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Haftara of Shmini Atzeres
by Julie Zhuk on 2022-10-29

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The Bais Hamikdash gets a dedication, in the book of Kings 1. Verses 8:54-9:1.

The events described in this chapter happened before King Shlomo blessed the Jewish people. Jews gave sacrifices and celebrated the holiday of Sukkot. King Shlomo completed the building of his palace and the Bais Hamikdash as well. This Haftara is going to focus on the dedication of the Bais Hamikdash. That happened on the second day of Sukkot and it mentions Shmini Atzeres, the eighth day of Sukkot. Explicitly it states that on the eighth day King Shlomo dismissed the people and they blessed the king. On that day, people were feeling extremely happy for all the good that G-d had done for His servant David and for his people Israel. The Haftara gives details of what happened then.

The Haftara starts with the words, “And it was”, according to our Sages this always portends to ominous events. In this case, we are reminded there was an inauguration of the Bais Hamikdash and that was one of the happiest events in all of Jewish history. It already contained the seed for future destruction, the night before the Bais Hamikdash was dedicated the king married an Egyptian princess. Even though he had good intentions and they were in the honor of G-d, He was not happy with what King Shlomo did. He didn't approve and decreed for there to be future destruction of the holy city and His House. He foresaw that the Jewish people's eventual spiritual decline was going to happen because King Shlomo married the Egyptian princess. The words “and it was” is hinting that the present feeling of the Jews feeling happy would one day end in tragedy.

At the inauguration of the Bais Hamikdash, King Shlomo had prayed a long time with hands spread out to heaven. That was the custom way to pray back then, he was also humbly kneeling. He arose from being on his knees and wanted to bless the Jewish people. He didn't want to do this in the kneeling position, because he was only sitting that way when addressing G-d. King Shlomo assumed that if he stood up, his voice was going to be heard a lot better and he had stretched out his hands and raised his voice. He started blessing the Jewish people by blessing G-d. He followed the examples of his father David and Moses who had blessed G-d before giving his last blessing over to the Jewish people.

King Shlomo's words were, “Blessed is G-d Who has granted us rest from all of our enemies, as He promised in the Torah. The complete tranquility in the Land has allowed me to construct the Bais Hamikdash, for it was one of the conditions for building it. Not one good thing from all that G-d promised Moses in the Torah has failed to come about.” King Shlomo didn't mention the words “Not one thing that G-d promised” is missing. Instead, he said, not one good thing. This demonstrated that G-d had mercy and if G-d had fulfilled all the things He predicted to Moses, it would have had to include the punishments as well. These punishments would have been

unbearable for the Jewish people, but despite their transgressions, still, G-d restrained Himself from bringing evil.

He didn't want to bring evil on the Jewish people, because He was trying to avoid afflicting His beloved children. He did bring about all His good promises. King Shlomo's opening words demonstrated the vast differences in the attitude of Jews and to non-Jews when G-d was granting them peace and bounty. The Egyptian Pharaoh of Moses' days was given conditions of peace and comfort. The Haftara asks if the Egyptian Pharaoh ever thanked G-d? The answer is no he didn't, it was the opposite of the way he responded. He used blasphemy and made fun, he was declaring anyone who claims to be G-d, why should I listen and hear his voice?

The Assyrian emperor Sancheriv and his Babylonian counterpart Nevuchadnetzar were ungrateful to G-d for His material gifts to them. They cursed G-d and denied any power that G-d had. G-d granted King David victory over his enemies, and David blessed G-d in front of the whole congregation of Jewish people. King David told G-d, that it was because of Him, everything that was great or had power, glory, victory, or even anything majestic was all coming from G-d. He was the source of it all. Heaven and the earth all belonged to G-d.

Any riches or honor had come from G-d, He was the ruler over everything and any power was in His hand. David continued to say that it was G-d's prerogative to make great and give strength to everyone. King David's son followed in his footsteps, Shlomo declared the words, "Blessed is G-d who granted rest to His nation Israel. The more gifts we Jews get from G-d, the more we praise and honor Him."

King Shlomo, blessed the Jewish people with the words, May G-d is with us to guard us and let His presence rest upon us, as He was with our fathers in the wilderness upon whom G-d's presence rested constantly. May He never leave us in this world, not forsake us in the next world! He informed us in the Torah that if we would transgress His laws, He would cover up His face.

May He direct our hearts to His service so that we should emulate His ways of kindness and mercy and perform all the mitzvos He commanded our fathers. Let my words of coming before the Haftara, be that G-d should accept the Jewish people's prayers in the Bais Hamikdash. Let Him be close to the people so that He should respond to our prayers at all times, by day and by night, and grand the needs of every single Jew of the community. When G-d is observing those who transgress against Him, He shall punish them. The people who do cleave to Him will be protected by Him, and all the nations on the earth will come to recognize that He is the true Power and there is none besides Him. We shall know that G-d will accept our prayers if only our hearts will be perfect with Him.

