself. In light of Rosh Hodesh's being a new beginning, the day before is a day to prepare, to choose important paths, and follow them faithfully and unswervingly even in the face of challenges to so doing. Jonathan provides an example of what an ideal Erev Rosh Hodesh looks like.

Shabbat Shalom.

Haftarah No. 2: The New Moon on the Sabbath, Isaiah 66: 1-24

A slightly different form of presentation, just to mix it up:

"This Court will come to order. The defendant being present and represented by counsel, the Court will entertain the accusations. Bailiff, please read out the first charge."

"In a proper court assembled, be it known that Isaiah b. Hilkiyah, henceforth to be referred to as The Prophet, has been charged with impugning the motives of the priests and other Temple functionaries, declaring himself and a cohort of followers to be the only ones who truly fear the Word of God."

"Defendant, how do you plead?"

"Your honor, my client has informed me of his intention to say only, "My words speak for themselves." While I understand the Court's desire to secure witnesses' and defendants' cooperation, I beg the Court's indulgence, since defendant claims he is only empowered to speak as commanded."

"Be that as it may, we are left to work only with defendant's words in deciding the truth of the charges. Specifically, the prosecution has presented Exhibit A, known as Chapter 66, as evidence. From our reading, it does seem true that he contrasts those who care about the Temple and its worship with those who are "חרדים על דברי, anxious to fulfill My words." The implicatioin that the first group do not seek to fulfill God's words seems inescapable. Aside from the statement's false assumption that the Temple need not be central to worship, it maligns the priests who work so hard to keep the sacrifices being offered!"

"Perhaps, Your Honor, we might move on before rushing to judge. I believe the next charge blames my client for predicting a dire end for others than the *haredim*. Later

the charge sheet accuses him of going further, assuming that *all* people who refuse to recognize God's hand in the world will meet awful punishments. Does that cover the charges?"

"No, it leaves out his deciding that other nations will eventually serve us by bringing back to Israel even Jews who no longer know of their connection to the religion or nation. As if we have the right to lord our special status over others!"

"Thank you for the clarification, Your Honor. Defense argues that even were we to grant all the claims so far—which we do not—the Court seems to be ignoring more positive elements of the presentation. The promise that those who mourn for Jerusalem will be able to rejoice in its rebuilding, for example..."

"Defense in turn is ignoring the implicit prediction that the city will be destroyed—seditious speech-- *and* defendant's certainty of a right and wrong way to mourn for it. Who is defendant to decide that mourning must mean refraining from having large parties, abstaining from building large homes in exile, and should include planning on returning as soon as the opportunity arises? How can he decide what constitutes a lack of mourning the Destruction?"

"Defense wishes to note and take exception to the Court's insistence on finding the negative in even the positive. What about the vision of a stream of peace, of Jews returning to the Land, of the Land being repopulated almost instantaneously, of all the nations coming to appreciate our God and His concern with the world?"

"We've been over this before, Counselor. We find the suggestion that other nations and religions will have to admit the truth of ours to reflect a troubling spiritual

imperialism. How does your client expect these other nations to hear about our God *before* He starts raining down punishment on them?"

"Why, Your Honor, I would think the answer would be obvious; by consulting with us and our Sages, the same way we are supposed to do."

"There you go again! As if the priests who serve in the Temple aren't good enough to guide us in proper religiosity? And how exactly would we expect other nations, cultures, and religions to submit themselves to us for that purpose?"

"If defense counsel is finished with conferring with his client....?"

"I'm sorry, Your Honor, but I do not think I have an answer for your last questions that the Court will enjoy. My client has instructed me to say only the following: His job is to announce the truth as it has been vouchsafed to him. That truth, like it or not, revolves around God and His relationship to the Jewish people and the world."

"My client is required to point out uncomfortable truths, to wit: those who stubbornly cling to sacrifices as the necessary sum and substance of a relationship with God, which can then excuse other abominable acts, such as theft, murder, and idol worship, will be proven wrong. Even those who do not take it so far—who only engage in idle gossip, or neglect of Torah study, or fail to care for the sick or the poor, for example—still wrongly assume, as my client has pointed out elsewhere, that performing their chosen rituals properly will insure God's good graces."

"Further, my client's God wishes to make clear that He will eventually be "forced" to make His presence known to the entire world, but if that becomes necessary, He will do so in a way that is significantly less pleasant than if people come to those kinds of realizations on their own. If it happens the harder way, many people will die, deaths that

will need to be continuing reminders to those who survive, a reminder of the truths my client has worked so hard to spread."

"My client wishes to stress that his words are meant to help people avoid their coming true. While he speaks of a monthly attendance at the Temple followed by a ritual visit to view the rotting corpses of those who rejected his messages, his warnings can help bring about a different future. Each Rosh Hodesh, were his words to find their mark, people would know it was a time to rededicate themselves to achieving a society in which Jews work to fulfill God's Will as a whole—not just specific rituals, but all of God's Will; a future in which Jews manage to make non-Jews aware of God before He does it in a painful and destructive way, in which humanity moves not only towards a more humane society, but one that engages the idea of a concerned and involved God in a meaningful way."

"Or at least that is what he was striving to get across. Whether repeated readings of his words will have that impact on readers or listeners, even he, he tells me, cannot predict, but it is his fervent hope that he will contribute somewhat to ushering in a future like that. With that, the defense rests."

Haftarah No. 3: Parshat Shekalim, **II Kings 11;17-12;17**

This week's *haftarah* is read on the Sabbath of or just before the first of Adar, the month in which Purim occurs. This is in memory of the practice, in Temple times, for the courts to make public announcements at this time of year, reminding Jews to offer their yearly half-shekel to support the Temple upkeep.

A Misleading Similarity

Since the selection tells of Jehoash changing the established system for how to maintain the Temple, the connection to the special Torah reading, which tells of men's obligation to give a half-shekel a year to the Tabernacle/Temple, might seem clear. A first flaw in that claim is that the Mishnah sees the half-shekels as primarily for daily communal sacrifices, not regular maintenance. If so, the collection of money described by the prophet was not the same as in the Torah reading. Further, the half-shekels were compulsory whereas the prophet discusses voluntary contributions.

One more question stems from the different starting points for the *haftarah* in the Sefardic and Ashkenazic communities. While Ashkenazic Jews understandably start with Jehoash's ascent to rule- since he is the one who changes the system- Sefardic Jews start with the last four verses of the previous chapter. In those verses, Jehojada, the High Priest who saved Jehoash as a child and then placed him on the throne, makes a covenant between the nation, king, and God, and then between the nation and the king. The people then destroy the House and altar of Baal, kill its priest, place Jehoash on the throne, and kill Ataliah.

In the part that the Ashkenazic Jews also read, we learn that Jehoash fully followed God's Will as long as Jehojada was alive. His dependence on his mentor for adhering to proper values dovetails with issues we will see below, so I mention it here.

Try the Old System First

When Jehoash takes over, the system had priests privately collecting (or raising, according to Rashi in II Chronicles 24;25) donations for the maintenance of the Temple. Rashi in Gittin 30a points out that priests expected gifts from their friends. The system flourished on networking; each priest built a base of supporters for his endeavors, including the Temple. It would be somewhat akin to choosing to support a yeshiva because you know the head of it or a teacher there.

One problem with that system is the lack of institutional safeguards; for example, I wonder whether the priests who collected more would also have more of a say in how the upkeep should be handled.

After 22 years, Yehoash sees the system is not working, and devises a new one. The text seems to blame the priests for the failure, meaning the money was there, and they did not do their jobs. Yehoash's solution also indicates that the problem was in applying the money to the Temple's needs, not in raising it.

Unless the priests were corrupt—collecting money for one purpose and then keeping it—or evil, it would seem their failure had to do with a flaw in their system. I suggest that it was their failure to assign responsibilities. In the absence of clearly defined tasks, the system fell apart. It was akin, perhaps, to the experiments that show that bystanders at an accident are more likely to help if someone takes charge, giving specific jobs to people.

Specific Tasks for Specific People

Yehoash's new system, which the priests seem to have welcomed, addresses that problem. Instead of a diffuse obligation to see to the Temple's upkeep, the "accountants" of the system, the king's scribe and the High Priest, were given the job of assigning money to the craftsmen who would actually fix the Temple.

The king's trust of the craftsmen—the prophet tells us that they were not called to account for their work—contrasts with his experience of the priests, who could not handle an honor system. Perhaps the greater specificity of the job eased the woodworker or metalworker's ability (who was in any case thrilled with his government contract) to produce the necessary results.

The Introduction to the *Haftarah* and the Connection to Shekalim

The priests' failure suggests a reason for starting the *haftarah* where Sefardic Jews do. Jehojada's covenant was supposed to inaugurate a time when people would take care of communal needs without needing exact guidance, not just one instance of freeing themselves of Baal or Atalyah. The priests' falling short thus mirrors what happened in the rest of the society.

In a mature society, members take care of social needs even without being told they have to; that was supposed to be how the upkeep of the Temple worked, it was what Jehojada was trying to teach the people, and it might be the point of the half-shekel in the Torah reading. The money itself is fairly negligible, since halachah assumes all Jews could afford it. Perhaps it was at least as much a symbol as an actual financial need, a yearly reminder that each male Jew is obligated to insure that communal institutions run well and properly.

Accepting that idea turns the first of Adar into a time when Jews would be reminded of their overall responsibilities. That connects Shekalim to Purim more meaningfully than otherwise as well, since one part of the Purim story is Esther's being told by Mordechai that she must step forward to do what she can to save the Jews. His sharp words—רוח והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר, salvation will come to the Jews from elsewhere—tell her that it is her job if it needs to get done, regardless of whether someone else could also do it.

Which suggests that we might use this Shabbat to rededicate ourselves to helping advance the cause of service of God not only in the ways specifically defined by God and tradition, but in other ways as well, the ones that are clear to us as being necessary but not taken up by anybody in particular. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Zachor, I Samuel 15;2-34

This *haftarah* is read on the Sabbath before Purim; since the Megillah identifies Haman as a descendant of Agag (and Amalek), we take this opportunity to fulfill the commandment to always remember Amalek's evil in attacking us as we left Egypt.

Warring Against Amalek

The *haftarah* offers an example of the attempt to eradicate Amalek, in line with the special Torah reading. Some struggle with the morality of the command to destroy Amalek, but Saul had little leeway for such considerations, since Samuel told him directly what to do. His words are notably explicit, requiring him to kill all of the Amalekites, old to young, man to woman, animals, and so on. Perhaps God spoke that way to forestall errors or miscommunications; if so, it did not work.

That Saul was punished for altering a Divine command should not give the impression that humans can never have input into the way the world runs. Moses himself sometimes acted differently than God said, only to have God later ratify his decision. Where the letter of the law is not explicit, there is room to follow the spirit in ways that had not been laid out by God. Saul was not given that option, so his failure to obey had the disastrous consequences (for him and his family) that we see this week.

Substituting Your Own Morality for God's

Yoma 22b stresses that Saul's error lay in his assuming he had a better grasp of the morality of killing Amalek than did God, his thinking that he was more compassionate than God. The gemara links his actions to the verse "אל תהי צדיק הרבה, do not be excessively righteous." The Talmud then notes that Saul ends up also becoming the embodiment of the continuation of the verse, "אל תרשע הרבה, do not be excessively evil"

when he commands the slaughter of the city of Nov for (in his view) having abetted David's escape.

I think the Talmud is noting that what we see as compassion or moral indignance, when it flies in the face of God's Torah or direct command, is often more about our own emotions than the reality of the situation. Human beings certainly bear an obligation to apply their moral sense to decisions, especially when the only input is from other humans—there is no excuse, according to the Torah, for claiming "I was just following orders."

Saul failed to realize how much God's entering the picture alters the situation. What would be indefensibly cruel when initiated by a human being becomes perhaps puzzling but still obligatory when commanded by the Divine.

Not the Right Mistake to Make

Saul wages the war effectively, winning a resounding victory, but fails to completely destroy Amalek, allowing the people to bring home the best of their sheep and cattle, and also taking captive their king, Agag. In reaction, God tells Samuel that Saul's failure has demonstrated his lack of fitness to rule, using the verb "נחמתי, I have regretted it" to describe the Divine "feelings" about Saul.

In Yoma 22b, R. Huna contrasts David to Saul, noting that David sinned several times without bearing the consequences just one sin earned Saul. The verb used for God's reaction to Saul's sin, "נחמתי," points the way towards an answer to R. Huna's implicit question.

Since God does not experience the emotion of regret or need comfort (the two main meanings of the verb in question), the word is better translated as implying a rethinking of an earlier decision, which is what regret and comfort also involve.

When human beings' misuse of their freewill "forces" God to rework His plan for history, the process involves a parallel enough re-orienting to justify that metaphor. Human freewill (and God's "preference" for it) implies the power to instigate events that are not ideal, producing a world that diverges from the way God "wanted" it to work out.

If so, R. Huna might have just noticed that Saul's one sin was more significant to God's plan for the world than David's several ones. All sin is problematic, but personal sin, with little effect on human history, elicits a different Divine response than ones that alter that history as a whole. In the litany of poor choices that comprise Saul's tragedy, his failure here, just one, is significant enough to lose him the monarchy.

Saul's Error, Amalek's Error

Saul's failure thus taps into the issues that are central to the mitzvah of wiping out Amalek in general. Instead of striking a decisive blow for God's way of running the world, Saul's actions offered one more example of people neglecting/refusing to follow the Divine Wisdom when it contradicted their own.

Amalek took Saul's error further, since they acted at a time when the civilized world had just been rocked by the Exodus, where God rescued a people from slavery despite the vigorous resistance of the most powerful nation on earth. Amalek's attack implicitly argued that the Jewish victory over Egypt was qualitatively similar to any other war. By winning a skirmish, Amalek showed (wrongly) that war with the Jews was similar to war with other nations, win some, lose some.

That view of Amalek explains Maimonides's interesting claim that we could spare Amalekites who agree to accept positions of servitude to the Jews (Rabad disagrees, but only to the extent of requiring full conversion). It is not Amalek as a race we seek to eradicate, but as a competitor to our worldview. We say that God runs the world, does what He wants, and selected the Jews for a particular role in world history. Amalek and his intellectual heirs argue otherwise; those who give up that worldview and accede to our special status are welcome to be part of our world.

Haman, too, was offended by Jewish exceptionalism; Purim was thus another time where we proved not only that we are different, but that the God we serve is the only One whose decisions about the world are always accurate. Saul, maliciously or not, failed to understand this. His story, Amalek's story, and the Purim story, remind us to rejuvenate our commitment to subordinating our own ideas to those stated in unambiguous fashion as the Will of the Creator. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Parah, Ezekiel 36;16-38

Becoming Impure As a Nation

The *haftarah* relates to this week's special Torah reading, in which we are told of the ceremony of the פרה אדומה, the red heifer whose ashes were mixed with water. That solution was then sprinkled on those rendered ritually impure by virtue of contact with a corpse; two sprinklings of that water four days apart (as long as the first of them was three or more days after contact) removed the ritual status and allowed the person to enter the Temple.

Our translating "טומאה" as ritual impurity points us in the direction of central questions that underlie our *haftarah* as well. When the Torah assigns what we call impurity to a person, Jewish sources differ as to how to understand the phenomenon. Some see the Torah's rules as reflecting some metaphysical reality of contamination (or other negative status), while others assume the Torah saw these experiences as making entry into the Temple inappropriate, but that are not otherwise negative.

While my sympathies lie with the second position, our *haftarah* is most easily explained by following the first. The *haftarah* speaks of the Jews as having defiled the Land with their sins, seeing them as having introduced a type of *niddah*-impurity to the Land (*niddah* is most commonly used in terms of a woman who is menstruating, but it can connote anyone who needs to be excluded from regular contact for some reason). Here, the status may have come because the Jews were committing murder, which is often called shedding of blood (as it is here). Although that would offer a "blood" aspect to this situation, it seems easier to explain the reference to being a *niddah* as the prophet

telling us that the Jews have defiled the Land, much as a niddah's blood conveys a status upon her.

The comparison of ritual impurity to sin is the source for a famous Mishnah at the end of Yoma, in which R. Akiva celebrates our having the right/ability to be cleansed by God. R. Akiva notes two verses that speak of God this way, in one of which God is referred to as our Mikvah, the other in our *haftarah,* where God promises to throw upon us purifying water.

Passive Cleansing

The image in our *haftarah* sees us as passive recipients of purity, bestowed upon us by God. That idea matches the predictions we see in the *haftarah* and explains why the prophet takes little pleasure in informing us about that cleansing.

The prophet stresses that God will do all this only because our continued exile and servitude is an embarrassment to Him (as it were); having linked His Name with us as a people, our abject and continuing failure to meet God's expectations for us necessarily affects how God is seen in the world.

There is some positive in that statement, namely that our people is so eternally linked with God's Name that our times of trouble are, as it were, so problematic for God that He will "need" to end our exile before we perhaps deserve it. That is outweighed, it seems to me, by Ezekiel's assumption that we will never actually learn the lessons God has been trying to teach us. Whenever the end of history comes, for Ezekiel, we will still have failed to rid ourselves of our sinful ways!

Becoming Purified, Becoming Changed

When the Jews come back, in this version, the Return is purely geographical, without any change of their internal workings or religiosity. Ezekiel's vision also does not tell us how soon after the Return we will be purified, nor how that purification will look.

If we see the metaphor of the red heifer process as more than just a literary device, it would seem that Ezekiel is predicting an extended period of time until our purification is completed. The water took a week, since sprinkling occurred on the fourth and seventh day, and had two stages. The same might be true of the future Ezekiel envisions.

Connecting Spiritual Change to Economic

However it will happen, God then says, in the same verse, that He will save us from our impurities and call out to the grain, so that we no longer have famine. Aside from reminding us how prevalent famine was in the prophet's time (a blessing of our own time, at least in the Western world, that we should always appreciate), the prophet assumes a fact we should well know from our recitation of Shema, that the quality of our service of God affects our financial circumstances, at least in the Land of Israel. Sin is a problem not only because of how it damages us spiritually, but also because it complicates our ordinary physical lives.

A Meritless Teshuvah

The verse only refers to the Jews as remembering and being embarrassed of their sins after they have been returned from exile and purified. In contrast to many other ways in which repentance can occur, this repentance depends almost wholly on outside circumstances. As a result of being brought back from exile, of being externally changed

and purified, of experiencing the economic goods that come out of a properly lived life, the Jews will look back on their sins with embarrassment.

The prophet's immediately saying that God will not bring any of this about for our merits stresses that this kind of contrition has little merit to it. The person becomes more religious, a good result, but garners no reward for that change, since the change had none of his or her input. Salvation can come without our either earning it or even gaining reward from having been part of it.

Our minimal contribution to this version of redemption—and other prophets offer other pictures; perhaps they are different possibilities, or perhaps the final redemption will incorporate pieces of them all-- perhaps also explains God's referring to us as sheep in the last two verses, sheep of sacrifice.

Sheep contribute to the Temple service passively; so do the Jews of this *haftarah*. The *haftarah* thus tells us that we can and ought to use this week's Torah reading to remind ourselves that, just like ritual corpse-impurity, the cleansing prior to Redemption might be taken out of our hands. Implied, I think, is the hope that we will use the vision as a spur to act well enough to avoid being in that group of people, meriting instead a Redemption where we can be active participants in inaugurating a world that recognizes the true Kingdom of God. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 6: Parshat haChodesh, **Ezekiel 45;16-46;18**

The Future Temple and the Month of Nisan

The Talmud in Megillah identifies this text as the one read on the week before the beginning of the month of Nisan, the month in which Passover occurs. The text presents many difficulties, since Ezekiel seems to here envision a Temple that operates with different rules than we are used to. Some of his strayings from tradition are so obvious as to already have been grappled with by the Talmud, which doubles our goals here; we wish to both understand what Ezekiel meant in a traditional way as well as understand why the Talmud would move such a text to so prominent a position in our liturgy.

A first difference: The *haftarah* opens by claiming the Jewish people will donate sufficient funds for regular communal sacrifices, but that the "נשיא, *nasi*" (the king or the High Priest, as Radak and Rashi interpret it) will give the communal sacrifices for the New Moons, Sabbaths, and holidays. Radak's interpretation has the verse saying the king will replace the people in giving the money for the holiday sacrifices. Since the *haftarah* also assumes the people will be most assiduous about attendance at the Temple on holidays, Radak's view reads Ezekiel as envisioning the people outsourcing responsibility for the sacrifices the most people will witness.

