

Tell a story
Haftara Vayikra
by Julie Zhuk on 2023-03-25

Comments

This week's haftarah covers why there is a purpose for the Jewish people. They were reprimanded by prophets because of their attitudes towards sacrifices as well as a promise that their teshuva would be honored. The Jewish people deserved to be punished and there was a promise from G-d of future blessings. We find out in this week's Haftara that G-d is unique. Part of the reason for the Jews needing to be punished was the absurdity of idol worship. The prophets have always encouraged the Jews to do teshuva. Doing teshuva would bring about the redemption they were waiting for. This haftarah deals with the procedures that involve different sacrifices. The Torah declares that these offerings were to atone for the sins that the Jews had committed.

The smoke coming from the Jews was a pleasing aroma for G-d. This also holds true only if the person who offers the sacrifice sincerely is seeking to purify themselves. In the time of Yeshayahu, the laws of sacrifices were adhered to; however, the Jews who brought the sacrifices worshiped idols. In this week's haftara, Yeshayahu spends time reprimanding and ridiculing the Jews who worshiped idols. Yeshayahu addressed his message to the Jews of the Babylonian exile. He was doing it to strengthen their religious commitment. As these verses contain criticism of the sacrificial service, how can they apply to the exiled Jews that were exempt from this. Maybe, while the chapters before and after this prophecy were addressed to the Jews of Bavel.

This prophecy is to be taken out of context. It was addressed to Yeshayahu's contemporaries who still lived in Israel, before the Babylonian exile happened. These contemporaries were guilty of abusing the sacrifices. There was another reason, Yeshayahu was prophesying to the Jewish people who would one day come back from the Babylonian exile to build the Second Bais Hamikdash. He was reprimanding them in advance, admonishing them to be sincere in their offering of sacrifices. He wanted the Jews to purify themselves from any idolatry they had been around. The haftara gets to the part where it explains the purpose of the Jewish people. The Jewish people, G-d had formed for Himself. He wanted to declare His praise.

The haftara asks us how do the Jews announce G-d's praise? Literally, by proclaiming His greatness and acts of kindness in their prayers. G-d says, "If not for the songs and praises with which the Jews praise Me daily, I would not have created the universe!" We see how much G-d loves the Jewish people, even though He has myriads of angels to glorify Him, He wants the praises of the Jewish people. G-d says, "When do I become elevated in the world? When the Jews come together in their houses of prayer and offer praises to Me." At that time, G-d said to the angels to come and see how this nation praises Him! It was also at that time, G-d became enveloped in splendor and glory.

This Midrash should not be misunderstood to imply that G-d is dependent on the Jewish people's praises. G-d is perfect, He doesn't require any praises from mortals whom He himself

created. It is in His infinite kindness, He told the Jews that He “enjoys” their praises. It’s important to praise Him, because we are becoming close to Him. It is how Jews grant G-d, “the pleasure” of rewarding us with eternity. When Jews, “proclaim G-d’s praises” we are doing this by living as Torah observant Jews. A Jew who will fulfill all of the mitzvos and abstain from sin is an embodiment of G-d’s praise. The Jewish nation exists only to proclaim the Creator’s praise. There is a verse in this week’s haftara, where G-d is expressing his anger of the Jews turning to idols instead of him.

It is in verse 43:22 and it goes as follows: But you, Oh Yaakov, have not called on Me. You have turned to idols instead. You have grown weary of Me - of My service in the Bais Hamikdash. Oh Israel. It’s important to keep in mind that in biblical times, when G-d referred to Jews as “Yaakov” they were on a low level. Meaning when He called them “Israel” He thought of them to be on a much higher level. G-d complained to the Jewish people that they had appealed to other gods, but not to Him. There were 365 temples of idol worship in Damascus. Everyday the Damascans worshiped a different god. One day was set aside annually for the joint worship of all gods. When the Jews stooped to idolatry, they surpassed even the Damascans. The fanatical ones among them worshiped all the idols of the surrounding nations each and every day, but they never considered to include G-d in their service at all.

In their eyes, He didn’t even rank with these other gods. They were refusing to include Him on their list of gods. The situation was similar to that of a general who prepared a lavish banquet for all the soldiers of the king’s army. To this feast he also invited the ministers of the court. The only one whom he didn’t invite was the king himself. The king finds out about this event and that he is not invited and feels angry. He asked in a demanding way, “Do you consider my honor to be inferior to that of a common soldier?” Here, G-d is saying the same to the Jews. He said, “My sons refuse to include Me in their worship. They have not called on Me at all. He is referring to the Jews as “Yaakov.” G-d says to the Jews You have omitted my Name completely. Reprimanding the Jews, G-d said “You have grown weary of Me.” This applied to all generations of Jews. G-d was complaining that, “A Jew does not tire of happily chatting about worthless matters all day long. The minute he gets up to pray, he feels exhausted.

