

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : אָז'ר

***For Ashkenazzim, this week's Haftorah is taken from Sefer Hoshe'a
(the first of the shorter Books of the Prophets which together make up "The Twelve")
Chapter 12, verse 13 — Chapter 14 verse 10***

1. Much the same as what has been written for the Sefaradi Haftorah of this Sidra can be applied to this Ashkenazzi Haftorah as the Haftorah for the Ashkenazzim starts where the Haftorah for the Sefaradim ends and the comments concerning the one really apply just as much to the other. As explained in the general Introduction to the Haftoras, the original purpose of the Haftorah was to call to mind the Sidra of the week and there are usually therefore some points in the Haftorah which connect with the Sidra. In both these Haftoras of this Sidra, although some points of connexion with the Sidra can be discerned, they are rather tenuous. This Haftorah of the Ashkenazzim also has in it the Haftorah of Shabbos Shuvoh (the Shabbos between Rosh HaShonoh and Yom Kippur) and its message is, unsurprisingly, *Teshuvoh*, that is, repentance, as is the message of these Haftoras as a whole.
2. After the death of Shlomo ben Dovid, the Jewish Kingdom split into two. The southern part of the country was known as the Kingdom of Yehudah, while the northern part was called the Kingdom of Israel. The Southern Kingdom of Yehudah consisted in the main of the people of the Tribe of Yehudah and some of the Tribe of Binyomin and the Northern Kingdom of Israel comprised in the main people of the other ten-and-a-half Tribes. (This Northern Kingdom is often referred to as Efrayyim because of that Tribe's prominence and because its first king, Yerovom ben Nevot, came from that Tribe.) The capital city of the Southern Kingdom of Yehudah was Yerushola'im and the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel was the later-built Shomron for which reason the Northern Kingdom is often also referred to as Shomron.
3. The Beis HaMikdash, representing the spiritual centre of the Jewish people, was in Yerushola'im and so, too, was the Sanhedrin and, consequently, most of the Torah teachers and Torah leaders of the Nation. Thus it came about that generally speaking the Southern Kingdom of Yehudah was more loyal to HaShem and His Torah whereas the people of the Northern Kingdom were more prone to turn away from HaShem and His Torah and the Mitzvos. Right at the beginning of the split, Yerovom ben Nevot wanted to stop his people from going to Yerushola'im for the *Sholosh Regollim* (the three Pilgrimage Festivals) as commanded in the Torah, and to that end he erected temples, complete with calf-worship (the predominant religious fad of the time amongst the idol-worshipping nations of the day) and even posted guards along the roads leading to Yerushola'im to stop any would-be pilgrims.
4. Of course, without proper Torah leadership, the people of the Northern Kingdom quickly slid into idolatry and neglected the laws of the Torah, both, those between man and G-d and those between man and his fellow. Many and various were the calls by the prophets of the day to the people of the Kingdom of Israel and their kings to return to HaShem and His Torah. Sometimes the people would rally themselves to *Teshuvah* but too often the warnings of exile and punishment for defecting from HaShem fell on deaf ears and indeed often the prophets who spoke out were in real danger of death. (Their crime: "defeatist talk in a time of national threat from an outside enemy.") Sadly, of course, the prophecies were fulfilled. At the time of our Haftorah, the danger was the empire-building aspirations of the king of Ashur, Tiglas Pilesser, and indeed it was not long before he invaded the Northern Kingdom and dragged some of its people into exile. The rest were taken into exile some forty years later.

HAFTORAH OF THE WEEK : נש"א

5. The first verse of the Haftorah (“Yaakov fled to the country of Arram and he worked hard to get a wife and then he had to work more to get the wife he wanted”) provides a clear link with the Sidra, although Hoshe’a mentions only incidentally Yaakov’s flight to Lovvon and how he had to work there for his wife. The message of Hoshe’a to the people of his time is that they should not be over-confident in their commercial success, as if it was due only to their own efforts and cleverness. See, says Hoshe’a, your ancestor Yaakov had to flee from his brother Aysov as a penniless pauper but it was HaShem Who blessed his efforts with success. And why did he deserve this supernatural success? asks Hoshe’a. Because he was devoted to HaShem and His Torah. If the people will continue to defy HaShem and refuse to return to the Mitzvos of His Torah, warns Hoshe’a, all would be lost: their wealth, their king, their country — everything.
6. Hoshe’a lived in the Northern Kingdom (during the reigns of Yerovom II ben Yo’ash and some of the assassins that followed him) and his prophecies and warnings are usually directed to the people of his own country. But he has a similar warning for the Southern Kingdom of Yehudah, for their conduct too has fallen way below the standard demanded by HaShem. They do not deal with one another fairly and they, too, formed alliances with foreign kings instead of relying on HaShem. They should take a lesson from the fate of the Northern Kingdom and return to HaShem before it is too late for them, too. If you all would but return to Me and My Torah, says Hoshe’a in the name of HaShem, I would protect you from all harm without your needing to form alliances with foreign rulers (who are unreliable in their promises, anyhow). Cease your disloyalty to Me and get rid of your idols, stop cheating each other in trade and commerce, pay attention to the defenceless and protect them. Stop justifying your ill-gotten gains and stop relying on your own strength and business acumen. Renounce your idols and return to HaShem and He will take you back, says Hoshe’a.
7. With all the predictions of punishment and exile, Hoshe’a prophesies that nevertheless even after HaShem has exiled the Jewish People from their land, He will take them back again for He has promised that never will He substitute any other people for the Jewish People.
8. It is perhaps difficult for us today to understand the lure of idolatry that seems to have so ensnared the ancient world and therefore a word of explanation is in place. In fact, the Gemorrah asks this very question. “Do you think that the Jewish People, who know Almighty G-d first hand and have themselves experienced His miracles, do you think that they are fools that they would prostrate themselves before sticks and stones? Only know this: Of course the Jewish People know the truth! But they have only ever worshipped idols because they wanted to allow themselves the worst kind of immorality — in public!” In other words, when the people sought release from the high standard of moral conduct that the Torah demands, they embraced idolworship as the new, more easy-going religion. But of course, the “new morality” is nothing but the old immorality. We should remember that this applies just as much to today’s calls from the so-called “liberated” “enlightened” “modern” people who try to justify their defection from Torah and we should be aware that as it was in ancient times so it is today, no less. (We might return to this topic at another opportunity.)
9. Another point that is necessary to explain is this: For all the harsh criticism of the Jewish kings of old for being the figureheads that were so crucial in the spiritual life of the nation (too often, but not always, for the bad) we must bear in mind that when compared to the kings of the nations of the world, these Jewish kings were paragons of virtue! The kings are openly criticised and made to account for their actions — but this is relative to the high moral standards demanded by the Torah. At the same time, their non-Jewish counterparts were nothing but thugs and murderers and robbers — and one can be sure that the bigger the “king,” the more cruel and merciless a despot he was. And this is true of the non-Jewish kings of recent centuries. Imagine what the monsters of two-and-a-half thousand years ago were like compared to even the worst of the Jewish kings! (Again, we might return to this topic, too, when the opportunity presents itself.)