How Different Will That Future Temple Be? The Rededication

Verses 18-25 of the chapter offer several more apparent discrepancies, with Rashi and Radak differing on how to handle them. Rashi tends to follow the Talmud, which strove to reconcile Ezekiel's words with the known workings of the Temple. Radak is more comfortable reading the text as laying out a 3rd Temple that will differ from the ones that came before. Rashi's position is more palatable from a traditional perspective,

but Radak's raises more interesting questions of where there is flexibility within what has been seen as the laws of the Temple.

We do not have room to analyze the *haftarah*'s challenging claims in detail—among them, the issue of when in the course of Redemption the Temple will be built and dedicated (Rashi thinks at the beginning, and in Nisan; Radak thinks it will be after much redemptive activity has already occurred); whether there will be a new sin-offering given on the seventh day of the dedication; whether the holiday sacrifices for Sukkot and Passover will change, making the two holidays, at least in their Temple service, more similar to each other and more generic. Instead, we will focus on Radak's understanding of one of them, the role of a future Temple in the lives of the people.

The Future Temple and the Role of Sacrifices in Jewish Thought

Verses 1-8 of chapter 46 speak of a special door, from the east, through which the *nasi* will enter on Sabbaths and holidays. Radak thinks the verses assume that those are the days people will generally come to the Temple.

The comment offers an in-between option to two views bandied about in the Jewish world today. One view holds and hopes that sacrifice will return exactly as it was. Certainly the more simple view for those who accept the authority of traditional sources, the problem is only with helping moderns resonate to that hope. In our times, such ideas as animal sacrifice seem odd, foreign, and even perhaps primitive.

Giving some apparent (I stress the word) comfort to the people who are leery of animal sacrifice is the view of Maimonides in the Guide of the Perplexed, where he suggests that God instituted sacrifice because of the needs of the people of the time of the

Exodus. Not ready for the ideal, sacrifice-free world, he sees God as weaning them by restricting it to one place and only certain forms.

Many have jumped from here to argue that Maimonides intended to imply that we would eventually dispense with sacrifice completely. Problematically for this view, as Prof. Twersky *zt"l* noted (and R. Lichtenstein has quoted approvingly), that section of the Moreh is not so much devoted to giving *the* reason for the mitsvot, but *a* reason. Maimonides was trying to show that mitsvot are logical, not that he had captured the absolute reason for them (as he himself stresses in the Mishneh Torah, again as Prof. Twersky zt"l demonstrated).

If so, whether or not his reason is no longer relevant, he might still have thought there would be sacrifices in a future Temple. Indeed, his having expounded the laws of sacrifice so fully, in both the Mishnah Commentary and the Mishneh Torah— laws that did not apply in his time, and were usually left out of halachic works—should prove his acceptance that they continued to be important to the religion.

What the *haftarah* does suggest—and here Maimonides might have agreed—is that the role of sacrifices and the Temple will change in the future. In the past, Jews overemphasized those rituals, seeing them as the entirety of one's relationship with God. As the prophets repeatedly railed, the people were unshakably sure that as long as the proper sacrifices were offered, God could not truly be angry with the Jews, nor punish them harshly.

The future Temple, we are being told, will be only part of the Jewish people's existence. Jews will go there on special occasions, but generally it will be staffed and

attended to only by a select group of people. Sacrifice and Temple worship will take its proper place as one of many elements of our connection with God.

The Importance of a Leader

The last verses discuss some rules for the *nasi* giving land gifts, stressing that he cannot be corrupt in either giving or taking. Our including this in the *haftarah* reminds us that the concern of the text—whatever we chose to get out of it-- was the role of the *nasi* in the future Temple, especially his connection to its service.

This connects well with the special Torah reading, since in both cases we are being told that the nasi should be our representative. In the Torah, kings had to count the years of their reign from Nisan, the first month of the Jewish people. The structure of the king's office, in other words, emphasizes lessons for the people as a whole, whether in terms of the calendar or the Temple, making him our representative in more than just the usually understood ways. **Shabbat Shalom**.

Haftarah No. 7: Shabbat haGadol, Malachi 3;4-24

It's Shabbat haGadol, Man!

I was always taught that this *haftarah* provides one of the reasons for calling this Sabbath "haGadol" because the second to last verse uses that word in its reference to God sending Elijah the Prophet before the advent of the Day of God הגדול והנורא, *haGadol ve-haNora*, the great and wondrous. A more careful read shows that the *haftarah* stresses the Jewish people's responsibility to make the Hand of God more obvious in the world, which provides an independent reason for it to become the *haftarah* for the Sabbath before Passover.

Punishment as Part of Showing God in the World

In the first part of the *haftarah*, God promises our sacrifices will one day again be as pleasing as "of old." Leviticus Rabbah points out that Noah's sacrifices were referred to as a "ריח ניחוח, a pleasing smell," just like ours. When God sets a standard for what sacrifices would be like, then, why would the bar not be set at getting back to Noah's level of sacrifice?

Verse 6 records a complaint of God's that offers an answer. God complains that He has not changed, and the Jews have not ceased (been destroyed). Rashi stresses that God's giving evildoers time and a chance to repent can give the (false) impression that He has foregone that punishment. In the same vein, he thinks the Jews not having ceased reminds them that, as an eternal people, there is always time for God to punish them.

Sotah 9a reads the first half of the verse differently but with a similar thrust. The Talmud reads "לא שניתי, I have not changed," as "I have not repeated," meaning that God's general pattern is to punish a nation just once. Each nation, in this view, gets one

shot on the world stage, where it lasts until its sins become intolerable, and is then punished and removed from the scene.

In that reading, the Jews' being punished more frequently but in smaller increments, enhances their role as witnesses to God's rule. Punishing a nation once does not educate; our punishment, painful as it is, allows God's Hand to peek through the veil of His Hiddenness. In all of this, we see that our sacrifices are intended to make a point to the world, whereas Noah's were for himself alone. It is our standard to which we are trying to return.

Much Ado About Tithing

That mission explains why God next complains about the Jews' having cheated through their tithes (calling it stealing from God). The verb stealing is strange, since God does not have or care about property. Heightening the mystery, the verse promises all sorts of blessings to those who tithe properly; Taanit 9a reads the verse as literally allowing a person to test God on whether tithing will enrich that person.

The answer lies in our theme, seeing God's affect on the world. Priests and Levites are meant to represent God (so that a gift to them is a gift to God; a failure to give is a theft from God). Those who refuse to tithe lessen their own and others' ability to recognize this aspect of these people, and by extension, lessen the belief in God.

If You Won't See God, Won't See Value in Serving God, Either

In verse 13, God complains about their saying that they see no value in serving God, a conclusion they reached because they don't see themselves being rewarded for doing what God wants. Indeed, in their view, the evildoers and those who test God have more success.

This claim assumes we can perceive the sum total of God's effect on the world and reaction to human actions. This is not only an error, it ignores Malachi's point, that the Jews' *job* was to bear witness to the active Presence of God even though he is not perceptibly manifest. God's promise, in the rest of the section, is that that lesson will one day become absolutely clear to all, that people will understand the difference between those who serve God and those who do not, the righteous and the evil.

The Coming of Elijah

The last three verses of the *haftarah* are each famous, but much is missed by not knowing them in context. The prophet calls for us to remember Moses' Torah, commanded at Sinai, then announces that God will send Elijah before the coming of God's great and awesome Day, and says that Elijah will return the hearts of father to sons and sons to their fathers, lest God come and smite the land to the point of eradication.

Remembering Torah is apple-pie for a prophet, but here it plays a more significant role. The Laws of Moses help us represent God, as members of a nation that asserts His continuing Presence in the world.

The role of Elijah as a precursor of Messiah also emphasizes the issue of making God manifest in the world. There is nothing intuitively obvious about the need for a harbinger of the Messiah--what would be lacking if Messiah came without Elijah? The answer seems to be (and, incidentally, Nachmanides says this in regard to prophets' predictions generally) that laying prophetic groundwork for an Arrival will insure that that Arrival will come with even broader recognition of God and Providence in the world.

Which now, of course, connects the *haftarah* to Passover. It is not just that on Passover we were redeemed and in a future Nisan will be again; it is that the original redemption consisted of God proving to the Egyptians He can achieve a desired result by affecting the world physically, metaphysically, naturally or supernaturally. At the future redemption, we hope, the Jewish people will have made that point clear to the world. If they haven't, Elijah will fill in, so that Messiah's success will be eased and the import of his activities will be that much clearer.

As with other *haftarot*, I understand Malachi as reminding us we have a role to play, that it is our task to make Elijah's job as minimal as possible. The more we achieve, the less of a revelation his coming will be. While he will necessarily have some work to do, each piece we take care of is a success of ours, each piece we leave for him a failure. **Shabbat Shalom** and Best Wishes for a holiday filled with the freedom that comes from recognizing God's role in the world.

Haftarah No. 8: Shabbat Shuvah, Hosea 14;2-10, Yoel 2;11-27; Micah 7;18-20

Verse 2: The Famous Call to Teshuvah, and Its Implications

This being *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath between Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur, when Jews are busily trying to repent all their sins so as to avert the judgment of pure justice, the *haftarah* opens with Hosea's call for the Jews to return (the literal meaning of *shuva*; *teshuvah*, repentance, could be translated as returning to God).

Pesikta Rabbati 44 suggests Hosea's reprimands in the earlier chapters of his work lay the groundwork for this one. Without those, the Jews of his time would not have seen why they needed to repent, an implicit lesson about our possible blindness to our sins. Rashi thinks Hosea is telling Judah (the Southern Kingdom) to realize its sin(s) before it meets the same fate as the Northern Kingdom. *Shuva*, then, means now, before it's too late, both in terms of avoiding exile, but also, when God is still acting with the Attribute of Mercy.

Yoma 86b cites Resh Lakish, who notes our verse's speaking of returning עד, *until* God, implying some remaining distance after doing so. Other verses speak of a return that makes our sins into merits; Resh Lakish suggests Hosea was speaking of repentance out of fear, which does not restore our relationship with God as fully as does repentance out of love.

Verse 3: The Effectiveness of Words

Verse 3 famously calls for us to use our words to return to God, closing with the phrase, ונשלמה פרים שפתינו, and our lips will make up for the bulls. Aside from this verse providing a source for the belief that prayer can partially substitute for our lost sacrifices, Yoma 86b says that God takes our verbal repentance as a favor; in return, He allows it to

replace sacrifices. The image of God "longing" for our repentance, taking it as a favor (helping Him not have to punish us) is a useful counterbalance to the (also appropriate) focus on God as punishing, even harshly, when necessary.

The rest of the section gives us a sense of the underlying nature of all repentance, the awareness that we are dependent on God for salvation or sustenance. Were we only to realize that fully, Hosea implies, sin would be a long-forgotten part of our past.

Verses 9-10: Exasperation Helps

Verse 9 has Hosea saying in the name of God, and now, Ephraim, what am I doing amidst all this idol worship? Verse 10 comments that the ways of God are "straight," meaning good and proper, the righteous thrive in them, while sinners stumble. The statement is inherently difficult, seemingly dooming sinners to stumble even further, but its connection to verse 9 is also problematic.

Ran, in the sixth of his famous *Derashot*, says Hosea is singling out the ease of repentance as the factor that helps the good and trips up evildoers. By rights, repentance should involve making exact amends for each sin (such as tracking down and apologizing to all those whom one slandered, for one example).

Were that to have been the regimen, those who fail to repent could at least hide behind its difficulty. When God instead asks only for a sincere admission of sin, regret, and resolve not to return to it in the future, that refuge falls away, leaving those who fail to repent without any excuse. That also explains how verse 10 follows from 9--God is impatient at still being in a realm of idolatry and stubborn sin, when the ticket out is so simple.

Yoel 2; 11-27—Combining Physical and Spiritual in a Complete Teshuvah

There are three parts to this rich section, which has many famous verses that could sustain their own essays. First, the text picks up in the middle of predicting a time of great disaster by saying that God is warning about it ahead of time because we can avoid it. Rashi and Radak agree, for example, that the verse וקרעו לבבכם ואל בגדיכם, tear your hearts and not your clothing, means we can avoid having to tear clothing (a sign of mourning) by tearing our hearts (repenting).

The method of doing so comes next, a nationwide and heartfelt fast. The verses delineate the various groups of society who are to be included in the fast in another famous verse, חתן מחדרו וכלה מחופתה, the groom from his room and the bride from her wedding canopy. Properly engaged, the fast can forestall the predicted tragedy.

God goes a step further, promising not only averting tragedy, but garnering great blessing. God here says that the locusts (earlier predicted as a vehicle of punishment) will be removed from the land, the famine will be replaced by plenty, and even the losses of earlier years will be recouped). Interestingly, it is here, when God is showering blessings upon us, that the verse says it will be clear to all that God resides among us. While punishment points to God's Hand, blessing does so better and more effectively. All lies in the power of repentance.

This is obviously a sketchy presentation, and it does not quite capture its most striking aspect, its concern with the internal experience of repentance (tear your hearts, not your clothes) and yet its continued insistence on external actions (fasting, blowing the shofar). Both external and internal components are necessary for repentance.

Micah 7: 18-20: The Forgiving Side of God

Until now, the *haftarah* has spoken of what repentance can produce, but we now turn to a third prophet (a rarity in *haftarot*) reminding us of the other side of the coin, God's willingness to forgive beyond the measure of what we deserve. This forgiveness stems from God refusing to hold on to His anger, as it were, because God prefers/wants to act kindly. These last three verses, then, echo the end of the selection from Yoel.

One last point is that this promise is only made to שארית נחלתו, the remnants of the people, which, as Rosh haShanah 17a-b notes and Radak mentions, assumes that only a remnant of the people will merit seeing that future redemption, the time when God's kindness can show itself fully in the world. Shabbat Shuvah calls for us to take the steps necessary to be included in that remnant, to hope and long for that day.

Shabbat Shalom and **Gemar Hatimah Tova,** may we be sealed for good tidings.

HAFTAROT FOR PART VI, SPECIAL SABBATHS: RECAP AND RECURRING THEMES

Shabbat Erev Rosh Hodesh: The drama at Saul's table shows us how the New Moon was a time of considered rededication to one's priorities. We see Saul surrendering to his obsession with David, sparked by his inability to ignore or excuse David's absence, and Jonathan, in contrast, using this time to commit to David at the expense of his allegiance to his father.

Shabbat Rosh Hodesh: The last chapter of Isaiah show the prophet complaining about those who emphasize Temple worship at the cost of true allegiance to God's commands and priorities. The prophet predicts both destruction and exile should this continue. In the eventual return of that scenario, nations of the world will come to recognize the truth of the Jewish view of God's relationship to the world.

Shabbat Shekalim: The priests' failure to properly keep up the Temple suggested that the *haftarah* was showing the difficulty of living up to obligations stated in general terms. While Jehoash's solution was to create a more specific system, the reading of Shekalim reminds us that all Jews bear these kind of amorphous responsibilities towards communal needs. It is a Shabbat for being reminded of those obligations, and making sure we live up to them.

Shabbat Zachor: Saul's loss of the monarchy for his failure to fully wipe out Amalek highlights the significance of the *mitzvah* as well as of the need to obey God's direct commands exactly. While there is room for positive human input in situations of ambiguity, the command to Saul was clear and direct. Much like Amalek, much like Haman, Saul decided his view of the world was as good as the one God had told him. Big mistake.

Shabbat Parah: The portrayal of the ritual cleansing God will perform on us at some point in the future stresses how passive we might end up being in the process. We will be returned to the Land, cleansed of our sins, and given economic success, but we will neither have earned it nor gained any merit from it. In contrast to active repentance, where we change our spiritual state, this *haftarah* reminds us of the danger that we will reduce ourselves to pawns in God's redemption of the world.

Shabbat haChodesh: Ezekiel's portrayal of the future Temple raised issues of whether we see that as consonant with our view of the past Temples, or understand him to be envisioning difference in that future structure. Most centrally to the connection to the Torah reading, we noted that the *nasi* would be particularly prominent in the Temple on Sabbaths and holidays, as would the people. In both cases, he would apparently be the one charged with insuring the nation properly balanced its observance of God's laws.

Shabbat haGadol: The issues of punishment, tithing, and the advent of Elijah all pointed towards our need to work towards making God's presence recognized by the world at large. In being punished incrementally, the Jews are able to stay on the stage of world history, eternal witnesses to God's relationship with them. The labeling of tithing as stealing from God, and the promise of riches for tithing correctly, stressed the priests' and Levites' role as representatives of God. Finally, the arrival of Elijah as harbinger of the Messiah tells us of his role as spreading recognition of God to whomever we have not yet succeeded at making aware of this truth. In all this, we are trying to further the messages God originally sent out when taking us out of Egypt.

Shabbat Shuvah: In a selection focused on repentance, we find several components. First, Hosea's earlier reprimands were seen as key; it is honest

confrontation with sin that opens the door to repentance. Second, the process has both internal and external components, regret as well as fasting and prayer. Third, the ease of repentance is both a blessing and an accusation, since the failure to repent becomes inexcusable. Finally, God is prepared to forgive and reconcile to an extent not warranted by our repentance, as long as we engage it fully and sincerely.

Although each *haftarah* has its own concerns, reading them all together points to two joint or recurring ideas in these selectioins. First, perhaps appropriately for *haftarot* chosen to connect to special Torah readings, the idea of marker moments comes up several times.

Saul appears twice in that context, once in his decision to ask about David's absence, and another time in his failure to eradicate Amalek. The priests' lose their right to oversee Temple upkeep, Sabbaths and holidays are seen as marker moments of Jews' engagement with the future Temple, and the arrival of Elijah is seen as a marker of the coming of God's Great Day (and the Redemption to follow).

A second issue that recurs is the need for humans to actively pursue some agendas, but to also accede to God's commands, and to sometimes be passive in the face of God's activity. It is a failure of the priests that they could not keep the Temple well-functioning in the old system, the purification offered by God is flawed because it is administered to us as we stay passive, Radak thinks we will make adjustments in the future Temple's worship, and our tithing is seen as a way in which we contribute to making God's power manifest in the world.

At the same time, Saul is unable to resist making input to the Amalek question, and is similarly incapable of reconciling himself to God's decision that David would rule

after him. Isaiah's central complaint is that people decide for themselves that Temple worship matters to God more than what God actually commanded, and the day that Elijah will announce is a "Day of God," a day in which Divine majesty and immanence will become clear to all.

We will obviously need to place this in the larger context of the year's *haftarot* but this small subgrouping fits well with its character. Chosen to supplement Torah readings that mark specific occasions of our relationship with God, the *haftarot* end up highlighting the ideas of marking such moments, noting when they happen, and also our role in insuring they are properly noted and observed.

PART VII: READINGS FOR HOLIDAYS

What is perhaps unrecognized is how many days other than ordinary Sabbaths demand *haftarot* of their own. This section, of supposed exceptions to the ordinary cycle, actually contains in it more *haftarot* than any of the others.

The question we will be looking to track is whether there are commonalities among these selections, whether the experience of a day that tradition assumed required an *haftarah* has some aspects that bind them all. In addition, there may be subunits here—the *haftarot* for Passover may share themes independent of those for Sukkot, and so on.

Haftarah No. 1: Public Fast Days, Isaiah 55;6-56;8

Fast Days Are Days of Repentance

Note that this *haftarah* is read more often than any other, since it is read at the afternoon service of each of five public fast days (Fast of Gedaliah, Tenth of Tevet, Fast of Esther, Seventeenth of Tammuz, and Ninth of Av).

The *haftarah* opens with a reminder that we fast as an adjunct to repentance, not as an end of its own. The first verse tells us to seek God "when He is present." Rashi, following Rosh haShanah 18a, reads the verse as adjuring us to call out before any Divine decree is sealed. Radak prefers his father's view, that we are being told to seek God with the entirety of our being, which would bring God closer.