The haftara asks us why one’s limbs feel very heavy when it comes to matters that have to do with G-d’s service? There is a Yiddish folk song that goes like, “Eating and drinking are automatic, but what can we do about praying and learning, which are not?” The answer is that when a person feels he is doing something for himself, he never feels tired. If he is doing a job for someone else, he gets weary in no time. Two people can be carrying equally heavy packages, but for the employee the burden is going to be heavier than his boss. This is because the employee is laboring for someone else. If a Jew is convinced that by serving G-d the gain is his alone, he will serve with joy and enthusiasm. G-d reaches out to the Jewish people in the next verse.

“You have not brought to Me the lambs for your daily burnt offerings, nor have you honored Me with your other offerings, even though I have not burdened you by demanding of you an expensive meal offering. It merely required the burning of a handful of flour on the altar. Neither have I wearied you out by demanding much of a spice used for the daily meal. I was only asking for a small amount to be burned on the altar. The haftara gives us two ways to understand this verse. The first way is that Yeshayahu was censuring the Jewish people for offering sacrifices while sinning. They hope to “bribe” G-d with their multitude of sacrifices. They should know that such offerings are not pleasing or honorable to G-d. This was why Yeshayahu warned the Jews, “You have not brought the lambs to Me, in My honor, for I derive no pleasure from them: and

you do not honor Me with your offerings. The verse was referring to a generation when the service in the Bais Hamikdash had come to a complete standstill. One such generation was that of King Achaz.

King Achaz ruled over the kingdom of Yehuda, but his ardor for idolatry matched that of the kings over the kingdom of Israel. Everywhere he went, he erected idolatrous statues. He even passed his sons through fire for the gods. G-d punished him by sending Tiglas Pilleser, who was a king of Ashur to besiege Yehuda. King Achaz was under a lot of stress and he reacted by alienating himself even further away from G-d. He began sacrificing to the Damascan gods. He was trying to reason with them. He said, "These gods are assisting the Assyrians! If I honor them, they will help me too!" Achaz was collecting all of the sacred vessels of the Bais Hamikdash. He hacked them to pieces and locked up the Sanctuary. The purpose of this sacrilegious act was to force the kohanim to use his idolatrous altars for their service.

When King Achaz died, he was not interred in the royal graves due to his unsurpassed wickedness. King Achaz's course had been reversed by his son, Chizkiyahu. He was an outstanding tzaddik. In his first year of being in power, he reopened the doors of the Bais Hamikdash. He got rid of all the idolatrous statues and any etchings that had to do with his father. His father called it "decorating" the Bais Hamikdash with images calling it the House of G-d. Chizkiyahu assembled all of the kohanim and the leviyim. He addressed them saying, "Our fathers rebelled against G-d. They forsook His word. They locked up the Bais Hamikdash, they extinguished the menorah, and stopped offering ketores and animal sacrifices. G-d was really angry, it was why He caused the Jews to die by the sword and to fall into captivity.

Chizkiyahu was now saying, "Let us return to G-d and He will no longer be angry with us. Chizkiyahu reminded the Jewish people that it was G-d Who chose the Jews to serve Him. The next verse in the haftara goes on to reprimand the Jewish people. They were performing the avoda, which G-d would have been happy about. Unfortunately at the time, the Jews were committing all sorts of sins, and this displeased G-d. G-d turns to the Jews and says in verse 43:21, You did not need to acquire for Me the spice that is used for the ketores with money. It grows abundantly in Jerusalem. You didn't satiate Me with the fat of the shlamim-offerings. I derive no enjoyment from your sacrifices. I didn't impose a difficult service upon you, you have imposed on Me. You have burdened Me with your sins, and consequently with sin offerings; you have wearied Me with your iniquities.

The Midrash is explaining how the Jews "imposed upon G-d." G-d said to the Jews with their sins, they were compelling G-d to burn His House to destroy His city and to exile His sons. The Jews were causing G-d to dwell in loneliness and go into a period of mourning. The reason for this is they were 'forcing him' to banish the Jewish people from Jerusalem all together. G-d was reminding the Jews how it was Him in the past who had blotted out, and it is Him who was still blotting out even after the Jews had rebelled for their sins for His own sake. G-d did not want His name to be desecrated and He would not remember their unintentional sins. G-d told the Jews He didn't want them to sin and then to offer sacrifices. G-d wanted the Jews to do teshuva, because it achieves forgiveness even for intentional sins. For the many sins that the Jews did, they got a just punishment.

