

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : וישב

*This week's Haftorah is taken from Sefer Amos
(one of the shorter Books of the Prophets which together make up "The Twelve")
Chapter 2, verse 6 — Chapter 3, verse 8*

1. The prophet Amos lived in the northern Kingdom of Israel during a very unhappy time in that country's history. Even at the best of times, the Northern Kingdom was lackadaisical in their commitment to Torah and Mitzvos but at this time, egged on by their figurehead of a king, Yerovom II ben Yo'ash, who encouraged the people's estrangement from HaShem and His Torah, the country's fortunes, both spiritual and material, were going from bad to worse.
2. Although the message of warning and rebuke that Amos brought to the people was for the transgressions that the people of those times were committing, nevertheless the wording of Amos's prophecy from HaShem is such that our Chachommim see in it a reference to one or two main events that are in this week's Sidra and this, then, becomes the connexion between the Sidra and this Haftorah.
3. The Nevi'im often spoke to the non-Jewish peoples of their time, either in Eretz Yisroel in such a way that their words should be carried to their target people by those who heard the Novvi or sometimes, indeed, the Novvi was sent by HaShem on a mission to a foreign land to deliver his message there — as in the case of Yonah who was sent to Nineveh. This part of the Book of Amos contains a collection of such short but powerful messages. Amos uses a dramatic declaration as his opening words and he uses this declaration each time that he addresses his various audiences. The words grab the attention of his hearers and the burden of his message comes over clearly. The people must repent. There must be social justice and a cessation of exploitation of the poor and tormenting the weak, on a national scale and on an individual scale. "So says HaShem: Even if I am willing to overlook the three grave offences of Damascus of Arram-Syria ... but when she offends a fourth time — that I will not forgive!" Therefore, punishment will follow for that fourth offence — and for the other three, as well! "Even if I am willing to overlook the three grave offences of Aza of Philistia ... but when she offends a fourth time — that I will not forgive!" Therefore, punishment will follow for that fourth offence — and for the other three, as well! "So says HaShem: Even if I am willing to overlook the three grave offences of Tzor of Phoenecia ..." "Even if I am willing to overlook three grave offences of Edom ..." "Even if I am willing to overlook three grave offences of the Ammonites — but when they offended the fourth time ..." "For three grave offences of Mo'av ..." Although the "three grave offences" are not listed openly in the Pessukim, and neither is the fourth offence that tilted the scales against them, nevertheless to the people to whom Amos was speaking he made it quite clear what their offence was and that if they did not repent of their ways he warned of the quite specific punishment that would follow. Furthermore, the Jewish People are to take a warning from the punishment that will be meted out to their neighbours and understand that if they do not better their ways they too will suffer dire punishment for their offences, too.

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4. Then Amos addresses the Jewish People. To the Kingdom of Yehudah, which because of the Beis HaMikdash and Sanhedrin which were situated in their midst were always considered the more learned in Torah and more loyal to HaShem, he complains that they are neglecting the study of Torah and as a direct result are slipping in their observance of the Mitzvos.
5. To the people of the Kingdom of Israel, he declares (and this is the first Possuk of the Haftorah of this week): “So says HaShem: I am willing to overlook the three grave offences of the Kingdom of Israel ... but when she offends a fourth time — that I will not forgive!” Therefore, punishment will follow for that fourth offence — and for the other three, as well! It is this last-mentioned prophecy, which speaks of how corrupt some judges had become in their courtrooms, “that they would betray the righteous, innocent person for a bribe of silver and the trusting poor for as little as the price of a pair of shoes!” that provides the link with our Sidra. For this declaration is also an oblique reference to the sale of Yosef for twenty pieces of silver and that with that money, as the Midrash tells us, the brothers bought for themselves shoes.
6. One has to bear in mind that our Nevi'im were the outstanding Torah personalities of the Jewish People. But besides being the Torah teachers of the people, they were no less the spiritual guides and mentors of the Jewish People. As such, they were also the social critics of the society of the day. For that reason, while they were looked up to by the people generally and were recognized as the fearless champions of the downtrodden, they were at the same time feared and even hated by the ruling classes who were clearly responsible for so many of the faults of society. In this week's Haftorah, for instance, the people are warned not to try to silence the Novvi but to take to heart the words of the prophet, for he speaks in the name of HaShem and seeks only to improve the people. His warnings are ignored at our own peril.
7. Another thing to bear in mind is that it is often the way of the Novvi to speak of an extreme case of wrongdoing, quite possibly an only occurrence, of which he has been told or which is the common talk of the time just because of its shocking offence against normality, and he then lambastes the whole People for this offence, the intention being to warn the people of the extremes that their backsliding can eventually lead them. We should not be surprised, therefore, when the Novvi tells off the whole Nation for quite horrible offences as if these were things done by everybody. They were not. But there is the very strong bond of collective responsibility and the Novvi often tars the whole community with the same brush for, “All Israel is responsible one for the other.” On the other hand, one can only with difficulty try to imagine the contrast between the standard of behaviour of the non-Jewish world at the time of the Kingdoms of Yehudah and Israel. Even the most sophisticated of the nations of those times were like wild animals amongst whom the concepts of justice and compassion hardly existed. Truth be told, the contrast hardly bears thinking about.
8. But indeed just because of this collective responsibility is the criticism of the Novvi justified. Furthermore, the very fact that the perpetrators of these offences, however extraordinary though they might be, lived amongst us shows that they knew that their deed would be tolerated by us (for otherwise they would not have dared to do it) and for that tolerance of evil in our midst we have to assume some responsibility and indeed deserve criticism. Not only that. The point is often made by the Novvi that because of the special ancestors that we come from, because of the special qualities that are inherent in the Jewish people, therefore so much more is expected of us and so much more is the lapse in our standard of holiness and goodness to be deplored. The disappointment is that much deeper when the possibilities for good are so great. “*Noblesse oblige*,” that is, our being a part of the noble People of HaShem obliges us to greater goodness and higher standards of excellence. This was true then and it is true today.