Their different readings carry over to the next verse, where evildoers are told to leave their ways and thoughts, for God's ways are not ours. Rashi sees this as a general comment, that we should put aside our actions and thoughts in favor of God's. Radak focuses on repentance, that we are being told to change both internally and externally. While people bear grudges even after forgiving a person (or, at least, hold on to the memory of the incident), God wipes the slate clean.

Rashi mentions a similar Midrash, which says God's thoughts are not like ours, since an admission of guilt in human court necessitates some punishment even if there was full contrition. In the Heavenly Court, though, those two ingredients can produce complete forgiveness.

The incentive to heeding this call is that God has promised great things, and God's Words are never futile. Much as the rain and snow have their impact before they return to Heaven (as an aside, Radak was puzzled by that comment; we nowadays can assume

Isaiah was referring to evaporation and precipitation), God's words will have *their* effect, leading to an eventual triumphant return from exile, along with a complete rebuilding of the Land. Here, Radak takes the text literally, that thornbushes will yield to beautiful trees, while Rashi quotes the Sages as reading it in terms of the righteous replacing evildoers.

Contributions that Rival Children as a Source of Continuity

The next eight verses are divided into four sections in the traditional text, but they make a fairly simple point: those who keep God's covenant, with the observance of the Sabbath repeatedly singled out, will find a continuous place in the Jewish people, will be returned to Zion to have their sacrifices accepted in a Temple that will have become a place of worship for all nations.

To sharpen the point, the prophet singles out two groups of people, those who cannot have children and those who would consider converting to Judaism. Each might think they have no stake in the promises being made here, since they have no hope of partaking of them.

The sterile person will never have children, and cannot himself hope to benefit, since the promise is clearly for after his lifetime. The convert has no personal share in the Land of Israel and therefore might think himself excluded.

Instead, God promises to give them a "יד ושם, a hand and name," better than children. Radak assumes this refers to their deeds being memorialized by the righteous for generations after, not to an actual monument. His assumption that God might promise fame as a satisfying replacement for children deserves contemplation, since it is so different than contemporary perspectives.

For many of us, bearing children is the only kind of continuity that will satisfy us; those who cannot have children will often spend enormous amounts of money on fertility treatments, in the hopes of achieving it. Radak's casual assumption that the fame of observing God's covenant properly might be better is challenging. I do not mean to imply Radak would be against fertility treatments, just to note the contrast between his view of the importance of children and ours.

The Centrality of Shabbat

In speaking of keeping God's covenant, Isaiah repeatedly singles out the observance of the Sabbath with the phrase, "שומר שבת מחללו, observes the Sabbath from profaning it." Shabbat 118b records R. Hiyya b. Abba, quoting R. Yohanan, as Midrashically reading the verse to mean that one who keeps the Sabbath can find absolution for all his other sins, even idol worship.

Lest we dismiss that as hyperbole, the last paragraph of Maimonides's Laws of the Sabbath notes that violating the Sabbath or worshiping idols count are considered equivalent to violating all the mitsvot. One who violates them is seen as a non-Jew in many halachic senses, and one who keeps them gets the many different forms of reward promised. That explains the common practice of defining whether someone is Orthodox (or some other such term for generally observant) by their Sabbath-practice (it does not explain how keeping kosher became a similar marker *mitsvah*, but that is for another time).

Of course, observance of the Sabbath, for Isaiah, meant more than avoiding particular prohibitions. Maimonides notes that this selection uses the terms כבוד ועונג, most easily translated as honor and pleasure, words interpreted by halachah as requiring

setting this day aside by differentiating our dress, food, and even way of walking, acting, and talking.

The Connection to Fast Days

This last piece of the *haftarah* is more about observance generally, less about repentance. Possibly, the selection's addressing those who might see themselves as excluded, stressing that sincere engagement even with only the most central *mitsvot* can lead to a more positive outcome than hoped, continues the earlier theme.

If so, the point of a fast day reading is to counter our sense of crisis (what fast days are suuposed to involve). Just as tragedy can be forestalled by repentance, and childlessness and exclusion overcome by observance of God's covenant, whatever worries have led to our fast day can be pushed aside if we only rouse ourselves to the kind of repentance and observance of the covenant Isaiah spoke of here.

The *haftarah* thus focuses us better on what we intend when we wish others, and ourselves, a meaningful fast.

The Haftarot Of Passover

Haftarah No. 2: First Day of Passover—Joshua 5;2-6;1 and 27

The *haftarah* tells a fairly simple story, but puzzles us in its having been chosen for the first day of Passover. God tells Joshua to take swords and circumcise the people (so they can offer a Paschal sacrifice), since none of those born after leaving Egypt had done so. The verse pauses to remind us that the Jews had spent forty years in the desert, to wait for the generation to die, since they were not going to be allowed to see the Land promised the Patriarchs. That left only uncircumcised males.

After the Jews obey, God tells Joshua that the shame of Egypt has now been removed. The people then celebrate Passover, and the next day they eat the produce of the Land, and the manna ceases coming every day. It is after that that Joshua sees an angel, and asks him whether he is for the Jews or for their enemies, and the angel answers, no, I am an angel of God, I have come now.

Joshua falls to the ground, asks what he wants, and is told to take off his shoes for he is standing on holy ground. The prophet then pauses to note Jericho was completely closed, no one going in or out. We then jump to verse 27, where the prophet notes that God was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.

We cannot satisfy ourselves that we choose this selection for its recounting the observance of Passover, because the focus is more on the preparations for-- and results of-- that Passover than the holiday itself. The story of the mass offering of Paschal sacrifices in Josiah's time, which we read on the 2nd day of Yom Tov outside of Israel, seems a better candidate if that was our goal.

More, the verse does not make clear why it chooses to emphasize the death of the generation that left Egypt—characterizing them as "men of war"-- nor do we immediately understand why the manna's stopping should be noted here, or the significance of the interaction with the angel.

The Shame of Egypt

The key seems to lie in the first section, the discussion of the Jews' circumcising themselves, and God's labeling doing that as the removal of the "shame of Egypt." Both parts of the statement bother us: why didn't the Jews follow tradition in this matter, and why is it the shame of Egypt?

Yebamot 71b offers two answers for the first question, that the travails of travel made it impossible or that there was no North Wind all the years in the desert. In the Talmud's view, such a wind is necessary for safe circumcision, and the Talmud even says that performing circumcisions without that wind in our times is an example of God protecting those who act foolishly.

Rashi cites this answer in his commentary to these verse, which somewhat excuses the Jews' not circumcising. This fits the tenor of the text as well, since God does not rebuke or criticize their failure; He only tells Joshua to now remedy it.

The first answer is also a problem because tradition has it that the Jews spent years in some places in the desert, so there would be reason to think there was enough time to rest, circumcise their children, and then let them heal. Radak explains that the Jews never knew when the cloud would rise, signaling a time to move. That uncertainty made circumcision impossible, not the actual weariness of the road.

Balancing Human Effort with Trust in God

Whichever reason we take, the Jews are being seen as completely dependent on God in the desert, in an unnatural way. Never knowing when they would be told to travel next or not having a wind that usually blows daily highlights the Jews' unusual dependence on God in the desert. The Talmud heightens that impression when it explains that the wind did not blow so it would not disperse the Clouds of Glory, a sign of connection to God

As they circumcise now, the Jews are being told that the Godly Hand is receding a step, both in terms of travel and North Wind. Similarly, their reliance on the manna was coming to an end. This also explains the reference to the men who left Egypt as "men of war," and that give us a sense of the "shame of Egypt" the Jews are divesting themselves of.

The generation that left Egypt had had the opposite problem, not recognizing enough how much they needed God, how much God could do for them. The sin that sealed their exclusion from the Land, after all, was accepting the spies' verdict that *they* could not conquer the Land. This might explain the reference to them as the "men of war who left Egypt."

The Passover here gave the Jews a chance to achieve the desired balance, and therefore recreated the original Passover. The demonstration of God's Hand at the Exodus was supposed to give the Jews the freedom to act on their own, with proper faith in and reliance on God.

Close to their first conquests of the Land, God shows them that the shame of Egypt, their inability to understand these basic ideas of faith and initiative, has been removed.

They can celebrate the freedom of Passover properly, can benefit from natural sources of food.

It is in that light as well that we can understand the incident with the angel. Joshua thinks he's human, or at least that he'll take sides in the upcoming battle. The angel corrects him, saying that he is a representative of God (so that he cannot be so simply categorized). Similar to Moses's first prophecy, Joshua is told to remove his shoes, as he is standing on holy ground.

The Passover of Joshua, and the surrounding incidents, is a Passover fully realized, and it is on the basis of that that Joshua's fame is spreading. The Jews are ready now to take possession of what's theirs, relying both on themselves and on God, in the right measure. **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 3: Second Day of Passover—II Kings 23;1-9, and 21-25

The Biggest Passover Since Solomon—Background

This *haftarah* is named by Megillah 31a as the proper one for the second day of the holiday, but is defined as "Pesach Josiah," the Passover festival celebrated by Josiah. That event comes in the second half of our *haftarah*, however, and we jump verses to get there—we read the first nine verses of the chapter and then skip eleven verses to get to the celebration. (This is especially interesting because we generally try to read fifteen verses on a holiday, and this *haftarah* has only fourteen).

Reading the verses immediately before and after the story of the Passover suggests that their subject matter was too painful to read aloud, so we chose more positive verses to read in public. Even so, once we see ourselves skipping verses, the choice to read ones from earlier in this chapter would seem to have been conscious, to suggest that the content of those verses is related to the story told later.

That earlier part is the conclusion of the story of the Book of the Law the priests had found in the Temple when cleaning it. The Sages identified that Book as Deuteronomy, and Scripture had previously told us that Josiah had been distressed by what he heard read in that book. In our selection, he calls the people together, the leaders and the masses, gathers them at the Temple, and reads the Book to them.

Bringing National Change

He then has all the people re-enter the covenant with God, undertaking to observe all the *mitsvot* with all their heart. Instead of being satisfied with that symbolic act, however, Josiah engages in a national cleansing so thorough that our *haftarah* characterizes him as the *only* King who returned to God with all his heart (a remarkable

statement, since there were several other kings of whom Scripture seems to have a high opinion; Radak notes that, then explains the flaw in each).

In rooting out all the idol worship (and worshippers), Josiah teaches us several lessons about how to rid ourselves of corruption. First, we ought to be shocked at how pervasive idol worship was—Josiah has to remove items and vessels of that worship from the Temple itself, and he roams throughout the land, removing idols, altars, and serving priests.

Destruction was not enough, however. He takes the ashes of the altars he had burned to Beit El, to defile the altar that Jeroboam had built there to compete with the Temple. He also makes sure to turn these altars into dirty places, as Radak explains, garbage dumps, to change the people's picture of them. That he needed to do so shows how entrenched this worship was in the eyes of the people.

Before we have gotten to the Passover at all, in other words, we are shown a society so locked into idol worship that it returns to such worship after each attempt by good kings to remove it (and, after Josiah, it will come back again). Josiah knows that enacting a covenant will not suffice—the people are good at making covenants, not so much at keeping them—and he knows that he cannot trust them to rid themselves of their idols on their own. (The Sages assumed people found ways to hide their idols from him as well, as we mention every year on Tisha B'Av). Temporary as his victory might be, Josiah does show us how thorough a change is required to rid ourselves of our deepest weaknesses.

Blemished Priests

That lesson is sharpest, perhaps, regarding the priests who had worshipped idols. The verse tells us that they were not allowed to serve in the Temple anymore (even though they had been brought back to monotheism), but were allowed to eat *matsot* with their fellow-priests. The Mishnah in Menachot assumes this as an halachic fact, that those who have worshipped idols and repented bear a permanent blemish, like a physical one—they cannot offer sacrifices, but can eat them.

Tosafot in Sotah 39a note that Rabbenu Gershom relied on this analysis to allow such priests to once again recite the priestly blessings and get the first *aliyah* of the Torah reading. The Sheiltot, an early geonic work, had assumed that priests who apostasize and return had lost their status completely, while Rabbenu Gershom and Tosafot assert that he has only lost his status as well-formed; since a priest with some kind of blemish can recite those blessings, so can a returnee.

The analogy is striking and should not be overlooked. Having once turned to gods (or religions) other than the true one, priests become permanently affected by that, even after sincere return (whether non-priests are permanently blemished by sin, even after sincere return, is an important topic, but not for here).

Menachot, Passover, and Why We Read This *Haftarah*

The verse tells us these priests can eat holy food by saying they can eat *matsot* (the way flour-offerings were brought) with their brother priests. Commentators assume this is just an example, but it is, conspicuously, the food of Passover. I suggest the verse was telling us that among the many holy foods they could eat, such priests should focus on *matsot*, the food that carries the lessons of Passover.

Not coincidentally, the next major event we retell is that Josiah led the people in a mass observance of Passover. The point is not subtle. Passover was the holiday of our freedom, but freedom from one kind of servitude to another, nobler kind. We used to be slaves of Pharoah, now we serve the Holy One. The *matsot* remind us of that, and will, hopefully, keep such priests true to their new commitment to God.

That lesson seems to have stuck in the Jewish people's craw, since the holiday was neglected throughout the period from the entrance into the Land until the Destruction of the First Temple.

To properly observe Passover, Josiah teaches us, requires preparation, not only of the physical cleansing kind (getting rid of all leavened bread), but of the spiritual. Having uprooted, removed, and destroyed the various barriers to a full relationship with God, the next step was to have a Passover, a holiday in which we go back to our roots, and celebrate our monogamous relationship with our King.

Chag Sameach.

Haftarah No. 4: Intermediate Sabbath of Passover-- Ezekiel 37;1-14

A note: this is an *haftarah* read on the Sabbath; it is placed here, though, because it occurs on a day on which we interrupt the regular Torah reading cycle.

The Dry Bones

This is a very famous prophecy, the outlines of which are broadly known. God takes the prophet Ezekielto a valley of completely dried out bones. God tells him to call on the bones to rejuvenate, to put on sinews, limbs, skin, and breath of life. Ezekiel does the first three, and then, at God's repeat command, calls for spirit to enter the corpses, which rise to life. Once that has been accomplished, God gives Ezekiel the application of the prophecy: the Jewish people see themselves as dried out, with no hope of rejuvenation, and Ezekiel's job is to tell them that they will be taken out of their graves, brought back to life, and returned to their Land.

It is justly famous both for the beauty of its metaphor and the eternal hopefulness of its message. The text on its own raises some questions, as we can see from comparing Rashi and Radak's readings. In addition, two reasons have been offered for why we read this on the Intermediate Sabbath of Passover; we will have to see how they affect our understanding of the prophecy.

Event or Metaphor?

Rashi identifies the dried bones as those members of the tribe of Ephraim who left Egypt before the Exodus, a story hinted at in I Chronicles 7. Accepting that identification suggests the prophey was aimed at encouraging those who were despairing their current exile, who saw it as so endless they might be tempted—as were the men of Ephraim—to

take rash actions. Instead, they are told to bear their sufferings, confident that God will eventually redeem them as promised.

Radak points out, however, that Rashi had adopted one of the options the Talmud offers for identifying the bones. Sanhedrin 92b has several alternatives, including the possibility that it was all a metaphor. For the rest of *his* commentary on this section, Radak explains the prophecy in both ways—what it would mean if it was purely a vision or if it actually happened. In both cases, the message is largely the same, that the Jews should not despair, but some of the ramifications differ.

For example: Ezekiel reports that God took him around and around the valley, when he was first shown the bones. Rashi understands that this was related to Ezekiel's being a priest, prohibited from coming into contact with parts of a corpse. Radak disagrees, pointing out that other of Ezekiel's prophecies called for him to violate the rules of priesthood; just as we interpret those as being visions rather than actions, he would do the same here.

Why on Passover?

Rashi's adopting a particular one of several Talmudic options for how to understand this vision is somewhat explained by his explanation of why we read this on the holiday's Intermediath Sabbath. Megillah 31a singles out this *haftarah* for this Sabbath, and Ezekiel 38 for the Intermediath Sabbath of Sukkot, even though the Torah reading is the same.

There, too, Rashi identifies the "dry bones" as those of the members of Ephraim who left Egypt early and were killed by the people of Gat. In Rashi's reading, we seem to be pausing in our experience of the Yom Tov to remember another aspect of it, that

there were those whose impatience led them to jump the gun; on Passover, we celebrate not only the redemption itself but also that we were included in it, that we had not allowed our doubts or fears to lead us to actions that would deny us ever participating in the Redemption.

Radak prefers the answer of R. Yitzchak ibn Ghayyat (known as Ritz Giyat). Based on R. Hai Gaon's tradition that the Resurrection of the Dead will take place during Nisan, while the war with Gog and Magog (at the End of Days) will take place in Tishrei, we read *haftarot* appropriate to each. That view does not explicitly explain why the Intermediate Sabbath should be the time to read an *haftarah* about a future event, but it provides at least some logic for the Talmudic declaration.

Nisan, The Month of Life

Without minimizing the disagreement between Rashi and Radak, they do agree that the *haftarah* comes to remind us that God will provide salvation in the future, our worries notwithstanding. But they also agree on the basic parallel between resurrection and return to Israel created by this text. Whether the corpses were real or not, the end of the *haftarah* is clear that the point is to show that just as God can resurrect those dead, our national fortunes can and will be resurrected as well.

That connection leads us to recognize another aspect of Passover: it is not just physical or national redemption we experienced at the Exodus, it was the gift of life. Life in exile, life in servitude, life without a purpose or the ability to actualize that purpose, is not life. The Jews of Ezekiel's time, stuck in exile, viewed themselves as desiccated, lifeless, and hopeless. The Jews in Egypt—at least in Rashi's reading—saw themselves the same way, and in desperation tried to break out of their prison.

This might be a message for Nisan as a whole, since the Resurrection will take place then, but it is at least a message for the holiday itself. Just as God once resurrected us by taking us out of the dead-end life of the slave, and as God will in the distant future resurrect us in more literal terms, on Passover we celebrate our knowledge that God will also do that in national terms as well.

The only piece left to discuss is why we read it on the Intermediath Sabbath rather than one of the days of the holiday. Without any specific sources to cite, I suggest it shows how the Intermediate Days differ from the holiday days. The first and last days of Passover and Sukkot have specific themes of focus, so deep a focus that creative work must cease.

The other days of the holiday are for taking up subsidiary themes, applying the ideas of the holiday to less obviously relevant contexts. This Intermediath Sabbath, then, is the time to consider that redemption and salvation affect us more broadly than we might otherwise realize. Indeed, it is a kind of resurrection, one we hope for daily.

Shabbat Shalom and **Moadim le-Simchah**.

Haftarah No. 5: Seventh Day of Passover-- Samuel II 22:1-51

Déjà Vu All Over Again

On the 7th day of Passover, we read much of Parshat Beshalah, finishing just after the Jews sing the Song of the Sea, the praise they offered after God led them through Yam Suf, the Reed Sea, on dry land. When we read Beshalach during the year, the *haftarah* tells the story of Devorah and Barak, culminating in the song *they* sang when God helped them defeat Sisera.

We might have expected the same *haftarah* on this occasion, since we read the same Torah selection. That we choose a different song of thanksgiving, the one David sings when God has saved him from all his enemies, suggests we are meant to experience the Song of the Sea differently on Passover than during the year.

The Song: A First Look

David's Song is too long to work through verse by verse; as we did when we saw this on Parshat Haazinu, we will work with the groups we find connected by theme:

Verses **2-3—**David declares God to be his protection, using metaphors for constancy of protection such as Hashem being his rock; **4-7:** David mentions God responding to his calls for assistance, and then saving him from various threats, including death; it is that responsiveness that fuels his praise. **8-16**: David says that God comes down to save him, turning the world upside down in fearsome ways, such as darkness, high waves, fire, and lightning. **17-20**: David speaks of God saving him from stronger enemies and from other disasters; at the end of verse 20, he ascribes it to God being happy with him. **21-24—**David speaks of his positive actions that led to his deserving, or at least meriting, God's salvation. **25-28**— Speak of how God repays good and evil, on a

personal and national level. **29-30**: David calls God his light, by which he can chase a whole battalion. **31-49**: David discusses God's power in general, returning to how God helps him defeat and destroy his enemies. **50-51**: Closing, because of all of this, David must thank God.