G-d expressed that the Jews could claim He was exaggerating, about them not being so awful. As well as them thinking they have their own merits. G-d wanted to debate this point with the Jews. In verse 43:26, G-d says to the Jews, Remind me of anything that I owe you; let us

deliberate together to see who is right. You state first what you have to say, so that you may be vindicated. Usually the one who states his arguments first is believed to be right. G-d said, "I wished the Jews would always win arguments against Me! If I lose, I win. If it happens the other way around as in, I win then I lose too. G-d says that he won the case against the generation of the Flood; at the same time he destroyed all of its members. So in the end, G-d really lost. Saying all of this G-d was not happy.

He was feeling lost when he won the judgement against the generation of the Dispersal and against the inhabitants of S'dom. He lost the argument against Moses after the sin of the golden calf, that was really His gain. The Jewish people managed to survive. He wished that He would always be defeated. Even your first father sinned and even your defenders (the tzaddikim among the Jews who had interceded on your behalf) have transgressed against Me. How can you claim that you are free of sin? Every human being, even the greatest one, has an evil inclination. This causes them to commit sin. Which first father sinned against G-d? The first man, Adam, sinned by partaking in eating the forbidden fruit. Adam was G-d's own handiwork. G-d was asking, how much more so are you, born of woman, liable to commit sins.

That was the first explanation how any human being, even the greatest one has an evil inclination. The second reason is, even your forefather Avraham, the tzaddik sinned. When G-d promised the land of Canaan to his descendants, they failed to trust fully in His word. This was why He asked, "Give me a sign whereby I will know that I will inherit the land. Avraham had feared that G-d's mercy was so great that He wouldn't drive away the Canaanim. At the same time, G-d made the "Covenant Between the Parts" with him. G-d said, "All of your intercessors committed a sin at one time or another. For example, Yitzchak loved the wicked Aisav through his motive was noble, for he was hoping to bring Aisav close to G-d. In verse 43:28 it says, Because of your sins, I will cause even Your holy princes to become desecrated by enemies. I will time and again give over Jacob for destruction and Israel for insults by the enemy. This verse shows us G-d's way of managing history. He destroyed the "holy princes," including righteous and noble Jews.

Together with the evil ones, because of the sins of the generation. Once G-d has decreed destruction, He will not isolate the righteous in order to rescue them on an individual basis. This was why the Jews in Egypt were told to stay indoors during the Plague of Killing the Firstborn, otherwise they would have been destroyed. The Midrash tells us that the "holy princess" mentioned here are referred to as the angels. At some point the prophet, Yirmiyahu had urged the Jewish people to do teshuva before the enemies would enter Jerusalem and destroy the Bais Hamikdash. The Jewish people didn't believe anyone would come into their city. They said, "No enemy will set foot in this city! The Jews thought they were in possession of the secret by which to adjure the heavenly angels to render Jerusalem impregnable.

One of the Jews said he knew the name of the angel who was in charge of water. The Jew was going to adjure him to surround the city with a wall of water. Then another Jew volunteered that he was going to command an angel to build an iron wall! Hearing all of this, G-d responded that He had been relying on His angels and that had become the Jews' substitute for doing teshuva! This was why G-d decided to change the angels' names and their tasks as well. G-d had switched the angels' tasks. The angel who was in charge of water was now in charge of fire. The angel who was in charge of fire was now in charge of the iron. When the enemies approached, a Jew started to call out to the angel that was originally in charge of the water. That angel replied, this is no longer my job, I can't do as you say. All of the angels responded in the same way, and as a result of this Jerusalem had fallen.

This was the meaning behind the words, "I caused the heavenly hosts to become desecrated." The Jews were encouraged to do teshuva. Despite the Jews sins and being punished for them, the haftara reminds us that the Jews should not lose heart. Their stressful situations would eventually stop. In verse 44:1, it says: And now listen, my servant Yaakov, and Israel whom I have chosen! To what message are the Jewish people supposed to listen? First of all, doing teshuva is very important. The term "and now" refers to how challenging it is to do teshuva. It denotes: Let bygones be bygones! Let us make a new beginning and improve our conduct as of this moment. G-d also wanted the Jews to listen to His message of encouragement!

G-d said, You, the Jewish people, are My servants whom I have chosen. Beatings and insults by the gentiles do not change the fact. Eventually, the situation is going to get better. I will once again be close to you and bless you. Verse 44:2, G-d is referring to Himself as the Maker of human beings. He was the one who formed us from the womb, and Who will also help us in the future. He says we are to not fear, My servant Yaakov, and Yeshurun. Yeshurun is another name for the Jewish people that G-d had chosen! Generally the prophets called the Jewish people by three names. "Yaakov" referred to the Jewish people in their lowest state. The name, "Yisrael" is used when they are on a higher level: and "Yeshurun" was referring to Jews who are on the highest spiritual level. The name Yeshurun came from the root yashar, meaning to go straight.