It was a unique gathering and both the king and the Jewish people were completely devoted to G-d. They were ready for any sacrifice for the sake of G-d. It was the true spirit offering and that was why the animal sacrifices Jews offered afterward were accepted with the greatest pleasure by G-d. For those sacrifices symbolized the Jewish people's total devotion to Him. There were many sacrifices done in honor of the Bais Hamikdash. The verse shares that the Jews used

twenty-two thousand heads of cattle and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep as offerings. These numbers could refer to the animals being bought with the king's private money. There could have been a lot of other sacrifices that were paid for by the community which the verse doesn't enumerate.

In honor of G-d, Shlomo personally slaughtered the first animal. This was an act of service that can be performed by a non-kohen. This person was the representative of all of the Jewish people as they stood by as participants in fulfilling the mitzva. Animal sacrifices were given on a large altar in the courtyard, but that altar couldn't in any way accommodate the thousands of offerings that were prepared for this occasion. An emergency measure was called for, and in accordance with prophetic directions, Shlomo legislated temporary exceptional laws. He sanctified the floor of the courtyard as an altar, and sacrifices were offered there. People were in a festive mood for seven days.

King Shlomo had very lavish dedication offerings, the total number of sacrifices at the dedication of Moshe's Mishkan in the wilderness had been modest. There were less than three hundred animals altogether. Since now, "the King", G-d was taking up residence in His permanent home and it was fitting to celebrate in a much grander style. It is mentioned in Divrai Hayamim, that it pleased the Jewish people to give these offerings.

G-d sent fire from heaven to devour the offerings. The Jews felt G-d was holding a sign of His own Presence in their midst, in addition to His cloud. The people were prostrating themselves and thanking Him. These seven days of celebration included Yom Kippur too. King Shlomo and the Jewish court felt strongly that the required joy of the inauguration precluded fasting. They decided to make a one-time measure, that the Jews should eat and drink that Yom Kippur and not interrupt the celebration.

The Jews obeyed this rule. The number seven in the Jewish calendar is a symbol of completion and perfection. It is not coincidental that Shabbat occurs on the seventh day of the week. It is also not coincidental that Passover and Sukkot are seven days long.

The dedication, too, continued for seven days and was marked as the spiritual perfection of the universe. These were followed by the seven days of Sukkot and the exuberant joy the Jews felt these two weeks was equal. The two celebrations came together into one long festival. During Sukkot, the special mussaf offerings of each day were sacrificed on the altar and were accompanied by all the pertinent mitzvos. On the eighth day, the yom tov of Shmini Atzeres was celebrated with its own sacrifice mussaf. On that day, the Jews came to take leave of King Shlomo. They expected to travel to the outskirts of Jerusalem that night. Later, they changed their minds and remained overnight in the center of the city.

The Jewish law prescribes that in a case like this, one has to again take leave of the dignitary. The people returned to King Shlomo the next day. It was on the twenty-third of Tishri that they did this to say goodbye to King Shlomo. The Haftara shares a story with us to help us better understand what was going on back then. Rabbi Yonasan ben Amsay and Rabbi Yehuda ben Gairim, were students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. The students took leave of their teacher

wanting to depart from the yeshiva for the night, but in the end, it didn't happen. In the morning they came up to their teacher again to say bye, and he asked them didn't already say bye to him the day before.

The students said yeah we did, but you taught us that if a student is going to leave his rabbi, and he stays overnight in the city, he needs to leave again. This was what the Jewish people did when they stayed one extra night in Jerusalem, and so these students were trying to follow the Shmini Atzeres tradition after the dedication of the Bais Hamikdash. The Teacher, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai told his son that these students were indeed very special. They applied their Torah wisdom in the right way to a real-life situation. The Jewish people returned to their homes feeling spiritually uplifted. They had personally experienced the presence of G-d in their midst and had witnessed a sign coming from G-d.

Where He was forgiving their beloved King David. Many Jews started to worry that perhaps eating on Yom Kippur was not fully in the honor of G-d. They started to feel bad about what they did. They soon heard a voice from up above in Heaven a reminder that all of you are destined to receive a portion in the future world! The joy the Jews were feeling of that event in Jerusalem was not the same as in history. We allude to this daily when we reach the ending prayer of shemone esray. There is a verse where we say, "May the mincha offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem be pleasant to G-d as in the days of old and as in former years."

This is found in the book of Kings. The phrase as in the days of old translates to as in the days of the Bais Hamikdash's dedication in Shlomo's time. This was when G-d accepted the Jewish people's offerings with pleasure. King Shlomo had exerted himself in honor of G-d to build the Bais Hamikdash in a fast way. The construction of the Bais Hamikdash lasted seven years, with his own palace he took his time. He didn't invest as much energy in other projects and G-d helped Shlomo in all of his undertakings and he completed them successfully because he was G-d fearing. He (G-d) fulfills the wish of those who do fear Him, this is from the book of Tehillim.