It's About Defeating His Enemies

The Song is written all as one unit in the traditional text, which suggests that it has one theme, but we have just seen many subsidiary themes. For example, while the last 22 verses before the coda speak about *David* defeating his enemies, the first half of the Song speaks of God as the Savior in various situations.

What brings them together, I believe, is that David did not experience open miracles. He was forced to flee some enemies (such as Saul), battle others (such as Goliath and the Amaleki tribes), and build alliances with surrounding nations, all without any direct and open Divine intervention.

At the Song of the Sea, the salvation could only be understood as coming from God. In contrast, when David speaks of God saving him, he is demonstrating his own faith and interpretation. Others witnessing the same events might have ascribed his victories to other causes. To take one striking example: on one occasion Saul was in hot pursuit of David, apparently about to catch him, when he got news that the Philistines had invaded Israel. When Saul turns away to fulfill his duites as king, is that God saving David, or chance?

David recognized this aspect of his praise, since verse 27 says עם עקש תתפל, with a stubborn man you should act stubbornly, a verse Megillah 13b reads as allowing us to act

deviously with cheaters. In such situations, David is teaching us, we must do our part, and then hope our efforts will be aided by God.

This explains the two halves of the Song. As David extrapolates from his victories over his enemies, as he recognizes God's role in those events, he turns to wonder and remember that he, too, contributed to the salvation he is celebrating.

Connection to Yam Suf

The Talmud specifically identifies this as the reading for the seventh day of Passover. Several Midrashim make the connection more explicit, suggesting a tradition that these words are intimately linked to that long-ago event. Mechilta de Rabi Yishmael on Beshalah portrays the Jews as spending the night before the Splitting of the Sea eating and drinking in full view of the Egyptians. They, perhaps frustrated at the Jews' calm, would shoot arrows at them, but the pillar of cloud protected the Jews. The Midrash cites verse 3 of our *haftarah,* God is my rock and my fortress, as support for this reconstruction of events.

Avot deRabi Natan 1; 34 notes that verse 10 is one of ten times Scripture refers to God descending into the world, and identifies it as God's appearance at the Sea. Midrash Tehillim 18 reads verse 16 (and the waterways were seen) as meaning that at the Splitting, *all* the waters in the world split, not just Yam Suf.

On other occasions, we've noted that the Exodus became a paradigm for all future redemptions from immediate threat (so, for example, the Midrash says that the sound God used to scare the Arameans from Shomron—in the *haftarah* for Metsora-- was leftover from the plague of hail in Egypt). In a similar way, these Midrashim seem to see

Yam Suf as a model as well; when David celebrates his personal salvation, the Midrash is certain his words must apply back to Yam Suf.

This might explain the different *haftarot* for the two readings of the Song of the Sea. When we read Beshalah during the course of the year, our focus is on the Exodus as an event that stimulates belief, for Jews and the world. In that context, the Splitting of the Sea should have absolutely established people's willingness to accept the Jewish view of God and the world. The perfect example is Yitro, whose story comes immediately after Beshalah. Devorah's Song appropriately echoed those themes.

On Passover, though, we are re-experiencing the Exodus in different contexts as well. For us, the Splitting was also a stage of the redemption, where the Jews finally were freed of worry about being chased and reconquered. David's Song captures that theme. The *haftarah* thus helps us focus our reading of the Torah, and experience of the holiday, on our need to struggle with opposing forces and our hope that God will aid us in overcoming them, producing—we hope, and quickly in our days—a world perfected in the Kingdom of God.

Shabbat Shalom and **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 6: Eighth Day of Passover—Isaiah 10;32-12;6

Senacherib's Error

Megillah 31a specifies this reading for this day; according to Rashi, the Assyrian general's defeat occurred on Passover, which is why we read it here. A problem with his suggestion is that the tradition is that it happened on Passover, not necessarily the eighth day. Additionally, we read many verses after the story of his defeat; if all we cared about was the defeat, we could stop earlier. As usual, seeing the themes of the whole piece will offer another answer.

In the first section, the last three verses of chapter 10, the prophet speaks of Senacherib's audacity. As told in Sanhedrin 95a, his astrologers told him he could conquer Jerusalem if he attacked that day. Prior to where we start reading, the text told of ten places Senacherib passed through on that day, in his rush to Jerusalem.

When he spied Jerusalem from Nov, however, he waved his hand dismissively, so confident he decided to rest his men and wait until the next day. This Midrashic background explains why the prophecy begins with God announcing that He is going to destroy or uproot those of haughty posture, who see themselves as mighty.

Messiah: Lineage and Character

The next ten verses describe Messiah and the era he will inaugurate. He is first described as an offshoot from Jesse (Note that the verse refers to King David's father, not the king himself. Radak explains that this is because the Messiah will return to the family's origins; just as Jesse produced a nearly perfect king, Messiah will be similarly perfect). He will have all the character traits we would hope for, phrased here as the

"spirit of"—the spirit of God, of wisdom, insight, counsel, courage, knowledge and awe of God.

Because of all this, he will achieve a higher justice than most humans. Rather than judge only according to his physical senses, he will take on cases ordinarily neglected by courts, the lower strata of society. Justice and faith will be essential characteristics, metaphorized here as belts, either of righteousness or, in Rashi's reading, as coteries of righteous people who will surround Messiah.

The World Justice Creates

The last five verses of the section are famous in their description of a time of perfect peace, symbolized by animals seeming to change their natures and live at peace with each other and with humans. Wolf and sheep, lion and lamb, our verses are the source for the commonplace that they will eventually live together at peace.

Radak, rationalist by tradition, takes up the question of what is meant. He notes some who see this as a prediction that animals will become herbivorous, plant-eating, and therefore no longer fight with each other. He also knows of readings of the text that see it as a metaphor for human peace, that the good and evil people will no longer fight. He explicitly rejects the second view, because he sees these verses as describing something that will only happen in Israel (Verse 9 says that there will be no evil or destruction in all of God's holy mountain, Israel).

Instead, he suggests that nature will stay the same, except in Israel. There, where Messiah will have ushered in an era of peace and justice, the *animals* will be affected as well. Even ordinarily carnivorous animals will refrain from killing *in the borders of the Land*. In some sense, this is a rationalistic reading, in that it preserves the continuity of

Nature. But it does accept the exceptionalism of Messiah and Israel, the former in his ability to judge and kill sinners verbally, the latter in its altering the nature of animals even as they pass through.

The Message Will Spread, the Exiles Will Return

The next verse notes that Messiah's wisdom will become known throughout the world, with other nations coming to learn from him (a highly utopian aspect of the prophecy, that other nations will *of their own* respect and accept his worldview!).

God will at this point re-take ownership of the Land and the people, returning all of them, including the Lost Tribes, to Israel. The two Kingdoms of old, Ephraim and Judah, will fully reconcile (Rashi thinks it means the two Messiahs predicted in Jewish tradition—one the son of Joseph, one the son of David—will have no jealousy for each other), able to recognize that each has their place in God's plan.

The next step is an ingathering of all the exiles, perhaps the reason this section is read on this day. In the prophet's description, God will dry up the various rivers and seas that might pose barriers to their travel; I wonder whether, with the advent of air travel, that becomes unnecessary or whether the prophet meant that the future Ingathering will mimic the original Exodus, when there was a Splitting of the Sea.

Continuing Growth After the Redemption

The most famous of the last six verses of the *haftarah* is the one we say at the conclusion of the Sabbath Rashi understands it as meaning that our praise and songs of God will merit future redemption. The paragraph as a whole declares that we will eventually thank God for the punishments that cleared away our sins and prepared us for the pure good of that future world. Another famous verse, ושאבתם מים בששון, you will

draw water in joy, is interpreted as meaning we will achieve new understandings of Torah (often referred to as water).

Together, the verses remind us that the redemption will make our past struggles seem a worthwhile (!) sacrifice in order to earn us a world in which we will see a new ear of history, filled with blessings greater than we can currently imagine.

The Connection to Passover

This *haftarah* only exists in the Diaspora (although some read it on Independence Day for the State of Israel). It speaks to Jews who may struggle with their distance from Israel, who may feel isolated from God, reminding them of Senacherib's error in belittling God or His promises. With that background, it then restates the future for which we long, showing the process it will entail, that Messiah will come, reform Israeli society along lines of justice and righteousness, other nations will seek advice from him, and *then* the exiles will be gathered in. Once the process is completed, we will the greatness of God's salvation, how our continued praise of God was important to it, and to revel in our return to the state of the original redemption, anniversarized on Passover. **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 7: First Day of Shavuot (Pentecost)—Ezekiel 1;1-28, 3;12

Reading the Wrong *Haftarah*

Just about everything about this *haftarah* surprises. As only the first anomaly, Megillah 31a names the piece from Habakuk that Diaspora Jews read on the 2nd day of this holiday as the proper *haftarah* for the first day. The Talmud adds that now that we have two days, we read this one as well, and that we reverse the order.

Granted that a second day allows for one more selection, why would it then move into the first slot (and, for Jews in Israel, replace the reading from Habakuk entirely)? Rashi suggests that since God appeared at Sinai in a fashion similar to that recorded by Ezekiel, we read his vision on the first day, the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah on Sinai.

One problem with Rashi's idea is that the first day of Shavuot is not so clearly always the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah. One opinion in the Talmud holds the Torah was given on the seventh, the second day of the holiday. In addition, when the calendar was set by witnesses' sightings of the New Moon, the holiday could fall on the fifth, sixth, or seventh of the month. Leaving that aside, Rashi's answer is too good—if he is right, why did the Mishnah mention Habakuk for the first day?

It seems that whatever message this *haftarah* yields was one we did not necessarily insist on conveying to people. Given only one chance to read a piece of Scripture in public on this holiday, we would have gone with Habakkuk. With the luxury of two days, this text made our list, and then took the first slot. Our goal here will be to identify a message that might have gone unsaid, but that fits best with the first day once it has made our list of ideas to read aloud.

Esotericism in Jewish Tradition

Luckily, the first Mishnah in the second chapter of Hagigah points us in exactly that direction. It lists three parts of Torah that should only be studied in small groups, because of the ease with which they can lead to false or wrong impressions. One of those is מעשה מרכבה, the Work of the Chariot, commonly understood as the piece from Ezekiel we are now discussing.

That means that Megillah 31a tells us to read this section, while Hagigah warns against expounding it. We apparently want Jews to know of this text, but not too intensely. Only once a student has achieved a certain age, level of righteousness, and wisdom can a more advanced initiate guide that person towards fuller understanding.

These verses from Ezekiel, in other words, are an esoteric text, to be fully understood only by a select group. The idea that some texts should not be widely shared was common until recently in many cultures; only with democracy have we assumed that anyone can understand anything if they just study it a bit. Esotericists claim instead that some topics require readiness beyond the technical or intellectual.

Reading a text like that in public sends a double-edged message. It reminds the community that certain topics and ideas, important as they are, are beyond ordinary people's capabilities or level of preparedness. Reading the Work of the Chariot on the day of the Giving of the Torah teaches that while *much* of Torah is available to all, parts of it are reserved for those who put in extraordinary time and effort.

Even then, according to the Talmud, the teacher can only offer "chapter headings," hints that will guide the student as he discovers the knowledge himself. Esoteric

knowledge cannot be given; it must be earned, both by self-improvement, and by insight that is necessarily personal, even as it is aided by wiser teachers.

The Nature of the Work of the Chariot

The Talmud's discussion explains why I am saying so little about the *haftarah* itself. The story it tells is fairly simple: Ezekiel is standing in exile, when the Heavens open, and he has a detailed vision of the Chariot of God. Maimonides and kabbalists agree that Ezekiel was sharing his insight into how a God Who has no physicality can relate to and interact with a physical universe. The Chariot is the set of intermediaries that bridge that infinite gap, and a full understanding of this vision would mean we knew exactly how God relates to the world.

Maimonides spends the introduction to the third part of the Guide defending his decision to record his views. Throughout the Guide, in truth, Maimonides tries to balance writing about esoteric topics with maintaining their hiddenness; his solution was to offer his ideas in flashes and hints—and this tendency is even more pronounced in the first part of the third section, where he elucidates these texts in Ezekiel.

As the centuries-old debate about what Maimonides "really" meant shows, he was either totally successful, his message only getting across to those prepared for it, or a failure, since no one can prove what he meant on almost any topic. In this topic, his use of the physics of his time makes his comments less than fully interesting.

Maharsha takes that Talmudic discussion as an opportunity to denigrate the study of Kabbalah. He notes that the Talmud does not mention it, and that the Talmud tells stories of scholars who allowed opportunities to study Merkavah to slip through their

fingers, suggesting it was not absolutely essential to their lives as Jews). That is all the more so for Kabbalah, which is why he urges stopping those who teach it in public.

Perhaps along the same lines, Mishnah Berurah records a tradition to only have a person of great wisdom read the *haftarah* for the first day of Shavuot, since no one else would have a meaningful understanding of it.

Sum total, the texts show that this *haftarah* contains information Scripture chose to include, but to hide. The selection from Habakkuk more directly refers to the Giving of the Torah, and is therefore more obviously appropriate to Shavuot. Given the opportunity, though, the Talmud decided it was worthwhile to make all Jews aware of his balance between the hidden and revealed within Torah.

I close without much detail, then, both because I make no claims to much insight into this text and also because I could not share it widely even if I had it. I believe I can suggest that the place to start is at the "lowest" parts of the Chariot, the parts closest to Earth, since the jump from the physical to the metaphysical is likely to be the most similar to human experience, and therefore most amenable to human intellect. **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 8: Second Day of Shavuot (Pentecost), Habakuk 2;20-3;19

The Quandary of Poetry

It would be foolish to try to deny the difficulties of this *haftarah*, its words, its poetry, how its phrases connect to each other; it's just a hard piece of text. That is a question for those who would like to study Torah, but there is a broader question to be asked. Considering that tradition assumes prophets were speaking to all generations, we could not satisfy ourselves that Habakuk was easily understood in his own times (even if that was believable).

Our problem with this *haftarah*, then, is more than a technical one of how to understand it, it is the theological one of why God would inspire a prophet to write like this. If God wants us to know God, to understand what God wants from us, what would be the reason to couch the message so inaccessibly that the vast of majority of Jews, probably throughout history, have never understood it?

The question becomes even sharper given a remarkable Radak early on in this reading. Radak notes that chapter 3 of Habakuk is written in the style of Tehillim, Psalms. He knows this because Habakuk uses the words "סלה, *selah*," a word that only appears in Scripture in Tehillim and in Habakuk.

Pause for a moment to admire the knowledge he carried so lightly. In a pre-Concordance era—let alone the computer search I did to check that he was right—he could confidently assert that this word appears only here and in Tehillim.

God is Not Simple

The comparison also reminds us how much of Scripture—at least much of Psalms, Song of Songs, Job, much of Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and much of Trei Asar-- is similarly

incomprehensible without hard work and many assists from the Sages, the medieval and later rabbis, and modern editions such as Daat Mikra, and Artscroll.

Here's my answer as to why: prophets, and those just below them, put us in touch with God's Word, and God, being the Irreducibly Other, is not so easily put in terms we can understand. Modern society prefers to think that all worthwhile truths can be stated accessibly and briefly, but God doesn't work that way. So as Habakuk here tries to get across a sublime message, it is churlish of us to complain at its difficulty. Of course, that makes it odd for me to attempt to summarize his views in a few hundred words, but self-contradiction and being human go together.

God the Ever-Present

Like many *haftarot*, this one starts at the end of a section in the traditional text, giving us only the last verse. In our case, the verse reminds us that God is "בהיכל קדשו," in His holy sanctuary, and that the whole earth either does or should be silent before Him. Granting room for nuance, the Sages, Rashi, and Radak take it as a reminder that we can see the effects of God's presence in the world, and that they should be awe-inspiring, even when that Presence is supposedly confined to a particular location (such as the Temple).

The coming words are going to build on the idea that we can see, feel, and note God in the world around us. Rashi reads the whole chapter as Habakuk trying to atone for his earlier having spoken harshly against how God treats the Jewish people, so the chapter recaps important aspects of Jewish history, including the Giving of the Torah, but there are also verses about God punishing the generation of the Tower of Bavel, of the

Flood, and verses that note that God punishes the Jewish people differently, maintaining an underlying mercy even while doing so.

A phrase in that section "אלוק מתימן יבוא, God from Teman will come," is taken by the Talmud to imply that God offered the Torah to all the other nations and they rejected it, and then other phrases about God helping us conquer Israel, punishing us for when we sin, ending with Habakuk saying that he trusts and rejoices in God.

Radak adds that this prophecy is about our current exile, trying to give us hope even while it extends in length. In his reading, some of the verses also focus on Gog, the name that Scripture gives to the last world leader to try to resist the Jews' special place in the world and the Kingdom of God. The defeat of Gog, in Scripture, ushers in the era we all hope for, when the world will accept God's kingdom.

The Giving of the Torah: God is Here Even As God is Elsewhere

Nachmanides in Exodus 2;25 suggests, as a mystical secret, that some of our verses actually mean that God's mercy to us is in the punishment itself, not in its restraint. I see this as connected to the Talmud's assumption that another phrase in our *haftarah*, " ראה ויתר גויים, He saw and loosed the nations," means that God saw the non-Jews' refusal to adhere to the commandments He had given them, and therefore stopped rewarding them for when they did observe them.

To my mind, the two sources point to an essential aspect of being a religious person, the oxymoronic truth that God is both immanent and transcendent, involved in the world while yet being wholly Other. If so, punishment needs to be evaluated as how God is sending us a message, while *mitsvot* need to be taken as God showing us the right way to inhabit and build God's world. Those who reject these lessons, regardless of what

else they do, are missing the point of Torah (where God made that most fully clear), of punishment, and of this *haftarah*.

Megillah 28b reads a phrase from the *haftarah*, "הליכות עולם לו, the ways of the world (or eternity) are his," to support the contention that anyone who studies pieces of Jewish law (*halachot*, a play on the word in the original) each day is guaranteed a share in the World to Come.

While the statement tempts us to take it as a simple-minded key to eternal life, the *haftarah* suggests that it means that *halachah* is the way we can discover and understand God's plan for the world, and then join forces with God in achieving those goals. (Were one to study *halachot* and not observe them, would we think that person would attain such a share? Certainly not; t is studying them and getting their message that works).

Binding oneself closely to the Divine Plan for the world guarantees life, and it is getting us to realize that aspect of Torah that moved and concerned Habakuk in the section we read this day. **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 9: Tisha B'Av Morning—Jeremiah 8;13-9;23

An *Haftarah* in Twelve Parts

Perhaps not surprisingly for a text that will capture much of our sorrow of Tisha B'Av, this selection is both long and choppy, ideas expressed in small bits. Facing a sorrow so encompassing, we have much to say, but can only get at it in small bits.

The first five verses speak of the coming destruction of the Jewish people. The prophet speaks for God in saying that God will destroy the people, their produce, and their Land. Bereft of the ability to work their Land, the people will move to fortified cities, and sit there silently, with nothing to do or say. Sitting there, they will hear the approach of the enemies God will send at them, aware that there is no protection to be had, waiting for them to come and wreak havoc.

Later, the prophet will remind us of why this will happen, but it is striking that we start with a recounting of destruction without any remonstration. At least at the start, we experience the Destruction itself, without thinking about why, or how to improve it.

People's Pain, Prophet's Pain

The next eight verses are one section in the traditional text. Jeremiah declares his wish to suppress his sadness, to stay silent in the face of it, but his heart is too heavy. The people are crying out, wondering where God is, where their King is, why foreigners have been given dominion, why their salvation is so long in coming.

At the end of the first verse, Radak thinks Jeremiah's sadness stems from his inability to move the people to improve, but the flow of verses suggests the sound of the people's complaints overpowered him. As he notes in verse 21, it is over the breaking of the people that he himself is broken, leading him to wonder where the healing balm is,

why the people have not been salved and mended. The chapter closes with him wishing he could cry constantly over his fallen brethren.

The chapter division sees this as the end of the section, since it is the point of reversal from the beginning. Jeremiah started off hoping to stop himself from crying or bemoaning the people's fate (presumably because they are getting what they deserve). Hearing them complain, though, moves him uncontrollably.