It may denote, "the straight (honest and consistent) one or the nation that is right and good in G-d's eyes. Here the prophet is maybe trying to encourage the nation. Even in times of hardship, he conveys when you are named 'Yaakov' you have nothing to fear as long as you remain a servant of G-d. Certainly the name 'Yeshurun' had nothing to fear. The prophet reminded the Jewish people that G-d helped them "from the womb." When Jacob and Aisav struggled in their mother's womb, G-d was protecting Jacob. This way Aisav wouldn't eliminate him, as he would have liked to do so. The next three verses promise the Jewish people's ultimate spiritual and physical survival and blessing. The Jewish public's conscience will be awakened, this leads to national teshuva.

This, in turn, will automatically result in the fulfillment of all these blessings. In the event that teshuva is G-d forbid, not forthcoming voluntarily, the blessings will in any case eventually come to pass, for G-d will compel the Jews to return back to Him. Verse 44:3 says, Just as G-d is pouring rain water on dry, thirsty earth and liquid on the dry ground, He will pour His spirit upon the Jews descendants, and His blessing upon our offspring. The haftara asks what "spirit" is G-d talking about that He will pour on the Jewish people's descendants? G-d is promising to restore prophecy to our people. Now, in exile, we lack this form of communication with G-d. This is because of our low moral and spiritual level. But in the era of Mashiach every Jew will be a prophet. Maybe the analogy to "thirsty" ground indicates that in order to be worthy of learning the word of G-d, a Jew must prepare himself with spiritual thirst - the desire and longing to hear it.

Our descendants will grow and multiply as though they were among grass that sprouts quickly and abundantly. It will be like willows that will flourish by streams of water. Grass sprouts rapidly but it is also quick to wither. Therefore the prophet also likens the Jews to willows that stay fresh because they grow near the water. Additionally, willow branches tend to hang downwards, symbolizing humility, a trait of the Jewish people. This verse is referring to the era of

the people coming back from the dead. It's known as *techiyas hamaisim*. The revival of the dead, at that time G-d will bless the Jews and multiply them until they fill the world. Some commentators interpret this verse as describing the exile period. It is amazing how the Jews are able to sprout and multiply even "among the grass," i.e., between the non-Jews, despite the adverse conditions of persecution and destruction.

Thinking back to the Purim story, when Haman wished to choose wood from which to fashion a gallows for Mordechai - which would ultimately serve for hanging Haman himself. All of the trees refused to make themselves available for this purpose. The fig, pomegranate, and nut trees argued with each other. They were saying, "The Jewish nation is compared to us. Then they came up with the question, "how can we allow this impure man to be hung on gallows made from our wood?" The myrtle branch, olive, esrog tree, and others at the same time refused to consent. These words were used for *mitzvos*, or the Jewish people are compared to them. Haman was considered the willow, but it (or its guardian angel in heaven), too, refused with the argument. Yeshayahu said of the Jewish people that they would be like willows shooting up by the water. How, then, can I allow this evil man to be strung up on me? Finally the thorn volunteered. He said, unlike the other trees, I have no honor. By saying this he was reasoning. The thorn continued that the evil man is like a prickly thorn; let the 'thorn' hang on a thorn! G-d was in agreement about this. G-d caused for Haman to find a thorn tree that was fifty amos long from which he made the gallows. The next verse is meant to teach us that eventually all of the Jewish people will be close to G-d. Even if it will have diverse back-grounds. Verse 44:5 says, One group will say how they always belonged to G-d. Members from this group will be the *tzaddikim*. One will call itself by the name of Jacob. Members of this group are the children whose fathers don't keep the Torah (either on purpose or through no fault of their own.) Members of one group will obligate themselves by a sign with their hands that they will return to G-d. This group refers to the *baalai teshuva*.

One group will be called by the name of Israel. Those who convert to Judaism will be the ones to join the Jewish nations. They will be members of this group. The end letters can be arranged to spell *mila*. This is hinting at the converts who will have a *bris* for themselves. In the time of *Mashiach*, all of the Jews will become righteous and even in the exile period there will be those who are awakened to return to G-d. The next part will compromise the central body of the *haftara*. It's where Yeshayahu ridicules every aspect of idol worship. First, however, he has to demonstrate that G-d is One. We learn that G-d is unique in verse 44:6. G-d says He is the king of Israel and its redeemer. G-d calls himself as G-d of hosts. He was first - before anything was created - and He was the last. After all it will all be gone, there is no power besides His that directs events in the universe.

This verse expresses the fundamental belief of G-d's omnipotence and oneness, as well as the fact that He is eternal. A human king may have a father, a brother, or a son. But G-d says, "I am different. I am first - I have no father; I am last - I have no son; there is no power besides Me - I have no brother. The next verse declares that no one besides G-d has the perfect knowledge of events past and future; at the same time, no one in the world has a right to claim divinity. In verse 44:7 it asks us Who can call out that he is like G-d? Let him say and set forth before me all that I have done since I placed people in the world in other words, since creation. Let them (meaning those who claim omniscience) also tell them the (others) signs and events that will come true in the distant future, just as I do.

Yeshayahu prophetically predicted the name of the Babylonian emperor *Koresh* (Cyres) 200 years before the birth of *Koresh*. He also prophesied regarding the impending destruction of the

Bais Hamikdash. He also prophesied about the Jewish people being banished from the land. Furthermore, the Torah is filled with precise predictions that regard events which transpired hundreds and thousands of years later. One of these was G-d informing Avraham that his descendants would possess Israel more than 400 years before this actually happened. There was the time when Jacob blessed his sons, he gave them accurate details about their future portions in the Land. For example, Jacob predicted that "Zevulun will live at the seashore." Many laws in the Torah are effective only when the Jewish people possess Israel: trumos and ma'asros, sh'mitta, offerings in, and visits to, the Bais Hamikdash, and etc.

Only a divinely inspired prophet like Moses could state with absolute certainty that the newly liberated nation of slaves now wandering about in the desert, would actually become the masters of the land of Canaan. The Torah forecasts the global dispersion of the Jews over a thousand years from before, while they still lived in a concentrated area in the desert. This is in parshas Ki Savo in Devarim 28:64-65. Since all the gods' claims to divinity are false: we learn in the verse 44:8, to not fear other gods. G-d is asking, haven't I let you hear and told you long ago, at the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, that I am the true G-d?! You are my witnesses to this fact, for at that time I opened all of the heavens and showed you that there is no god besides Myself and no rock (meaning power) unknown to Me.

Yeshayahu encouraged the Jewish people to not be afraid of the gods because the priests of idol worship threatened that non-compliants were doomed to revenge by the gods. There is an irony of worshipping images. The next part of the haftara will share Yeshayahu ridiculing idolatry. Verse 44:9 touches up on Yeshayahu ridiculing the idolatry that was going on. It says in 44:9 how those who form images are all empty people. Their coveted objects and the idols are useless. The idols are their own witnesses to their worthlessness for they neither see nor know, so how can they help others? They put their worshipers to shame. Verse 44:10 asks us who would be so foolish as to form a god and then cast an image that is useless?

Verse 44:11 says, let all those who join in the idol worship be ashamed. The smiths themselves are human, so how can they make a god? Let them all - the artisans together with the worshipers - gather and stand still to reflect on the matter? Let them together be afraid of G-d and ashamed of their actions. Yeshayahu continued to make fun of the idolaters for investing effort in producing worthless idols. Verse 44:12 talks about the iron smith forging an axe, working with coal. He shapes the god with hammers and works on him with the strength of his arm. He (the smith) is hungry, but in his eagerness to finish he doesn't eat, and that is why he has no strength. He doesn't drink any water, and that is why he becomes faint.

The verse is underscoring two points, the smith works really ardently and allows himself no break to get a refreshment. It's pretty ludicrous for a mortal to claim that he is fashioning a divine being, when he himself can't function even for a short while without satisfying his basic physical needs. On the other hand, many of our saints were able to exist without any food or drink for a long time. There is the example of Moses, staying on Mount Sinai for forty days without eating. His body was spiritual enough that it required no food.

The smith who manufactures the idols can't claim Divine inspiration, since his earthly needs dominate his entire being. The verse here describes the iron smith who fashions an image from metal. The next verse will deal with the toll invested in manufacturing a wooden idol. The carpenter stretches out his tape measure. He marks it (the gods shape) with a colored marker. He smooths the wood with planes and designs the god's round face with a compass. At the

same time, he uses the compass to design round decorations with which to embellish the god. He shapes it into the figure of a beautiful person. That is the idolater's notion of a god. The god's function is to sit in the house. It is, after all, incapable of doing anything else!

The carpenter fashions the deity with the aid of ordinary tools using a tape measure, a marker, a plane, and a compass. How can he hope to produce with these artifacts a living being? At best, the result is a beautiful, but lifeless, image. He cannot even make it move, the way Moses and Aaron lehvadil, produced crawling snakes before Pharaoh. Let no one be deceived into believing that the god came into being by means of a higher power! Miriam's son was once taken into captivity, together with her seven sons. The emperor, an infamous idolater, commanded the oldest son, "Bow down to my god!" Miriam's son said, 'G-d forbid I bow down to your god.' He went on to express what Jews and he believed in the Creator's existence." The emperor was enraged by the lad's refusal in front of the whole court to comply with the royal command. So the emperor ordered for Miriam's son to be executed.