It is not their pain itself he finds so irresistible, it is their blindness to what would heal them. He does not wallow in their sufferings, but in their failure to find balm, to heed the "doctors" (read: the righteous and/or the prophets who could show them the way they should be living) who could have brought about the repair they need. When Jeremiah wishes to be an unending fount of tears, it is not the fallen themselves he is mourning, but the lost opportunity to have avoided this fate, and the needless tragedies brought about by that lost opportunity.

The first two verses of chapter nine can seem like a different topic, since Jeremiah records his wish to separate himself from the people, to live in a distant location where he would not have to witness their self-destruction, for they are all fornicators (note: the term is used here as the paradigm of betrayal and faithlessness), groups of traitors. God echoes that in the last verse of the section, saying the people speak in lies, are not trustworthy, and proceed from evil to evil.

At the break in the traditional version of the text, Jeremiah is finishing his elaboration of what he finds so tragic that his fervent wish would be not to witness it, for it is rooted in behavior that is so obviously wrong, any rational person would have

expected the people to be able to get away from it. The people are pained by their enemies; Jeremiah is pained by their senselessness.

Lies Bring Destruction, as Does Leaving Torah

The next two sections continue the theme. The prophet portrays a society where no one can trust anyone, where deceit rules, where language both wounds and kills. Such sins, God says, cannot be overlooked, must be responded to and punished.

It has been said many times before, but bears repeating, that even as many sins are technically more significant than dishonesty, the prophet here stresses its absolute necessary for a sustainable society; falsehood leads to destruction.

Yet it is not the sin that was the original cause of the destruction; indeed, in the next five verses—separated into three sections in the traditional division-- he mourns how thoroughly the Land will be destroyed, and then asks who is wise enough to understand why this has happened. The Talmud notes that Jeremiah posed the question, but neither wise men nor prophets answered it—God did.

The answer is given in three ways, that the Jews have left His Torah, not listened to Him, and not walked in His paths. The Talmud argues, therefore, that the "left His Torah" means they did not recite the blessings over the Torah.

The technical answer conveys a deep truth. Lies break down a society, and the abandonment of Torah leads to that breakdown, but it all starts at a more innocent spot, the failure to recognize the Torah's special qualities. From that, people decide to follow their own intuition of how to act, and the downhill slide begins.

Proper Pride as the Antidote

Space considerations force us to skip the next nine verses, which are about experiencing the tragedy, and employing wailers to keep us focused on it. The *haftarah* closes, however, with two verses that Maimonides placed at the end of the Guide as the model for what we should strive for. The verses point out that many people take pride in unimportant achievements, but that the only true source of pride is knowing God and (for Maimonides) imitating His actions to the extent possible.

True in all circumstances, the lesson is particular apt on a day that encapsulates our failure to follow God, and an *haftarah* that speaks most directly of our slowly losing our attachment to God's Will, a state of affairs God could no longer ignore.

All along, as Jeremiah points out, we have ignored those who remind us of these failings. As we share Jeremiah's overwhelming grief on this day, we can only hope we will begin to heed the messages of God's Torah, beginning with truth and with the willingness to accept the uniqueness of the Torah itself, and thus begin to move back towards God and away from the tragedies Jeremiah describes. I close with the traditional farewell given to mourners, as we are all mourners on this day.

המקום ינחם אותנו בתוך שאר אבילי ציון וירושלים; God should comfort us among all the other mourners over Zion and Jerusalem.

Haftarah No. 10: First Day of Rosh haShanah, I Samuel 1;1—2;10

The Events Of Chapter 1 Of The Book Of Samuel-- A Brief Review

A man named Elkanah had two wives, Peninah and Hannah, the latter of whom was childless. Elkanah had a general custom of going once a year to Shiloh, to worship at the Tabernacle, the precursor of the Temple. Despite Elkanah's great love for Hannah and his attempts to comfort her, Peninah's taunts over her barrenness brought her to a crisis point. Bitter at heart, she went to the Tabernacle and prayed for a child, promising that the child would be given to God all his life.

Hannah used an unusual form of address in speaking to God, "ה' צבאות, God, Lord of Hosts." Too, and, according to Rashi contrary to common practice, Hannah prayed silently. It was this aspect that led Eli, the High Priest, to assume she was drunk. Deciding her soundless mumbling was a sign of drunkenness, he rebuked her; she, insulted by his assumption, corrected him, earning a blessing by way of apology.

Soon after, Samuel is born; Hannah decides not to join Elkanah's annual pilgrimage until the baby is weaned; two years later, she brings him to Eli and informs Eli that this boy is " שאול לה', loaned to God," all the days of his life.

First Discussion-- The Elkanah Family

We might question the book's opening with the description of the family at all; the prophet seems to be implying that the pre-story of his birth is relevant to the book as a whole. I believe the answer lies in chapter 3's pointing out that "דבר ה', the Word of God," was "יקר, rare" in those days. The nation was living through a time in which God's Word was not often a directly experienced reality.

Given that context, Elkanah and his family become more remarkable. Elkanah makes a yearly pilgrimage, a concern with God out of synch with the rest of society. One strand of Midrash thinks Peninah teased Hannah to spur her into asking God for help. Hannah, of course, makes God central when she prays for a child, when she promises that child to God, and when she thanks God after his birth. The backstory gives us an understanding of how it came to be that this family produced the prophet who would bring back the common closeness of people to God.

The Prayer And Conversation With Eli

In the Sages's opinion, Hannah is the first to use the title "Lord of Hosts." Hannah reminds us of the possibility of innovation within prayer, of discovering new ways to approach God. They need to be unsullied by improper motives, but proper innovations can fruitfully expand our understanding of how to relate to the Creator.

Note also that we do not know most of what Hannah said. We are told she poured out the bitterness of her heart to God, but Scripture only records verbatim the part about Samuel being dedicated to God. The omission suggests that the preparation for prayer might not depend so much on the words said as on finding the frame of mind that will lead to telling God exactly what is deepest in our hearts.

Samuel a Nazir?

The Mishnah records a debate about what Hannah promised when she said, " ומורה לא יעלה על ראשו, and *morah* will not rise on his head." The Hebrew "*morah*" can either mean a razor, in which case she is promising he will never cut his hair, as the phrase indicated in the case of Samson, or the word can mean afraid, in which case she is asserting that he will not cower before people. In the latter case, Hannah is reminding us

of the importance of fearlessness for servants of God (and, perhaps, communal leaders generally).

Hannah's willingness to give up the baby she so greatly longs for might mislead a reader into thinking she cared about the physical experience of having a child, not raising or relating to one. Her actions after the boy's birth belie that. She keeps Samuel with her until he is weaned, during which she can set the foundations for his later life. In a section we do not read on Rosh HaShanah, Scripture goes out of its way to mention that she would also regularly bring him a new coat, a sign of their continuing connection.

Hannah's Prayer

After she brings Samuel to Eli, Hannah recites a poem that the prophet introduces with the verb "ותתפלל, and she prayed." There is no request in her words, suggesting that some prayers might only express joy, even though we usually think of prayer as needing some kind of request.

Some commentators see Hannah's words as a prophecy, a description of what will happen in the course of Samuel's life and leadership of the Jewish people. If so, we have another interesting component of her relationship with her son the prophet. Since the prophet tells us that God's word was rare in that time, knowing that his mother was a prophet suggests that his own service in that role was a continuation of a family tendency. His mother trailblazed for him in both prayer and prophecy.

Radak adds another dimension, claiming that Hannah's words were a warning to those who are too secure in their station in life. As Hannah notes in her oration, whether poem, prayer, or prophecy, the tides of Fortune can shift dramatically and suddenly. If so, the verb we commonly translate as "and she prayed" must mean something more along

the lines of articulating understandings of the world, ones that can remind contemporaries of truths they have forgotten.

The multiplicity of meanings we see in the verb root "*pallol*" helps explain why we read this selection on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, in addition to the usual answers. As we envision God sitting on a throne of judgment, our *haftarah* reminds us that judgment, prayer, prophecy, and the proper understanding of how to live are intertwined with each other.

We can only hope that the judgment we are undergoing this day will turn out for all of us, individually and collectively, to take us to a future where we feel the need to sing the kind of song of thanksgiving Hannah so eloquently offered when her life turned from a nightmare into a blessing she would never even have dared dream. כתיבה וחתימה טובה, may we all be written and sealed for a good year and life.

Haftarah No. 11: Second Day Rosh haShanah—Jeremiah 31;1-19

Megillah 31a points to this as the appropriate text for the second day of Rosh haShanah, but refers to it by the last verse, "הבן יקיר לי אפרים, Ephraim is a dear son to me." In addition, the Talmud points to a different Torah portion than we actually read, so it is not the connecton with the Torah reading that militates in favor of this selection of Scripture. Rashi sees the end of the verse, "זכור אזכרנו עוד, I will yet remember him" as the important part, a promise that God will remember us in a good light, essential for us on Rosh HaShanah.

That leaves two questions: First, why read the whole chapter, if all we care about is the last verse? We could easily have started a few verses later than we do. Second, it is possible that the Talmud only cared about the end of that verse, but it would be prettier if the verse the Talmud quotes was also an important part of the reason the selection was chosen. Beauty is not always required, but if we can explain the choice of this section both plausibly and beautifully, how much the better, no?

Verses 1-5: The Experience of the Desert Created Eternal Love

The first five verses of the *haftarah* have God reminding us that we found favor in the desert, having fled the sword of Egypt (as Rashi explains), seeking rest in Israel. In response to that, or to the Patriarchs' merits, God appears to Jeremiah, promises His eternal love, that we will be fully rebuilt, that the day will come that Ephraim's watchers will say, let us go up to Zion.

The Sages offer 2 comments I want to share. Makkot 24a sees Jeremiah's mention of "הלוך להרגיעו, going to rest," as the reversal of the Torah's warning that in times of punishment "לא תרגיע, you'll have no rest" among the nations to whom you will be

exiled. The idea that one prophet's words respond to those of an earlier one, even repairing or counteracting them, seems to assume that prophets are sometimes required to stress one side of God's truth over another, leaving later prophets to offer the opposite and balancing approach.

Sotah 11a suggests that the verse in the Torah describing Miriam as watching the baby Moses in the river from afar is a veiled reference to God. The prooftext that the word "מרחוק, from afar" in *that* verse means God is from our *haftarah*, where Jeremiah describes God as appearing from afar, using the same word. More than a Midrash about that one event, I think the Talmud is suggesting that the idea of watching from afar is always true of God. The challenge (at least for Jews) is to bring our relationship closer; it is always there no matter what we do.

Berachot 11a cites our verse's mention of God's eternal love as the source for saying "אהבת עולם, eternal love" as the second blessing before reciting Shema, as opposed to אהבה רבה, a great love. The two versions differ as to whether to focus on the magnitude of God's love, or its lasting quality. In our *haftarah*, we care about constancy, particularly appropriate to a day when we seek to squeak through a judgment of pure justice.

Verses 6-8: Eternal Love Eventually Leads to Redemption

In this section, God tells us to call out with joy, given the promise to redeem us, and that we will all be brought back, including the weak, injured, and pregnant. Radak notes that God tells us to celebrate, then to call out. He understands that to mean that after the announcement of the Redemption, Jews will need to supplicate Him to bring it about, but does not explain why that should be necessary.

For me, this indicates God's "desire" to have the redemption of the world be a partnership between God, the Jewish people, and all of humanity, to the extent possible. This explains verse 9, where God tells the the prophet to predict that redemption will only occur in all its glory once non-Jews in faraway places call out about it.

The verse singles out the weak, injured, and pregnant; Radak thinks it means to say that the pace of the redemption will allow even such people to keep up. In our times, that could mean the redemption will use modes of travel that allow even such people to get back to Eretz Yisrael, or that it will unfold in a way that even people ordinarily leery of travel will have the confidence to join.

The Lessons They Teach Us

Citing this verse, the Sages assume that in the future women will become pregnant and give birth on the same day. In Baba Batra 16a, where the Talmud comments that Job was shown a bit of the world to come, Rashi names this miracle as the one he saw, his wife becoming pregnant and giving birth in one day.

I wonder whether the point is that the world will return to a time before Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, when the process of childbirth was meant to be painless. Babies will still be born (which seems to assume that death will still occur), but the process will no longer take as long or be as hard. The time of the Messiah, here and elsewhere, is when we can finally leave behind the consequences of the Garden, and get back to the real work of serving God.

Verse 14, 15-16: **Rachel, Ephraim, and the Jewish People**

Verse 14 envisions the Matriarch Rachel seeing the Jews going out to exile and crying for them. Some read Rachel as Ephraim, an example of how the Jewish people as

a whole are here being referred to as Ephraim, probably because they were the majority. The use of Rachel as an image usefully connects to God's stress on unbreakable love for the Jewish people. Just as Jacob maintained his connection to Rachel through all the years he had to work for her, all the troubles with their children, and even hearkened back to her in his final commands to Joseph (long after she had died), so, too, God focuses on us, as it were.

Verses 17-19: Bringing It All Together

That view of the Rachel metaphor brings us to the goal of the prophecy as a whole, and the reason the Talmud would refer to it by the words "Ephraim is a dear son." We are being reminded of God's unbreakable connection to us, which "forces" God to linger over the positive memories we have together.

Reading it on this day, we are hoping that the words of Jeremiah, the promise that God's "memory" of us is always fond will help us avoid the kind of judgment that the Attribute of Perfect Justice would be likely to produce. Best wishes for a Shana Tova, a sweet and happy New Year.

Haftarah No. 12: Yom Kippur Morning—Isaiah 57;14-58;14

Chapter 57, Verse 14: Clearing the Path Isn't the Same As Getting There

The opening verse of the *haftarah* has Isaiah calling to pave the way, remove the obstacles from the way of God's nation. Radak takes that somewhat literally, noting that the prophet had earlier predicted the removal of the enemies who would keep us away from Jerusalem.

Rashi sees the stumbling block as the evil inclination, a reading that connects it better to what is to come. For all that the verse is included in the previous section in the traditional text, Rashi (and the Sages, who read "מכשול, stumbling block" as "יצר הרע, evil inclination") gives it a more forward-facing feel.

Verses 15-21: Greatness and Humility Go Together

Isaiah announces that God, who is high and exalted, dwells with the downtrodden and lowly of spirit. While being downtrodden by physical circumstances is a problem, God's attitude towards such people suggests that they develop personality traits worth cultivating.

Megillah 31a cites this verse as the one that makes it appropriate for Yom Kippur morning. These two aspects of a personality seem to hold the key to finding God's presence, and regaining the closeness we so desperately seek on this special day. According to the prophet, at least some of us will succeed at repenting properly; even without that, God promises not to punish us forever. Radak thinks the verse means that God has been punishing us since just about the beginning, which assumes that the Jewish people have never managed to live up to God's standards for us, lenient as they have been.

When some will be properly humble, God will heal and comfort them, and then change the way the other nations approach us. Note that the healing will come by God's removing our stone heart; since Rashi identified that as the evil inclination, it sounds as if God is promising to take that away. Attractive as that may sound, it means we will have failed to overcome our baser instincts, a central human task.

Changing Those Around Us; The Meaning of Peace

Once we have been restored to spiritual health, God promises that He-- Who creates the whole ability to communicate-- will get those around us to approach us differently, in that they will say *shalom*, *shalom*, peace, peace to us. More than God promising that those around us will no longer try to attack or hurt us, Radak thinks the verses mean that God will change their nature, make them interested in peace.

Evildoers' being closed off from *shalom*, which we translate as peace, but which here means more than just a lack of violence. Isaiah predicts the evildoers will crash like the sea, finding mud and dirt. Too, God's promise of *shalom* for "near and far" leads R. Abahu to famously assert that even the fully righteous cannot stand where penitents do, again making this *shalom* more central than we might otherwise think.

I suspect that it refers to a peace in which the universe operates smoothly and efficiently, all its parts—physical and metaphysical—in harmony. Avoiding violence is a necessary first step, but only that. God is promising us He will bring us to that goal, once we are truly penitent, humble of mind and of spirit. As a thought experiment, imagine someone today were to suggest that penitence was a key component for the modern State of Israel securing the peace it seeks.

Chapter 58; 1-5: A Fake Religiosity, the Central Sin

The chapter opens with a call to the prophet to tell the Jews their sin, specifying that the people ask questions as if they care about observance, but don't follow what they're told, and then wonder why they aren't answered on their fast days. The prophet seems to me very modern in being bothered by the nation's selective interest in halachic observance, where they pick and choose parts of Jewish law they decide are important. The details of their sin support that view, since Isaiah bemoans their gathering for fast days, when on that very day they are collecting loans at interest, and fighting amongst each other.

Verses 6-12: From God's Perspective, It's Easy

Note that God does not tell Isaiah to reject the idea of fasts, He only wants the rituals to be accompanied by a true resolve to leave our paths of sin. Once we rectify our sins, which for Isaiah included feeding the hungry, bringing them to our home, and clothing the naked, our light will burst forth like the dawn, our prayers will be answered, and we'll be like a well-watered garden that never lacks for water.

Yebamot 62b-63a thinks that those who love their neighbors, are close to their relatives, marry off their nieces, and lend to the poor will be answered when they pray. There could be many reasons to name those acts, but I wonder whether bringing about peace with one's relatives—no easy task—is where the Talmud imagines each of us can make the greatest contribution to universal peace.

Verses 13-14: Switching to Shabbat, Not as Abruptly as it Seems

The turn to the Sabbath seems jarring. Until now, we had been discussing how the Jews could achieve proper forgiveness, get God to accept their fast days, and usher in an era of world peace and closeness to God. In that light, though, the Sabbath is a ritual that

offers an excellent opportunity to show that we are humbly submitting ourselves to God's goals, not using mitsvot to advance our own. We can use the Sabbath to enrich our lives in the way we want (using our day off to thinking about our business, to walk places we want for mundane reasons), or we can turn it into a time of focus on God and honoring His holy day.

Summary

Our challenge on Yom Kippur is to see whether we can cultivate the humility that will earn us God's comforting Presence, whether we can free ourselves of the chains of our evil inclination and find our way to a true engagement with God's goals, the key to unbelievable blessings—of true peace, of true pleasure, and, we can hope, of true freedom from sin and all the distractions that have led us so far astray in the past.

With best wishes for a Gemar Hatimah Tovah, an end to the curses of last year, and a year filled with blessing and peace.

Haftarah No. 13: Yom Kippur Afternoon, The Book of Jonah

Chapter 1

Considering how many people know the story of the Book of Jonah, I will restrict myself here to noting aspects of the drama I have not heard emphasized elsewhere. First, Jonah's decision to flee rather than follow God's command demands comment, especially as Jews commonly assume that prophets did not achieve that status until they had developed religious personalities to a high level.

In perusing the sources, I was struck by the Sages' assumption that Jonah fled because he was afraid the people of Nineveh would repent sincerely; this would contrast embarrassingly with the Jews' failure to do so. In the Sages' words, Jonah knew that non-Jews were "קרובי תשובה, likely to repent" and resisted giving them that opportunity. Avot de-Rabi Natan has a similar idea in mind when it identifies Jonah as a prophet who cared more about the Jews' honor than God's. (Elijah is cited as a prophet who cared only about God, while Jeremiah cared about both).

Jonah's fears coming true, in that the people of Nineveh do repent, explains to Radak why Scripture included a book completely about non-Jews. In his read, the story is supposed to lead us to reflect on how they listened to the first prophet sent to them, and we Jews ignore the lessons of prophet after prophet. For him, the book exposes a sharp irony—Jonah ran away to avoid the non-Jews showing up the Jews, and ended up being the central figure of a book inserted into Scripture precisely to exert pressure on the Jewish people.

We might wonder why that is true, why non-Jews are closer to repentance than Jews. Perhaps it was only the emptiness of paganism that made them so open to it;

certainly, non-Jews today do not appear as open. If so, much of the sting of reading the book is lost on modern audiences.

I suspect, though, that their lack of experience with prophets and miracles made Jonah's coming more moving than for Jews, to whom it was almost common. What would happen, for example, if a prophet—fully identified and authenticated—would accurately predict some catastrophe (one which there would be no scientific way of foretelling), and connect it to some set of sins we commit (which would, by the nature of the beast, be sins that listeners were loath to confront)?

Jews are so used to miracles that we can imagine them disputing the prophet, either denying that he performed a miracle or claiming that he misunderstood its proper interpretation. Familiarity breeds contempt, and we are familiar with God, prophets, and miracles, sometimes to our detriment.