The emperor barked at Miriam's son saying, "Worship my image!" This was the emperor's second attempt at trying to get Miriam's son to bow down to his image. The emperor stated that, "Even if your G-d does exist, as you claim, you must admit that my god is mightier, for see, I hold you in my power!" Miriam's other son got involved now. He said, "G-d forbid, I will not worship an image, just as my brother didn't. Miriam's second son ended the conversation with the emperor by saying, "G-d commanded us, to not have any other gods! At this point the emperor felt pretty infuriated, he exclaimed to put Miriam's son to death. Miriam had one last son left who was not yet involved, but the emperor turned to him. The emperor said to Miriam's third son, "Even if your god is great, mine is also deserving, therefore you need to honor him!

The third brother wouldn't give in, he like his other brothers stated that he couldn't bow down to the emperor's image. This son of Miriam's reminded the emperor that it says in the Torah to not bow down to another god. The emperor didn't care for anyone's life, he said to have this lad killed as well. Miriam had a fourth son who is brought into the haftara now, the emperor started to argue, "Your G-d may be greater than mine, but surely my deity deserves some honor too, for he is also powerful! The fourth son of Miriam retorted back that he and other Jews can't worship any deity besides G-d. There is no power other than Him! The king decided to have this fourth son be killed too. One more son of Miriam's is mentioned, he was the fifth son.

The emperor started arguing that his god deserved to be recognized at least as G-d's servant and agent. The fifth son started to say, "Not at all". He said this in a very confident voice. He continued, "Our Torah states, 'Shma Yisrael, Hashem Elokainu, Hashem echad' - G-d is unique and none of His servants has power independent of Him." This brother, too, was sharing the unfortunate fate of the others. To the sixth brother, the emperor had something to say. "Even if your claim that no other than G-d is the ruler, you surely realize that He directs the fate of people on earth by means of my zodiacs. This is why we should honor them." The sixth son was not about to bow down to the emperor's image.

Right away he said, "No way!" "G-d Himself directs the fate of the Jewish people; we do not honor zodiacs (meaning zodiacs). The sixth brother was also sent to the fate of his five other brothers. Now only the youngest brother was left. The emperor was pleading with the youngest brother. The emperor was desperately trying to attempt to save face. He said that even if G-d supervises your nation directly, He directs the destiny of other nations by means of the zodiacs. This is why you and everyone else should bow down to my image. Here the youngest son turns to the emperor. The youngest brother says, "Far be it from me to lie! G-d is the only power in

heaven and on earth and the zodiacs are all under His control. Even now, after the Bais Hamikdash is destroyed and we are governed by other nations, we have sworn not to exchange Him for any other god and He has sworn not to exchange us for any other nation. The emperor was feeling irritated at his failure to prevail over these young and stubborn Jews. The emperor tried to coax the young boy into submission. He told the youngest son of Miriam's, "You are so young! Why should you forfeit your life?"

If you only bow to the image, I will shower many favors upon you. The boy insisted that G-d rules forever; it is His favor I seek. The emperor reminded this youngest son of Miriam's, "Consider what happened to your brothers," the emperor responded, his voice reflecting his rising rage. "See, I will throw down my ring in front of the image. All you have to do is bend down and pick it up. In this way it will appear to everyone here at court that you obey me while in your heart you can remain perfectly loyal to your G-d!" The last son had something back to say to the emperor. He called him, "Mighty emperor! If you are so concerned with your prestige that you are afraid of what people will say about you, should I not be much more afraid of the true G-d, King of the universe? This argument went back and forth, the emperor didn't want to stop.

The emperor asked, "But tell me, my boy, is it really true that G-d rules the universe?" The emperor was inquiring about this from the boy. The emperor started to soften at the sight of this tender-aged, brilliant light boy. The boy turned to the emperor saying, "Shame on you, Emperor. Can you not tell that we do not live in a chaotic and disorderly universe?! The emperor questioned the boy, "Does G-d see and hear everything? The youngest of the brothers confirmed that G-d sure as certainly does hear and see everything. The youngest brother concluded this conversation with the emperor. His last comment to the emperor was about his idols being lifeless by contrast. They don't see, they don't hear, they don't speak, nor do they move. Again the emperor kept going.

He said, "If it is as you say, why doesn't G-d save you from my hand, as he saved Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya from the emperor Nevuchadnetzar?" The youngest son of Miriam was not afraid of this emperor. He wasn't afraid to show it either, he said that it was his brothers and he included himself. It was their own fault, Your Majesty. He said this in a very brave tone. We have sinned and even if we are personally innocent, we are punished for the generation's sins.