Chapter 2

Rashi records the tradition that Jonah spent his first three days in the spacious belly of a male whale. With no discomfort involved, he showed no sign of acceding to God's wishes, so God had him transferred to a smaller, pregnant whale, eliciting a prayer in which Jonah promised to go to Nineveh as ordered.

At a technical level, the Midrash explains a shift from masculine to feminine in how the prophet refers to the whale, from "דג, fish" to "דגה, female fish," but the implications for our perspective of Jonah go further. Note Jonah's comment in verse 5 that he had assumed he had been expelled from God's Presence, only to find he had erred, that he would be required to again stand before God.

Combined with the first chapter's comment that Jonah had decided to flee from before God, we get a remarkable picture of Jonah's world view. The Talmudic tradition assumed Jonah believed he could escape his prophetic mission by fleeing Israel; once that fails, he seems happy to sit in a whale's belly, being shown all the wonders of history that happened near the sea.

Only when he got uncomfortable did he yield, a fact I find astounding. That a storm on his ship only abated when he was thrown in the sea, that a whale swallowed him whole, regurgitated him, and another whale took him in, none of that convinced him of the need to pray; only the discomfort of the second whale did. And this was Jonah, a prophet of God!

It strikes me as teaching us the perils of getting locked into a worldview-- even miracles cannot cause a truly pious man to rethink his perspective. For many of us, perhaps for all of us, (and I note this with sadness and trepidation) only discomfort moves us to the actions we need to take. (Worse, some of those people will bitterly resent the discomfort when it comes, will blame God for mistreating them.)

Chapter 3-4

First, we should notice the sincerity, depth, and breadth of the repentance of Nineveh; I cannot imagine what in our times would stir people, Jews or not, to such a thorough rethinking of their way of life. Change is not easy, a lesson of Yom Kippur, and watching Nineveh reminds us of how high they have set the bar.

Jonah's reaction also teaches us a lesson, but of the Berenstain Bears kind, where we are meant to learn the opposite of what the character does. What Jonah feared had

exactly come true, the non-Jews shamed the Jews by readily accepting a prophet's admonishment. Still, his adamant wish for Nineveh's destruction jars us.

Jonah is so upset at Nineveh's salvation that he would prefer death, and God says "ההיטב חרה לך, are you so bothered?" The prophet does not answer, leaves the city, and then we have the short, sad life of the shade-giving plant. Discomfort again moving Jonah, he says "טוב מותי מחיי, death would be better than this life."

God again asks, "ההיטב חרה לך, are you so bothered?" It seems to me that when God asks the same question twice in a row, it signals that the first answer was wrong, and God asks again, to try to teach the prophet a lesson.

Jonah does not get God's point, but we should. We can close off the possibility of repentance by rejecting the less than perfect as completely unlivable, by focusing on the minor failure, not the room it leaves for other successes. What would have happened if Jonah had stayed in Nineveh, worked with the people, fortified their sincere repentance, set them on a well-structured path to improving the world?

That we will never know in that one instance is perhaps not a tragedy; that instances like that repeat in our lives, perhaps daily, is part of what we try to repent on Yom Kippur. May we all be sealed for a life of comfort that also brings us closer to God.

Haftarah No. 14: First Day Sukkot—Zachariah 14; 1-21

Verse 1-5, The War With Gog

The last prophecy of the prophet Zachariah speaks of a future war in Jerusalem, which will unfold in two parts. During the first, the Jews will be vanquished, their houses destroyed, women raped, and half the city will go into exile. Rashi assumes we will suffer to help God prove the evil intentions of the non-Jewish nations in this war. In modern terms, it would be as if the nations of the world attacked Jerusalem under the pretext they were there to protect the Arabs, or the holy sites, or some such. Their rampage, taking half the populace into exile, will lay bare their true motives.

Radak thinks we will be the target of the lesson. Zachariah earlier predicted that two thirds of the Jews will not make it to the times of the Messiah (it is an interesting number, as one third of world Jewry was killed in the Holocaust, and another third has since been lost to assimilation and intermarriage), but Radak assumes even the remnant will need purification, rededication to God's goals. This last war's trials will smelt the remaining Jews of their impurities.

Either way, Zachariah seems to be assuming a painful end to history, a pain necessitated only by segments of humanity continuing to deny truths of the world. This aspect of the prophecy should produce not only sadness at our stubborn insistence on denying simple truths laid out so long ago, but also trepidation at what our failure to accept those truths dooms us to bear.

Ratifying this point, Song of Songs Rabbah asserts that the verse's reference to "God's holy ones" joining this war means the many prophets whose words were not recorded. Relevant only to their generation, their specific words did not need to be saved

and treasured throughout history. Had their message only been heeded, that final war might not have been necessary. These prophets standing at God's side will remind us all that none of these disasters had to occur.

Verse 6-9: The True World Revealed Ushering In A Unified Kingdom of God

Verse 6 literally predicts that in that time there will be no clear light or absolute darkness, a claim the Talmud and Midrash read as saying that people will learn a truer version of what Torah means, what parts to focus on, and whom to respect. Verse 7 continues the focus on light, saying that the light will only come towards evening of the day of the battle. As a metaphor, this seems to mean that God's victory will only clarify towards evening, the end of the battle.

Commentators take verse 8's reference to two rivers extending from Jerusalem literally, but I would read it is a metaphor as well, that "waters of life" (Torah or truth, if there's a difference) will extend from Jerusalem at that time.

Once all is in place, Zachariah can speak of God and the Name being One, the verse we use to close Aleinu. Pesachim 50a notes God is not yet One both in how people react to good news and bad (we easily accept that the good is from God, not so much the not good), and in our reading of God's Names. In the future, when God's full Unity is understood, both these bifurcations will be removed.

Verses 10-15—The Aftermath

The verses have already mentioned some of how the war will end well for the Jews; verse 10 continues that, telling us how Jerusalem and its surroundings will be repopulated. The non-Jews who fought against the city will not fare well, as verse 12

describes their flesh melting as they stand(verse 15 extends that to their animals), reminiscent of the climactic scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Verses 16-21—The Holiday of Sukkot as Reaffirmation of Faith in God

The rest of the *haftarah* is the part that links to the holiday, in that Zachariah envisions the non-Jewish survivors of this war coming to Jerusalem yearly, on Sukkot, to reaffirm their faith and acceptance of God's rule. Moreover, those nations who do not come, and here Egypt is singled out, will not get rain that year.

Radak's technical explanation that Sukkot is chosen because it will be the anniversary of the war fails to satisfy, for two reasons. First, it simply pushes back the question to the next level, why the war will take place then. More to the point, tradition identifies Sukkot as the time we are judged on whether we get rain. That the verse sees the nations in the same situation seems to extend the judgment of Sukkot to them, over and above any anniversary aspect.

Rather, it seems to me that Sukkot here serves as a symbol of the hidden Providence of God. Rain can be seen as a natural phenomenon, part of the way the world works, sometimes even susceptible to human control. Maimonides thinks much of Avodah Zarah, idol worship, was the result of human attempts to gain control over how they got this precious resource. Egypt, which has the Nile as a constant source of water, is a perfect metaphor for a nation that comes to see itself as self-sufficient.

The War of Gog and Magog will provide the flashy kind of proof lazy people always say would finally get them to accept God and His discipline. Zachariah is letting us know that the test is in our ability to maintain our faith in God's day-to-day control

over our lives. Those who refuse to accept that will be punished by not enjoying the bounty God provides in those unseen ways.

The Final Battle Sets Up a Challenge, Not Takes It Away

This view explains how Sukkot is an appropriate end for two cycles of the Jewish calendar, the major holidays (Passover and Shavuot) as well as the High Holidays (Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur). In each case, Sukkot represents a return to the normal from a time spent in the metaphysical. Coming out of Egypt, we celebrate the leaving itself, the Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea, and the giving of the Torah. The High Holidays are times to experience the Heavenly Court in all its otherworldly glory.

Sukkot is the return to the mundane. We celebrate day to day manifestations of God's presence, not one time events. We are also being judged about our day to day life will go, not the broad sweep of our futures.

If so, timing the battle with Gog then becomes more understandable. Those nations will deny God, in general and in particular. God will find a way to prove them wrong in large terms, but will leave to them the need to keep that lesson alive in the simplest aspects of life, like rain. Those who do so will enjoy God's bounty; those who do not... **Shabbat Shalom and Happy Sukkot**.

Haftarah No. 15: Second Day Sukkot, I Kings 8;2-21

Verses 2-11: The Temple, Completed, and Dedicated

Having finished the physical construction of the Temple, King Solomon brings the Ark of the Covenant to its proper place in the Inner Sanctum. The prophet describes the pomp that accompanied the occasion, including the killing of innumerable animals. Once the priests place the Ark in its place and leave, the Temple fills with the Cloud of God, signaling the concentrated Divine Presence, on this occasion appearing so fully that the priests could no longer enter the building.

A verse at the end of the chapter says Solomon and the people celebrated for seven days and then another seven. Moed Katan 9a reads that to mean the dedication took place over Yom Kippur, and that Solomon and the people *ate and drank*! After, they worried whether they had acted properly, and God signaled that they had.

In that same discussion, the Talmud raises the concept of "אין מערבבין שמחה בשמחה, we don't mix two sources of joy into one activity." It is for that reason that tradition does not allow making weddings on holidays, suggesting it is not "just" a story, but a full component of the Jewish view of what ceremonies can outweigh others.

Timing A Dedication

Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, note that the month is referred to as "ירח האיתנים, the month of the mighty," but that Scripture does not identify those mighty. Targum Jonathan thought the term referred to Tishrei originally being the first month, before Nisan elbowed it out of the way. The Sages suggested the term refers to the Patriarchs, born in this month. Radak suggested that it's a month of strength either because the harvest is in or because there are so many mitsvot.

Each of these interpretations suggests King Solomon made a conscious choice in dedicating the Temple when he did. To take two examples: if we follow Targum Jonathan, Tishrei is the month of the creation; halachah's using the building of the Tabernacle as the paradigm for the prohibited labors of Shabbat already connects that building to Creation, which would justify Solomon's choice.

The Sages's reading the name of the month as a reference to the Patriarchs alerts us to the connection between our forefathers and this building, the culmination of the Jewish people's desires since before the slavery in Egypt even started. And so on with the other possibilities offered.

A Multitude of Sacrifices

The phrase for the offerings that they made as they were bringing the Ark to the Temple—"אשר לא יספרו ולא ימנו לרוב, that cannot be counted or numbered by virtue of their great number"—is rare in Scripture and is used in other cases to describe the multitude of descendants that God promises Abraham, Jewish or not.

If you'll allow me a moment of homiletics, I wonder if there's a connection here—Abraham's known as "אב המון גויים, father of many nations," a fact that, according to Maimonides, allows converts to make blessings like other Jews. The Temple, as Solomon is about to say in the prayer that takes up the bulk of the chapter, is meant as the center of God's Presence in the world for all who wish to find God, Jewish or not. If so, characterizing the number of animals offered in a way that reminds us of Abraham's promised number of descendants hints at the idea that Solomon was trying to include the multitudes of humanity promised to Abraham in this event.

Verses 12-21: Solomon Tells Us Why We Read This on Sukkot

Upon seeing the Cloud, King Solomon notes that this had been God's plan all along, since the Torah tells us that God will be seen with a cloud near or on the Kapporet, the top of the Ark.

King Solomon adds that he has built this structure to be a resting-place for eternity, meaning that from that moment on there was no other place in the world where one is allowed to offer sacrifices to God (in contrast to earlier sanctuaries, where individuals were still allowed to have their own altars in addition to the central one).

Solomon then turns to the people, blesses them, and gives them a little history of this building. He mentions God's choosing his father David as the permanent lineage of kingship over the Jewish people, and then God's having told David that his urge to build a permanent sanctuary was a good one, but that David's son would do it, which Solomon has now accomplished.

In his recounting, Solomon makes explicit his understanding that all the events that led up to this moment-- the selection of David, of Jerusalem, and of this House as the residence of the Ark—were the culmination of the process set in motion by the Exodus. (Indeed, the first verse of chapter 6, tells us that Solomon built the Midash in the 480th year from the Exodus, one of the few times after the Book of Joshua that events are ascribed back to then).

If so, the second half of the *haftarah*, Solomon's emotional recognition of the success of his project, complements the first half. The completion of the Temple was, like the final gathering of a harvest, the culmination of the Exodus. Once it was established, we have in place the city, the monarchy, and the structure that were aimed at making the Oneness of God manifest to the world.

That did not quite happen, but there is no need to mar the happiness of this holiday— a happiness we now see in a new light, as that of having completed a stage of building, and making possible the reaping of the rewards of those efforts—with the memory of how later generations failed to live up to the promise of this moment.

We will instead stop here, noting that on the eighth day of Sukkot (Shemini Atseret) we return to this selection, bracketing our joyous Sukkot with memories of that moment of promise, of commencement, of finishing the Exodus business and moving on, with hope and confidence, to the bright future made possible by those efforts. **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 16: Intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot, Ezekiel 38;18-39;16

What Section of Ezekiel Should We Be Reading?

Megillah 31a speaks of reading יום בא גוג, the day that Gog comes, on the Intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot. R. Hai Gaon connected this to a belief that the war of Gog and Magog (discussed in the *haftarah*) would occur in this month; even if true, that does not yet explain why we read this selection during this holiday.

An interesting issue about this *haftarah* is that we start reading at the words ביום בא גוג, the words the Talmud mentions. On other occasions, though, we started the reading earlier than the Talmud noted, apparently assuming the Talmud was pointing to the most significant words of the *haftarah* rather than its necessary starting point. Indeed, the Siddur of R. Amram Gaon starts earlier, where God first addresses Gog.

The Reverberation of the Gog Tradition

The *haftarah* itself is easily summarized, but its ramifications and ripples spread beyond its narrow reading. The *haftarah* continues a section that takes up two chapters of Ezekiel, in which the prophet is told to prophesy towards Gog, the king of Magog (Magog is the name of the nation, Gog the king).

In the section we read, Ezekiel predicts that Gog will come to attack the land of Israel, and God will be stirred to a forceful enough reaction to prove, for all time, His strength and Presence. One of the terms used here, והתגדלתי והתקדשתי is pronounced *ve-hitgadelti ve-hitkadeshti*, the source for our starting Kaddish by saying *yitgadel ve-yitkadesh* (as opposed to *yitgadal ve-yitkadash*).

Gog will be killed in Israel, but will leave great destruction in the Land, of people, animals, and property. R. Saadya Gaon, in *Emunot ve-Deot*, has a long discussion of the

traditions regarding the arrival of the Messiah, and he quotes one that says that those killed during this war will not be revived in the eventual Resurrection of the Dead. As if to counter that, Shabbat 118a reports the opinion that those who eat סעודה שלישית, the third Shabbat meal, will be saved from several disasters, including this war of Gog and Magog.

Those last two citations introduce us to the remarkable resonance this prophecy has had in Jewish thought. The name Gog is mentioned in Scripture only here and early in Genesis, where the descendants of Japheth are mentioned, and in Chronicles as one of the grandsons of Reuben.

Yet the Sages interpret many prophecies as relating to this war of Gog and Magog. For just one example, Avot de-Rabbi Natan notes that there are ten times Scripture refers to God coming down to Earth itself; the war of Gog and Magog, where God's "legs" are described as standing on the Mount of Olives, is one of them. This prooftext, from Zachariah, refers to a battle at the end of days, but Gog is not mentioned.

The war we read about here, then, is The War, the one that will finally and eternally establish the existence and rulership of God. Granting R. Hai's tradition that it will happen in Tishrei, we can wonder both why we would read about it on this Shabbat, and why it would be necessarily true that it will happen in Tishrei.

The Order of the Redemption—Fixed or Pliable?

Before getting to those issues, I would just point out that Turei Even notes an order to the Arrival of the Messiah we might not have recognized. He deduces from Maimonides's words at the end of the Mishneh Torah that Messiah will come, only after

that will there be the war of Gog, and after *that* God will blow the shofar to gather the exiles.

For those who like to see our times as the beginnings of fulfillments of the prophecies of old, Turei Even's comment suggests that even the return to Israel we are currently seeing is not yet the one predicted. Since the war of Gog has not yet happened—a fact we know by the description here and elsewhere, which says that this war will finally prove God's rule to the world—the ingathering has also not happened.

That is only true, however, if the order of the Redemption is set in Scripture and cannot be altered. As I have mentioned elsewhere, R. Moshe Lichtenstein has suggested that the varying prophecies in Scripture might indicate alternate paths to the same end. If *that* were true, it might be that events have let God to allow an ingathering of the exiles even before Messiah has arrived, or God has been universally recognized.

Seeing Scripture as laying out possibilities rather than certainties also allows us to wonder whether we might be able to avert the horrors of these wars in ways other than eating the third Sabbath meal. Any steps we take towards making God's Rule known in the world, towards avoiding any king who would brazenly challenge God and attack God's people, are steps we also take to saving ourselves and others from death, destruction, and suffering.

Our wish to minimize suffering in the world, even if not our own, is also represented in our *haftarah*. As Rashi and others note, the *haftarah* speaks of Jews' burying the dead of this war, Jewish or not. It is a trait embedded in our peoplehood, to fight the enemy as long as necessary, but also to show kindness wherever possible. In the

same vein, one of the messages of the *haftarah* might be that we should be proactive in trying to stop the war of Gog from being necessary.

Sukkot As the Holiday of Universal God Recognition

That last point offers a broader reason to read this *haftarah* on Sukkot as well. In many ways, Sukkot is a holiday that reminds us of God in Nature. For some examples, we are celebrating a successful harvest, praying for rain, and the *haftarah* of the first day warned that, in the future, any nation that fails to honor Sukkot will not get rain.

In that context, the reminder that the course of human history will necessarily lead to universal recognition of God's power and of God's special relationship with the Jewish people rings important. The likeliest course of events may be that a war such as the one described here, with all its awfulness, will have to occur to make this point.

But as we celebrate this holiday, with all the joy we should have, we take the Intermediate Sabbath of to remind ourselves that we ought to be striving to bring about recognition of God in ways that mimic that joy, and that save ourselves and others from what they might otherwise be forced to endure. **Shabbat Shalom.**

Haftarah No. 17: Shemini Atseret, I Kings 8;54-9;1

Quite a Prayer

This *haftarah* provides the end of the one we read on the second day of Sukkot. There, Solomon addressed the people at the dedication of the Temple, here we hear a second address to them, after he has finished a lengthy prayer to God.

Before we get to his words to the people, we note that the *haftarah* begins with a verse that says that Solomon completed his prayer. It notes that upon doing so, he rose from his knees, where he had apparently been for the entire supplication. The Talmud in Berachot 34b cites this verse, with others, to support its definition of different kinds of prayers, depending on one's status in the Jewish people.

Ordinary Jews bow only at the beginning and end of the first blessing and of the *Modim* blessing (the common practice today), the High Priest bows somewhere within each blessing, and the King, according to an opinion based on our verse, does not get up from his knees until he has completed his prayer.

Rashi understands the Talmud to be assuming that the more important the person, the more he needs to demonstrate his humility while praying, a reminder that prayer is not a situation of demand or command, it is supplication that our Creator deign to answer our petty needs.

Quite a Blessing

The text then records Solomon's "blessing" of the people. We use several of these verses in our liturgy, both in the series of verses recited in the weekday evening prayer, before the Amidah, and in the verses we recite on Simchat Torah before taking out the Sifrei Torah.

King Solomon's words lead us to wonder how Scripture defines blessing. In our verses, he announces his thanks that God has fulfilled the promise to give them this structure, his hopes that God will stay close with them, that God will turn their hearts towards God, that God will accede to the requests of his preceding prayer (in which he asked that the Temple serve as a central clearing-house for people's prayers), giving the people what they need, and proving to other nations that there is only one God, keeping our own hearts properly close to and focused on God.

The king does ask that the Jewish people receive all the good they can handle, but buries that in so much else. He seems to me to be consciously stressing that the path to success, material and political, lies in how close we are to God. As he dedicated a place where one can be more "לפני ה', before God" than any other, he stressed his hopes that the people not become so caught up in this place to forget that their internal feelings are the first place to test for closeness to God.

Quite a Party

The last few verses of the *haftarah* speak of the grand celebration made upon the completion of the Temple, a party with several surprising factors worth discussing. First, the king and the people offer many sacrifices, so many (in the prophet's telling) that King Solomon sanctified the floor of the Temple to handle the traffic that day. What exactly that means is a topic of continuing debate (from the time of the Mishnah through at least the medieval authorities), some taking the verse literally and some reading it as referring only to his having made a much larger altar than in the time of Moses. The first reading (simpler in the words of the text) assumes a great deal of halachic innovation on Solomon's part, a theme to which we will return.

I puzzle over the centrality of sacrifices here. The Talmud wonders why the people had to partake of the sacrifices in order for the celebration to be complete. (The Talmud's answer, that any true celebration has to involve eating and drinking, assumes that human beings have to sanctify their natural physical appetites rather than overcome them, an important topic of its own. Defining when and which practices are connected to our basic humanity and which are specific expressions of a certain time and place could greatly enhance our understanding of Torah.)

My question was a little broader. Granting the importance of eating and drinking, the number of sacrifices offered seems beyond the amounts required in order to have a festive occasion. Possibly, the answer is that I underestimate how many Jews were at this dedication, that all those sacrifices were necessary to give a celebratory amount of food to the attendees. Barring that, the only answer that comes to mind is that excess is sometimes important in a celebration, too, but that raises a host of other questions, involving the words when, where, how, and why.

Yom Kippur Gets Washed Away

In the *haftarah* for the second day of the holiday, we mentioned the Talmud's assumption that the Jews ate and drank on Yom Kippur as part of this celebration. More shocking, the Talmud assumes they relied on a קל וחומר, pure deductive logic, to allow themselves this breach of law. In that time, in other words, King Solomon evinced the comfort to decide he could sanctify the entire floor of the Temple, and that he could encourage the people to eat and drink on Yom Kippur to celebrate its being built.

That kind of comfort with halachic innovation is certainly far in our past, and I can look in wonder at that time without advocating any similar activity today. But the idea of

a king expert enough to properly know when Torah law—Yom Kippur, no less!—could be violated in the name of a higher ideal, and then have God demonstrate His agreement with that decision, "אשרי אנוש ראה זאת, happy is the person who merited seeing such events."

As a last point, which I've noted before, it was no coincidence that the two celebrations happened consecutively, as the prophet describes the festivities as "seven days and seven days." The holiday of Sukkot, when we celebrate the harvest, was the perfect time to celebrate the completion, the harvesting, of King Solomon's labors to produce a Temple.

Shemini Atseret, when he sent the people home, was the day all those blessings had been taken, gratitude had been expressed, and the people were ready to take those blessings back to their regular lives. May we do the same with the smaller blessings our Temple-less world receives from God, "דבר יום ביומו, each day's necessities in its day." **Shabbat Shalom** and **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 19: Simchat Torah, Joshua 1;1-18

God's Version of How to Succeed

Our *haftarah*, the very beginning of the second section of Scripture (the Prophets), tells of the beginning of Joshua's career as leader of the Jewish people, with three incidents kicking off his time at the helm of the nation.

First, God comes to remind Joshua of the tasks that face him and the tools to success. Now that Moses has died, the Jews can cross the Jordan and begin conquering the Land of Israel. God "intends" for them to win those battles without any fight or resistance of any significance. For that plan to come to fruition, however, Joshua will need to remember to follow the Torah, not to abandon it, to have it consistently in his mouth, and to think about it day and night. In doing so, he will know the right way to proceed.

Note that Joshua is here identified as Moses's "משרת, servant," a title also used twice in the Torah. Radak understands this as explaining why he was selected leader after Moses's death. In serving his master rather than just studying with him, he learned aspects of the prophet/leader role ordinary students could not. Radak offers Elisha as another example, identified by Scripture as having poured water over Elijah's hands, apparently a qualification for taking one's master's place after his passing.

My interest in the comment lies in the recognition that intimates of a person, even of lesser standing, know more about that person than the closest disciples. A similar story is told in Berachot 34b, where R. Yohanan b. Zakkai asks R. Hanina b. Dosa to pray for his ill son, and comments that his own prayers could never have been as successful. When his wife wonders whether that means R. Hanina was greater than R. Yohanan b.

Zakkai, he answers that R. Hanina is like a servant whereas he, R. Yohanan, is like an officer or cabinet member.

The comment shows us that knowing God is one of those qualities best transferred through intimate acquaintance, not study. Great a scholar as R. Yohanan b. Zakkai was, R. Hanina b. Dosa was more adept at eliciting a positive response to prayer. Here, too, Joshua steps into Moses's shoes because of his intimate service, not his intellect or military prowess.

How Preoccupied with Torah?

One other aspect of God's exhortation to Joshua I want to comment on is the command that Torah not leave his mouth, that he be considering it day and night. The simplest sense of the words is that he is being told to spend all his time studying Torah, a model of Jewish life that is seen as the highest ideal in many, if not most, Orthodox circles today. A comment in Avot de-Rabi Natan citing this verse points in that direction as well, in that it warns a man who spends a great deal of time with his family that he will be faulted for neglecting his Torah study.

Yet the general tenor of the Sages' words makes it clear that they did not understand the verse that way at all. (Truthfully, the verse itself cannot mean that, since Joshua is about to go into Israel and spend seven years conquering the Land, and seven dividing it; are we supposed to assume he went to war with books in hand?).

First, the Talmud in Berachot cites a debate between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon b. Yohai as to how to understand the command (which we say daily in Shema), "ואספת דגניך, and you shall gather your grain." R. Yishmael, the preferred position, assumes the Torah

is requiring us to live our ordinary human lives, to engage in earning a livelihood in the natural way.

(R. Shimon b. Yohai disagrees; he assumes that God will provide for those who study properly. The Talmud rejects R. Shimon b. Yohai's path for the general masses.)

Further, the Talmud in Menachot understands our verses to only be prohibiting a complete neglect of Torah in any one day. As long as one learns something (even the Shema, which men are anyway obligated to recite) morning and night, this verse will have been fulfilled.

A more accurate version of the message, then, would seem to be that Joshua's involvement with Torah should a) never be interrupted for a whole day or night, and b) that all his endeavors should be infused by and with the understanding of Torah. If he does that, he will succeed. In fact, that standard of conduct is what is assumed to have earned the Patriarchs and Moses the title "עבדי, my servant"; everything they did, even the most mundane, was for the sake of the worship of God, the actualization of Torah (broadly speaking) in the world.

Joshua Commands the People

Joshua sets himself to his task, sending word for the camp to prepare "צידה, provisions," since they will be crossing the Jordan in 3 days. Rashi questions the reference to provisioning themselves, since they had manna; his question itself is striking, since Radak mentions the Talmudic tradition (which Rashi himself cites in his commentary on Exodus) that the manna stopped with Moses's passing, but the last batch lasted for more than a month. Presumably, Rashi meant that since they had manna prepared, there was no need for food-provisioning.

Joshua also reminds the two and a half tribes that they had sworn to join the rest of the people in conquering Israel. They agree, but add that they will listen to him as they had listened to Moses, that anyone who disobeys him should be punished, and close by saying "רק חזק ואמץ, only be strong and of good courage." These were the exact words God had twice said, an echo that cannot be coincidental (although I would not claim they knew what God had said).

Radak reads them as meaning what God did, that Joshua's success depends on his doing what God wants, following the Torah, and so on. Ralbag (Gersonides) echoes that, but also suggests they meant to encourage him to be the strong kind of leader a people needs, dealing firmly with anyone who might stand up to him.

Either way, Joshua's ears must have been ringing with the words "strength and courage," qualities we all need to succeed at the essential task of the Jew—to be always involved with Torah, even while participating in the ordinary world.

As we finish one cycle of the Torah and begin the next, we can wish ourselves the same strength of character and success being wished Joshua. **Chag Sameach**.

Haftarah No. 19: First Sabbath of Hanukkah, Zachariah, 2:14-4:7

Lighting the World

I thought we might this week spend a little time discussing Hanukkah's having a component of lights, based on the miracle of the cruse of oil. The essential story of the holiday, after all, could have happened without a component of lights. My question is why it was essential that it also involve this aspect.

For example, had the Hasmoneans cleaned up the Temple and found that the Syrian Greeks had defiled or blemished all the animals for sacrifice, with some miracle then providing the needed animals, there might still have been a holiday, with a slightly different character. It would have celebrated the military victory plus the miracle of the animals, in whatever way the Sages would have instituted.

It was not inherent to the holiday, in other words, that it involve a menorah miracle, although hundreds of years of Jewish experience have woven it so thoroughly into the warp and woof of the holiday that it might to be hard to imagine it without.

I begin with this question because this week's *haftarah* prominently features a Menorah, so we might easily assume that it is that aspect that connects it to Hanukkah. Yet that Menorah serves a different purpose than the menorahs we all light this week. When Zachariah has the vision of the Menorah— and that vision is at the very end of the selection we read, suggesting that the rest of the passage is also important for its message— the angel explains that it is to tell the world that might and strength are not what lead to conquest, but God's Spirit.

Following God, The Point of It All

The idea of God's Spirit productively unifies the parts of the *haftarah*, since the earlier verses had all been different examples of recognizing the necessity of following God. In the beginning, Jerusalem is told she'll be able to finally and fully rejoice (celebrate her redemption) when God resides in the city, and many nations are gathered to her. The marker of the complete redemption is getting the whole world to commit to serving God, a commitment that will apparently come from the connection between God and the Jewish people.

The next part of the *haftarah* tells of Joshua the High Priest and his "dirty" clothing, understood by the commentators to symbolize flaws in his service of God, either his own or his descendants. The persistence of flaws in one's behavior or attitude seems to stem from underlying failings in one's absorption of the belief in God, of God's Spirit pervading that person. Just like we don't test gravity, or have a problematic relationship with it, those who fully know of God's Spirit have no issue with it.

The solution advanced in the *haftarah* makes the same point, since Joshua is re-garbed and then reminded that if he follows God's ways and paths, his family will all be able to continue serving God in the Temple. Involvement with and acceptance of God's Spirit are the key components of success.

The Menorah As Symbol of God's Spirit

That leaves the question of the choice of the Menorah as the symbol of this idea. The question has been asked many times, but I'd like to offer an answer that is risky, because it builds off a scientific insight, the issue of the absolute speed of light. . The idea goes back to the late 1800's, a fact Einstein deduced even without knowing of the Michaelson-Morley experiments that had already shown it.

In brief, most speeds are relative. If I shoot an arrow at 50 miles per hour, and it goes past a car traveling at 30 miles an hour (I know, I know, why would anyone drive only 30 miles an hour? bear with me for the sake of the example), people in the car will see the arrow as going by at 20 miles an hour.

That is not true of light, which always travels at-- you guessed it—the speed of light, no matter the placement or speed of the observer. That becomes especially interesting when we remember that it led Einstein to build his theory of special relativity, which argued that all the rest of space and time is relative. The only Absolute, in Einstein's physical world, was light.

Light and God, a Partial Absolute the Symbol for the True Absolute

That nugget of scientific information melds nicely with the Torah's report that creation began with God saying "יהי אור, let there be light." We are so accustomed to it that we may not often enough stop to wonder at why light was chosen as the first reported piece of creation, when Heaven and Earth would have been a simpler and clearer choice. If we believe that the Torah's reports about Creation reflect what happened, at least somewhat, light seems to be the essential "stuff" of the universe.

One last fact, and then the point will be made. Ancient and medieval thinkers struggled with how a completely Other God could create anything physical and came up with the idea of the creation of a כבוד נברא, a Created Glory, a being (an angel) extremely similar to God, but one significant step closer to the physical, in that it, too, was a created rather than Absolute Being; that being created another, and another, and so on, until we got a world.

If, in that chain, light is the first physical substance, it would make sense that it contains a Godly element the rest of the physical world does not (such as by having aspects of the absolute, and perhaps also by its being able to seem to us to act as both a particle and a wave).

That would mean that the use of light as the way to demonstrate our renewed devotion to God and rededication of the Temple on Chanukkah would be no accident, but would be the most felicitous symbol out there. The light of the Chanukkah candles, and of Zachariah's menorah, blaze with the light of God, the light of rededicating ourselves to absorbing and involving ourselves with God's spirit.

Shabbat Shalom and **Happy Hanukkah**.

Haftarah No. 20: Second Sabbath of Hanukkah, I Kings 7; 40-50

This short *haftarah* is only read when there is a second Sabbath to Hanukkah (meaning Friday night is the first night). It is also one temptingly easy to dismiss, since it mostly lists appurtenances of the Temple Solomon was constructing. However, as we noted in the *haftarah* for Parshat Terumah, the discussion of the building of the Temple takes several chapters in Kings, so the choice of what to mention in an *haftarah* is likely to be edifying.

The Candles of Solomon

The Talmud helps us identify the choice of this selection. When the Talmud at the end of Megillah lists the readings and *haftarot* for special occasions, it refers to this *haftarah* as the "candles of Solomon," much as it called the *haftarah* of the first Sabbath the "candles of Zachariah."

In contrast to occasions where I have rejected the simplest explanation for why a certain text was chosen, here the claim that this was simply the best choice for a selection mentioning the Menorah might be the closest to the truth. Other than in Zachariah, this selection is the only other place in Prophets that a Menorah is prominent. Once Hanukkah was set as a Menorah holiday, this selection is in fact almost the only candidate. (The last chapter of Jeremiah mentions that the Menorot were taken as part of the plunder of the Temple, but that is obviously not what we would read on a holiday celebrating the Temple's rededication).

Solomon's Disciplined Creativity

Even as I grant that that may be true, I still would point out a striking aspect of Solomon's Temple, expressed here through the Menorah. II Chronicles 4 mentions that

King Solomon did not only use the vessels of the Temple that had been constructed in the desert, he built others as well. There, we find out that he built ten show-bread tables, the arrangement and uses of which were a matter of debate and discussion in the Talmud.

In our *haftarah*, we find out that that was true of the Menorah as well, that Solomon had his artisans make *ten* Menorot in addition to the one left over from Moses' time. Since the Talmud made clear that it was the "lights of Solomon" that led to our reading this *haftarah*, paying attention to those lights seems worthwhile.

It is a general truth of Solomon's Temple that it showed his certainty (and Jewish tradition has agreed) that the Tabernacle built in the desert was only meant to be a model for future such structures, but not the absolute or single design. Only that realization can explain the larger dimensions of Solomon's Temple, and his adding appurtenances that had not been considered before.

If so, our reading "the candles of Solomon" here carries that message as well. Especially since we don't see the candles lit—just made—our focus seems to be on the *building* of the Menorot, not so much their being put into place. Again, it may be the force of Scriptural circumstance that led to the situation, but there is also a thematic connection that this opens up.

The Maccabees: Improvisors and Creators

The holiday of Hanukkah, let us remember, is a holiday of rededicating the Temple, but the story also contains numerous examples of the Maccabees improvising, finding new and hitherto unthinkable ways of acting. The beginning of the Hasmonean revolt itself offers an example. In the story that is part of the holiday, the revolt began

when Matityahu, of the High Priestly clan, aged enough to have children who could become leaders of an army (meaning he might have only been forty, but that was still an advanced age compared to the presumable age of the soldier), killed a Syrian Greek and the Jew who agreed to join him in a pig sacrifice.

His cry of "מי לה' אלי, Who is for God to me?," the way he called for recruits to his rebellion, echoes that of Moses when he saw the Golden Calf. Matityahu's confidence that the situation he was witnessing deserved the same response as the Golden Calf is a striking continuation of the tradition of Solomon's Temple, in which the past is not aped, but adapted to the times.

A similar flexibility of thought might be relevant to the Menorah itself, depending which version of the miracle of the oil one chooses to accept. For the past several hundred years, rabbis have enjoyed discussing why Hanukkah is eight days, since they had enough oil for that first day. One answer mentioned in the Beit Yosef, R. Joseph Karo's commentary on the Tur, is that the Jews of the time divided the oil they had into eight parts. That way, they would at least be able to light the Menorah for some part of the day on each of the days until they could secure new oil. The miracle was that each one-eighth of a day's worth of oil stayed lit the whole day.

This version, not hinted at in the classical sources, fits in well with the spirit of the Temple suggested by Solomon's candelabra. Instead of business as usual, the Maccabees knew how to innovate when necessary and in a way fully faithful to the principles of the tradition.

This view of Hanukkah as innovative within limits is also emphasized by Maimonides in his first paragraphs of the laws of Hanukkah. Three different times,

Maimonides notes that the structure of the holiday of Hanukkah was based on the structure of the holiday of Purim (including the obligation to light candles, which he parallels to the obligation to read the Megillah).

Maimonides does not explain his insistentce on these points, but it seems that it was because of the innovation inherent in post-Biblical Jews creating their own national holiday. While Purim was the first post-Sinaitic holiday created (and the Talmud does mention that it raised some discussion), Hanukkah was after the completion of Scripture, was in an era when prophecy had ceased.

To be willing to declare a holiday *then* was another revolution. As was their pattern—and building off of Solomon in the construction of his Temple—the Hasmoneans looked to earlier times for precedent, and then used that precedent as a model in which to shape their own innovation, to be sure that, new as it was, it could slip right in to the tradition, becoming another facet of our religion.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah.

PART VII, HOLIDAY HAFTAROT: RECAP AND RECURRING THEMES

In contrast to other parts of this work, we will divide this set of recaps according to holiday. For those holidays that have more than one *haftarah*, we will include smaller summations of the themes and ideas that recur within them. In this way, we can see not only whether the *haftarot* in this part as a whole share ideas, but also whether the *haftarot* of each holiday share an internal cohesion as well.

Public Fast Days: The *haftarah* stressed repentance as a total-body experience, coupled with reminders of the Sabbath as a marker *mitzvah* of special importance. While a fast day comes in a moment of crisis, the *haftarah* tells us that we can forestall or avoid the feared future with our repentance. So, too, those who see themselves and their lives as cut off, either by childlessness or by being a convert, are assured that the fame of being seen as one devoted to God can be a better form of continuity or belonging.

First Day of Passover: The Passover celebrated by Joshua just after the Jews entered the Land of Israel focused our attention on the differences between that generation and the one that left Egypt. While the first had not understood how much they had to rely on God, this generation had been raised in an atmosphere in which all decisions were made by God. Their now circumcising themselves, and eating the produce of the Land rather than manna, readies them for a life in which dependence on God is balanced with self-reliance.

Second Day of Passover: The story of Josiah's Passover is combined with the story of his working to uproot all idol-worship in the Land. The two parts show that the physical freedom of the Exodus is meant to concretize the spiritual freedom. In that

context, we understand why priests who had worshipped idols have the same legal status as those physically blemished, able to eat of sacrifices but not offer them.

Intermediate Sabbath of Passover: The prophecy of the dry bones connected the physical redemption of Passover to the national redemption of return from Exile and the physical resurrection of the future. The timing of the reading raised the possibility that Intermediate Days of a holiday are a time to explore the holiday's themes beyond its narrowest confines. In this case, those themes are of God having granted us physical and spiritual existence on all planes by the Redemption.

Seventh Day of Passover: David's Song of praise to God after having been saved from all his enemies focuses our attention on his ability to recognize the impact of Providence even when it did not express itself in obvious miracles. Read in conjunction with the Song the Jews sang after the Splitting of the Sea, it points out that the Jews of the desert had it almost easy in that regard; after that experience of open and clear Divine intervention, the challenge for succeeding generations is to apply that knowledge to situations that are not as clear.

Eighth Day of Passover: Isaiah's recall of Senacherib's dismissive attitude towards the conquest of Jerusalem focuse us on taking seriously God's promises to us. Those promises, of a process of redemption led by a descendant of David who will get back to the purest origins of the family, are particularly aimed at Jews living outside of Israel, whose feelings of distance might tip over into despair. The message here is that all of our suffering will eventually be seen as worth the rewards reaped.

THE HAFTAROT OF PASSOVER, COMMON THEMES:

There are few themes that dominate these holiday *haftarot*, the sole exception being perhaps the question of balancing personal effort with reliance on God. Arguably, the *haftarah* of the first day, when the Jews embark on a stage in their history where their actions will be more prominent than God's Providence, and the seventh day, when David both remembers his own initiatives and thanks God for the largely invisible salvation, both revolve around this question.