Moreover, you are not a worthy emperor as Nevuchadnetzar was. You are therefore not privileged to experience G-d's providence. It was G-d who sentenced all of us to death. If you will not execute us, we will die in some other unnatural way. But one thing you should know: G-d will definitely avenge our blood. You will one day pay for this deed." It is no surprise to read here that the emperor reacted by ordering the young boy to be killed. The young boy didn't expect anything less, but he still didn't want to bow down to the emperor's image just to be saved unlike his brothers. The emperor ignored the mother's pleas that she be executed before her youngest son. The mother fell upon her son, kissing and embracing him.

She exclaimed, "My child, go to our father Avraham and tell him, My mother is greater than you are! You only bound one son upon the altar, but my mother has built seven altars and sacrificed seven sons in one day! Tell Avraham to beg G-d to have mercy upon our people! The brazen emperor didn't feel unmoved. He still ordered for the child to be slaughtered in front of his mother without delay. The mother's grief was so intense that it caused the mother to become deranged. It was a few days later, she threw herself down from a rooftop. She toppled to her death. In this manner Yirmiyahu's foreboding words (in 15:9), "The woman who has borne seven sons is unhappy," came to pass. When Yirmiyahu had said these words, "The woman

who has borne seven sons is unhappy,” he was symbolically referring to the entire Jewish nation.

It was concerning whom G-d had issued a harsh decree that would cause the Jews a lot of unhappiness. At the same time, these deaths of Miriam’s seven sons did atone for the entire Jewish nation. It was why the evil decree was abolished. There was a heavenly voice that was heard, it was speaking about Miriam. The heavenly voice said, “She is the joyous mother of sons!” The heavenly voice indicated immeasurable reward in the world to come for the mother and her sons. The next verse is going to deride those artisans who take the trouble of planting and cutting down trees to keep wood for the idols. Are they also convinced that their wood is “holy”?! Verse 44:14 goes like this: There is one who goes personally to the forest to cut cedars for himself, or he takes pine wood or oak. These are especially beautiful, since the pine and oak are not as strong as cedar.

He reinforces this wood with other types of wood from the forest. Then there is one who goes to even more trouble: He plants an oren-tree, whose wood is very suitable for carving, and he waits. The rain will make it grow. In reality, G-d should hold off on the rain, because the wood was planted for a forbidden purpose. However, G-d does allow the laws of nature to assist even a sinner. In this way, people have freedom of choice whether or not to obey G-d. Similarly our Sages teach that if someone stole seeds and planted them, they shouldn’t grow. G-d does not want to interfere with the course of nature. Verse 44:15 talks about why man needs to use fuel. The man will take some of it to warm himself; he heats his oven with it in order to bake bread. With some of the wood he fashions a god and worships it.

Still part of the verse 44:15, He makes a carved image and prostrates himself before it. After using some of the wood for his private needs, he uses what is left over for a god! If the idolater truly believes that the wood is holy or reserved for a higher purpose, how can he also use it for his personal enjoyment? The next verse in 44:16 talks some more about the wood that the man uses. Half of the wood, he burns in the fire to warm himself. This half he also uses it to eat meat. He roasts meat and is satisfied when he eats it. Since he also warms himself, he gloats, “Aha! I am warm. I enjoy the fire!” (Alternately: Before warming himself, he claims, I have seen that my god is a consuming fire!). In verse 44:17, there is talk of whatever wood is left over. The man takes the remaining wood and makes a god. This becomes his idol, he bows to it. He falls down before it, and he prays to it.

He says to the idol, “Save me, for you are my god!” This kind of behavior of our ancestors was ludicrous. It is apparent: nevertheless, we should not take the liberty of assuming that they were naive. Unlike ourselves, they were well acquainted with the zodiacs that direct events on earth, and by means of worship, they attempted to alter their effect. Moreover, they had a passion for idol worship which has been eliminated for a long time now, so that we are not in a position to pass judgment on our forebears. In verse 44:18 it talks about those who worshiped idols. Those idolater’s neither know nor understand their folly, for their eyes are shut by the evil inclination. It’s because of the evil inclination that they cannot see, and their hearts couldn’t reflect. The ancient people had an innate urge that propelled them towards idolatry.

Just as with every type of evil inclination, G-d implanted it in their hearts so that they might resist and conquer it. The Jewish people would then achieve sanctity and gain great reward. There were many Jews who succumbed to their evil inclination. That was why the Men of the Great Assembly begged G-d to eliminate this type of evil inclination. G-d concurred, and that was why the Jews were no longer tempted to worship idols. In verse 44:19, no one thinks about it. No

one understands it or has the insight to consider, I have burned half of it in the midst of a fire, and I have also baked bread on its coals. I have roasted meat and eaten it. How then can I make the rest of it into an idol, detested by G-d, and bow down to the product of a tree? The following verse is 44:20. The idolater's deceived heart has inclined him to accept as a leader god a substance that turns into ashes when it is burned. But he will not save his soul; he will not admit, the god I have made with my right hand is false!

On the other hand, idolatry is an obvious lie, one that is, as it were, clearly written on my right hand. This verse has a clue to the root of the worship of idols, or anything other than G-d. His deceived heart has led him astray. A person's desire for gratification of his instincts binds him to the truth. He will defend the most illogical philosophy and remain under life-long delusions in order to evade the rigorous self-control demanded by the Torah at all times. For this reason, our Sages have called this world "the world of deceit." In this next world, it's known as "the world of truth," there is no deceit or illusion. The truth will become apparent to us. In verse 44:21, we are reminded of these things, you who are called Yaakov and Israel, for you are a servant of Mine. We are not servants of the gods. G-d was the one Who formed us to become His servants. He tells us to not forget Him and to not turn to idols instead.

G-d implored the Jewish people not to imitate the idol worshiping gentiles. The Jews had to resist the persuasive influence of the nations around them. We always had to be aware that they were G-d's people. Even though they had already gone astray, doing teshuva would eradicate any past sin. This is where the verse of 44:22 comes in. It says that even if people had transgressed and did teshuva, G-d would blot out even their rebellious sins. He would blot the rebellious sins like a thick cloud that would totally vanish. They would be like a cloud, our unintentional sins. We would have a chance to return back to G-d and He would redeem us. The prophet Yeshayahu addressed these words to the Jewish people in the Babylonian exile.

Yeshayahu clarified that their redemption was contingent upon their sincere teshuva. This verse can also be applied to all future generations. We recite it in our Mussaf prayer on Yom Kippur. This includes when we say, "For You are the King Who forgives our sins and passes over our guilt year after year. Redemption could be at hand, G-d is only waiting for us to do teshuva. The last verse in this week's haftara is 44:23. It's a bit long, It starts out saying, we should rejoice, heavens, for G-d has accomplished it! He has brought redemption to the Jewish people. We can shout, depths of the earth! We can now break into song, mountains, forests and every tree therein! For G-d has redeemed Yaakov and is glorified by all because he has redeemed Israel. The haftara asks us why will heaven and earth, mountains and trees be so happy at the redemption?

There are two answers for this, first is G-d has promised whoever mourns for Jerusalem will rejoice in the future. All of nature participated in the mourning over the destruction. This is why we will experience joy in the future. The second reason is when Adam sinned, G-d passed a decree. It was the earth that would become cursed! As a result, the earth became less fertile. All fruit became less succulent and the heavenly bodies were dimmed. At the redemption, the curse will be lifted. Nature, too, will be redeemed. After that we will all rejoice. The prophet specifically mentioned the happiness of the mountains and the forests. The mountains became hard and unsuitable for cultivation after Adam's sin. In the future, they too would become fertile. The forests would be happy because even barren trees would bear fruit. At this point all of idol worship would vanish, their wood would no longer be used for production of idol.

This is the end of this week's haftara. There are some footnotes from this week's haftara. It reads like commentary. It says that tragically in our times, as well, a large majority of Jewish people have alienated from its precious heritage. In their confusion, these Jews seek meaning and fulfillment in any cult, religion, or absurd theory that they may have come across. They don't even consider the Torah as a viable option. Earlier in the haftara G-d mentions how Jews refused to include Him in their worship. They have not called on Him at all. G-d refers to the Jews as Yaakov. G-d said that there are some Jews who have omitted His Name. Moreover, just as the ancient Jews outdid their pagan contemporaries in idol worship, so too.

In modern times, Jews are often the movers and shakers of destructive movements, such as Communism, and liberalism in America today. Jews are spiritual by nature and are often gifted with sharp minds. Unless Jews are guided solely by the Torah, these very advantages can cause their downfall. Earlier in the haftara one of the verses explaining why G-d wanted to punish the Jews. In verse 43:28, G-d says because of the sins that the Jews committed He will cause even our holy princes to become desecrated by enemies. Over time G-d would give Yaakov for destruction and Israel for insults by the enemy. The footnote about this explains what this means. It's from a source named Rabbi Mendel Hirsch. He was the son of R.S.R. Hirsch. He says in fact, Israel, the name is given to our nation when it is in an elevated state. It has not evoked praise from the nations.

Instead, the virtues by which it has been achieved are depicted by them as weaknesses. The non-Jews have never been heard to extol Jews for their compassion, refined character traits, and idyllic family life. These very attributes are labeled as weakness, servility, submissiveness, cowardice, and so on. The last footnote for this week's haftara is focusing on how there were many Jews who turned to idol worship. It is hard for us to picture the world of our forebears realistically, since the evil inclination of idol worship has been eliminated. The historical period that we are dealing with was dominated by unchallenged belief in and fear of soothsayers, demons, magicians, and idolatrous priests. Anyone who didn't conform to this mentality was considered a social outcast.