More broadly, the *haftarot* all seem to grapple with balance; the second day balances our awareness of physical redemption with our awareness of the need for spiritual redemption as well (as shown by Josiah's efforts to remove all idol-worship from the Land), the Intermediate Sabbath turns our attention from Egypt to keeping faith in our future redemption and resurrection, and the *haftarah* for the eighth day reminded us to balance our feelings of being sunk in Exile with our recall of God's promises and our confidence that those sufferings will one day seem a worthwhile prelude to the eventual redemption.

Taken together, the *haftarot* of Passover thus suggest that we are being told to avoid simplifying the events of the Exodus, being reminded of the complex other issues this event raises, and are being made aware of our need to weave it all together in our experience of the holiday.

First Day of Shavuot: The reading of the Work of the Chariot reminds us, on what we celebrate as the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah, that there are aspects of Torah, and of knowledge of God, that are esoteric. To secure such knowledge takes preparation, and then a process of discovery that can be aided by initiates, but must be mostly personal and individual. It is to make clear that such knowledge exists, to dispel

the myth that Torah is easily available to all in all its depth, that we read this selection as we remind ourselves of the gift God gave us around this day.

Second Day of Shavuot: In a difficult presentation, perhaps matching the loftiness of the topic, Habakuk reminds us of immanence and transcendence, of God being both present in the world and inescapably Other. It is through Torah, through punishment, and through the awareness of God those are supposed to create, that we can bridge the gap between us and God, earning eternal life.

THE HAFTAROT OF SHAVUOT, COMMON THEMES:

With only two *haftarot*, we obviously have less to work with, but they do share a focus on esotericism and how to get past it. Ezekiel gives us a hint of what we will find if we develop ourselves fully enough, while Habakuk reminds us of the challenges of getting beyond the veil of God's transcendence. In both cases, unsurprisingly, the proper understanding of Torah plays a large role in getting us where we seek to go.

Tisha B'Av: We saw Jeremiah, first, simply experience the sadness of Destruction, without either remonstration or thought of how to repair it. Beyond that, we noted that his regrets centered on the people's failure to heed the remonstrations that would have avoided this tragedy. Only after registering those thoughts does Jeremiah tell us that the roots of this Destruction lay in the people's lying, in their abandonment of Torah, and in their even losing sight of Torah's specialness, symbolized by their failure to recite blessings over the Torah. The remedy to all this is to remember the only legitimate source of pride, knowing and understanding God.

First Day of Rosh haShanah: The reading about the birth and early childhood of Samuel showed important background to his career as a prophet. Born in a nation that

had lost contact with God's Words of prophecy, Samuel inhabited a family that bucked the trend. Aside from the yearly family pilgrimage, some sources see Hannah as both an innovative petitioner of God and a prophetess. In the word that perhaps brings it all together, Hannah's song of thanksgiving is referred to with the same verb as prayer, suggesting that all of what we do on Rosh haShanah—supplicate God, articulate our worries about the future, judge ourselves, recognize truths about how God operates the world—are linked and related experiences.

Second Day of Rosh haShanah: The *haftarah* emphasizes God's eternal love for the Jewish people, starting with the desert and extending to the days of the Messiah. It is in that light that we understand the Talmud's referring to this selection as הבן יקיר לי אפרים, Ephraim is a dear son." It is this aspect of our relationship with God we seek to highlight, in the hopes that it will balance the pure judgment which is the order of the day.

Yom Kippur Morning: The *haftarah* laid out the way for us to get to the results we seek—by removing stumbling blocks from our path, whether physical or spiritual, we will merit God healing us as well as changing the reactions of those around us to what we say and do. A challenge in doing that is that Jews, of Isaiah's time and ours, often decide for themselves what is important, regardless of what God has said on the topic. It is when we accept God's priorities that we secure the blessings promised, the ushering in of a world of peace for all mankind.

Yom Kippur Afternoon: The figure of Jonah teaches several lessons relevant to the process of repentance. In his attempt to flee from God, in his stubbornness in the whale, and in his reaction to Nineveh's changes, he shows us how even the greatest

among us can be blind to truths staring us in the face (or to flaws for which we ourselves need to repent). In addition, of course, the feared repentance of Nineveh, which ends up happening, is a rebuke to us, the current generation of a nation that ignored multiple and repeated warnings to repent.

THE HAFTAROT OF ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR:

These holidays are linked in our religious experience, and yet their *haftarot* interestingly capture differences between them. Rosh haShanah's two *haftarot* speak of loving relationships, Hannah and Elkanah, Hannah's thanks to God, and then God and the Jewish people. This is appropriate for a day of judgment—to counteract our worries about judgment, we speak of love and those with a solid connection to God.

Yom Kippur, on the other hand, speaks more directly of repentance and ways to get past our weaknesses to a full restoration of our standing with God. The challenges to this, shown in both *haftarot* of the day, are our tendencies to focus on ourselves and our own conceptions of what is right and wrong.

First Day of Sukkot: The depiction of the war of Gog and Magog first lays out for us one version of history, a largely unappetizing one, in which disaster finally forces the world (Jews and non-Jews) to confront truths about God that have been denied until then. Sukkot is the time for such lessons to be taught, since, as the holiday of being judged for rain, it is the paradigm of seeing Providence in nature.

Second Day of Sukkot: We read of King Solomon's dedicating the Temple, an event that Talmudic tradition placed in close proximity to Sukkot. In addition, though, several aspects of the dedication showed that King Solomon saw it as the culmination of

both the Exodus from Egypt and the promises made to the Patriarchs. If so, the holiday is not only about remembering the Exodus as about seeing it through to its fullest fruition.

Intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot: The prophecy about Gog and Magog, a king who will attack Israel and be killed there after wreaking much havoc, did not obviously connect to the holiday. Based on a tradition that this will happen in Tishrei, we suggested that the war will provide the final proof of God's rulership of the world, a message that is prominent in Sukkot as well.

Shemini Atseret, the Eighth Day of Sukkot: The *haftarah* tells of the end of the dedication of the Temple in Solomon's time, echoing many of the themes of the *haftarah* for the second day. We here added that Solomon's blessing of the people seems heavily centered on reminding them that connection to God is the crucial factor in achieving such blessing. Second, we noted Solomon's comfort with halachic innovation that stemmed purely from his own logical deductions.

Simchat Torah: Having completed the yearly cycle of Torah reading, we read of Joshua's first moments as leader of the Jewish people. God reminds Joshua of the importance of being involved with Torah. That statement might be taken to imply a need to be involved with Torah to the exclusion of all else, except for the facts of Joshua's life and the explicit statements of the Talmud. Instead, the point would seem to have been to remind Joshua (and us) that as we involve ourselves in our regular lives, we need to be sure to incorporate our Torah study and knowledge into what we do.

THE HAFTAROT OF SUKKOT, COMMON THEMES

The *haftarot* for the first four days of the holiday either focus on the End of Days or on Solomon's dedication of the Temple. Either event is seen as a watershed in terms of

making God's presence known in the world, the former because it will be the final instance of it, the event that will lay the question to rest forever; the latter, the building of the Temple, was meant to serve in that capacity, but failed to accomplish all its goals. The four together suggest that Sukkot was a holiday in which recognition of God's Providence was singularly important, a conclusion that jives well with the themes of the holiday itself.

Simchat Torah's *haftarah*, with its focus on the study of Torah and incorporating it into a fully lived life, differs from the others, perhaps because it connects more to the completion of the yearly cycle of Torah reading than to the holiday. This *haftarah*, in other words, seems more the *haftarah* for Parshat Ve-Zot haBerachah than for Simchat Torah.

First Shabbat of Hanukkah: The reading from Zachariah ends with a discussion of his vision of a Menorah. We noted, however, that that Menorah differed from our Hanukkah lights in many ways. Instead, we suggested that light is a symbol of God and the Absolute (both because it was the first piece of Creation and, luckily, because it is physically Absolute in terms of speed). If so, we read about Zachariah's lights because they, like the Hanukkah lights, remind us that we only succeed when we turn to God.

Second Shabbat of Hanukkah: We read of the building of the Temple, specifically Solomon's construction of candelabra for the structure. Solomon's adding ten such lights to the original one built in the desert suggested a similarity to the Maccabees, whose revolt and rededication of the Temple was replete with their innovations as well. In this way, we saw Hanukkah as also celebrating the ability to

refine and recreate a tradition in ways cognizant of what has changed yet adhering to the essential aspects of the traditions of old.

THE HAFTAROT OF HANUKKAH, COMMON THEMES

There were only two *haftarot*, so that it is not easy to find common themes. Both *haftarot* focused on the Menorah, but in one the Menorah seemed to stress the role of light as a reflection of God, while in the other, the Menorah was an example of human creativity being allowed to expand upon the original Divine command.

Re-reading the ideas we found in each of these *haftarot*, there seem few if any running themes that cut across the holidays as a whole. Rather than being a disappointment, it reminds us that the holidays were seen as distinct, and were treated distinctly in Jewish law and lore. For all that the definition of prohibited labor is the same on all of these days, their *character* differs.

As reflected here, Passover would seem to be a holiday meant to remind us of the complexities of the Exodus, of the need to balance different factors in our relationship with God; Shavuot is a holiday concerned with balancing the lofty and mundane, the transcendant and the immanent, the exoteric and the esoteric; Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur approach the topic of judgment and forgiveness differently, Rosh haShanah stressing relationship and love, Yom Kippur focusing more on repentance itself as a way of restoring one's standing before the Almighty; Sukkot is a holiday of making God's Presence known in the world at large and of recognizing God's Providence in the world, and Hanukkah is a day of Light, whether as a pale shadow of God's Absolute Nature, or as an example of human creativity in actualizing God's commandments.for metaphysical.

Conclusion: A Theology of Judaism Found in the Haftarot

Some long roads are endless, but our journey through the *haftarot* is not. Throughout this work we have pursued two goals at the same time. The first, giving readers a brief handle on each *haftarah*, has taken up the previous pages.

We have been building towards the second, a sense of an assumed theology of Judaism revealed in these selections of Scripture. Since they were read to the entire people, we took as our hypothesis that the theology of these sources was one all Jews were expected to adopt, as a minimum expression of what it meant to be a member of this people. Being Jewish might have meant a lot more than what we have found here—especially since the *haftarot* are light on *halachah*, Jewish law—but it at least meant this.

To derive that theology with minimal intrusion of personal ideas or foci, we have taken each *haftarah* on its own, and then each Book (or other unit of *haftarot*), searching for only those ideas that appeared repeatedly, their frequency signaling that they were not a mere detail of Jewish thought but a prevalent theme.

The next, and final, stage is to take the conclusions from each of the parts of this work, see what themes they stressed, what points they share, and where that leaves us in terms of an internally derived, "ground-up" expression of Jewish faith.

In Genesis, we found that the *haftarot* spoke of God's relationship to the world, exploring such questions as how manifest God's Presence is, how well humanity keeps aware of that Presence, whether humanity manages to internalize the range of ways in which Providence can appear (punishing, rewarding, and any in between), the importance of treating God's representatives on earth with particular respect (prophets, priests, and

scholars), and the question of our openness to the admonitions of those who speak in the name of God.

A second, but related, topic was the use of metaphor in describing and/or experiencing our relationship with God. Whether as family or as a marriage, *haftarot* showed prophets assessing Jews' and others' actions by how we would judge them if family members acted that way toward each other.

Third, several *haftarot* questioned how humanity could best function. These included the idea that humans need to be aware of their own mortality and prepare accordingly, that children are meant to carry on parents' life's work, finishing what they left and then building for themselves, and that true unity often involves ignoring some differences in the name of a greater whole.

Only two themes dominated the *haftarot* of the book of Exodus, paralleling the two central events of the book, the Exodus itself and the building of the Tabernacle. The first showed itself in discussions of how to earn the future redemption, with an emphasis on seeing God's hand in history, on banishing competing commitments to God, and on the necessity of punishment for those who hold on to such competing commitments.

Temple-building, the second theme, was portrayed as an endeavor that taxed human capabilities in trying to contribute creatively to a Divine structure. The investing of the Divine Presence in the Temple stemmed from a proper mix of relying on the past as well as using all of our human talents, including those acquired in a non-Jewish environment.

The *haftarot* of the book of Leviticus stuck to an even more closely related set of questions. Appropriately for a book that deals with sacrifice, the *haftarot* again and again

visited the difference between performing actions in an attempt to control God and performing those same actions in obedience to God's Will and power.

In that light, the *haftarot's* raising questions of the level of naturalism in Elisha's miracles or of the timing of the dispersing of the armies of Aram focused our attention back on similar issues with sacrifices. God's choosing to act in ways open to naturalistic interpretation, even in some of His miracles, remind us that human life is meant to balance direct encounter with God—as can happen with proper sacrifice—with faith and subservience to the Will of God.

Balancing extremes was the best way to describe the many themes in the *haftarot* of the book of Numbers. Those included navigating between Heavenly concerns and earthly ones, such as Elijah's insistence that he had been zealous for God at a time when it might have been more appropriate for him to see ways of defending the Jewish people; between the physical and the spiritual, a challenge for Samson's parents and for Rahab; between a private life and one of public service, such as Jepthah's difficulties with family relations or Hosea's being obligated to marry a prostitute in order to learn about how to defend the Jewish people; or between focusing on the essential aspects of Judaism or the entirety of the religion, as seen in Jeremiah's complaints to the Jews.

Here, too, the themes of the *haftarot* correspond well to those we might easily have noticed in the book itself. Numbers tells of the Jews moving through the desert toward Israel, both before and after the spies' sin delays their arrival. The process of the people readying themselves for the end of a life fully dependent on God, moving to a more naturalistic one, would easily raise such problems. The *haftarot* ratify this, and emphasize the importance of appropriately attending to each of the competing concerns.

For the book of Deuteronomy, we first noted how few of the *haftarot* were chosen for their relationship to the text itself-- one was the last of those that warned of destruction in the weeks before the fast of the Ninth of Av, the next seven were about comfort, in response to our reliving the Destruction of the Temple on the Ninth, and one was a response to the Torah's Song in Haazinu.

Despite the differing reasons we read these selections, they convey a remarkably cohesive basic message: Good times and results come from recognizing God and seeing God's impact on the world. The reverse is also assumed, that punishment and times of trouble come from refusing to recognize God, and from the moral and spiritual deterioration that inevitably follow that failure. The Jewish people's willingness to recognize the role of God in their lives—in events both good and bad—and to draw appropriate conclusions from that realization is seen as central to their success.

Further, the health and wealth of Jerusalem is not only seen as important for its own sake, but also as a marker-point along the way to uniting the universe in service of God. The reference to the universe highlights these *haftarot*'s recurring hope and desire that non-Jewish nations will recognize God's rule, particularly those that previously oppressed the Jews. Only when they do will we have achieved a world in which God is truly and fully King.

For the special Sabbaths of the year, despite the diparate topics and interests of the *haftaqrot*, two ideas recurred. First, perhaps appropriately for adjuncts to special Torah readings, marker moments were highlighted several times. Saul twice experiences such events, once in his decision to ask about David's absence, and another in his failure to eradicate Amalek. In other *haftarot*, the priests' lose their right to oversee Temple

upkeep, the prophet reminds the people that Sabbaths and holidays will define appropriate engagement with the future Temple, and the arrival of Elijah will mark the coming of God's Great Day (and the Redemption to follow).

A second motif is humans' responsibility to both actively pursue their goals (within the limits of acceding to God's commands), and yet to also sometimes be passive in the face of God's activity. Thus, the prophets blame the priests for failing to set up a working system of Temple upkeep, we are told that waiting to receive purification from God would make it less valuable than if we acted so as to deserve it, and tithing is offered as a way to make God's power manifest.

On the other side, Isaiah's repeated complaints about the people of his time, specifically their insistence that Temple worship matters more to God than anything else they do, shows them straying too far to the side of trusting their intellects and intuitions. So, too, Saul was supposed to just follow God's command to destroy Amalek and is punished for making his own decisions about it, as is true of his persecution of David, a mark of his inability to reconcile himself to God's decision that David would rule after him.[7]

For the holiday *haftarot*, the largest of the units we studied, there seem few if any running themes that cut across the holidays as a whole. Rather than disappointing us, it reminds us that each holiday was seen as distinct in Jewish tradition, each with its own themes and concerns. For all that these days share a definition of prohibited labor, their *character* are individual to each.

[7] It is interesting to note how often Saul arises in crucial ways, as if the first king the Jewish people had managed to capture, in his successes and failures, central questions for the Jewish people for all time.

As reflected in the *haftarot*, Passover would seem to be a holiday devoted to reminding us of the Exodus in all its complexity, especially the different factors we need to balance in our relationship with God. Shavuot is concerned with balancing the lofty and mundane, the transcendant and the immanent, the exoteric and the esoteric. Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur both deal with judgment and forgiveness, but differently, Rosh haShanah stressing relationship and love, Yom Kippur focusing more on repentance. Sukkot is a holiday of making God's Presence known in the world at large and of recognizing God's Providence in the world, and Hanukkah is a day of Light, whether as a pale shadow of God's Absolute Nature, or as an example of human creativity in actualizing God's commandments.

Now for the last step, going from these summaries of summaries to a bare-bone, home-grown Jewish view of the world, expressed in the *haftarot* of the year. Once again, we should remember that we are here presenting general ideas, the exact expression of which might differ from Jew to Jew, or from one group of Jews to another. In addition, these are not *philosophical* ideas, they are theological ones, the difference being that we make no claims to know exactly how they all hang together, how human freedom fits with God's role in the world, how a completely metaphysical God impacts (or interacts) with a physical universe, or any of those complex questions that have bedeviled religious thinkers throughout history.

Rather, we are interested here in the contentions that the *haftarot* make, in knowing what they assume about how Jews should conceive of and act within the world. With those caveats registered, we have found that the *haftarot* expect and assume:

1) **In terms of God**: That Jews believe in a God Who knows of human actions, Who at least at some points communicates with humans, and Who reacts to human actions by meting out reward and punishment (or good and evil life-happenings), at least on the national level. This same God has a plan for history, in at least general terms, ending with world-recognition of God's Kingdom. There may be different ways that future can come about, but its eventual arrival is certain.

2) **In terms of people**: That people, the Jews primarily, are tasked to balance competing responsibilities towards God. While humans have the freewill and the obligation to work to produce a certain kind of world—one that recognizes God's power and Presence—they also, often, are required to passively accept God's Will, to forego their freedom in the name of obedience to the Divine. This is true of kings and ordinary people, and success is defined as walking this line correctly throughout life. Ultimately, all of humanity is to be brought to realizing that this aspect should characterize all of our lives.

3) **In terms of places**: That both the Temple and Jerusalem play special roles on a world-wide scale. The Temple was portrayed both as a place of God's greater Presence and relationship to the world than elsewhere, but also as the place where humans fooled themselves into thinking they could control or manipulate God, performing the required service there and thinking that it then exempted them from following God's other dictates (such as, primarily, promoting social justice).

Jerusalem is seen as the center of the world, since a rebuilt city founded on principles of Godliness (and the social justice that ensues) will bring the rest of the world

to recognize God's Kingdom. It is, then, Jerusalem as a political/religious entity that the Prophets spoke of, not just as a national capital.

4) **In terms of time**: That the yearly calendar is studded with marker-moments, some sanctified as holidays, some not, but that these moments are occasions to focus on particular ideas or aspects of a life lived in relationship with God. In particular, each holiday had its own set of ideas, reminding us of aspects of life to which we must rededicate ourselves on these days.

It is no surprise to me that much of this replicates what one finds in medieval presentations of Jewish dogma, since those writers worked from a deep involvement with tradition and its sources. Our advantage here, we hope, is that readers will see not only that these ideas characterize Jews *today*, but that these ideas are strongly present in Scripture itself, and especially in those selections of Scripture that tradition singled out for public reading over the cycle of the year.

To the original question of whether there is a Jewish theology, we thus answer definitively yes. Deeper analysis of the *haftarot*, or engaging other Jewish sources, might point to ideas we have not touched, or flesh out these ideas in greater detail, but that at least these ideas are present in Jewish sources from their beginning is what we have been interested in showing. The rest, as the Talmudic Sage Hillel told us so long ago, is commentary.