

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : וַאֲרָא

***This week's Haftorah is taken from Sefer Yechezkel,
Chapter 28, verse 25 — Chapter 29, verse 21***

1. The common theme of the Sidra and its Haftorah is the punishment of Egypt. But there are different reasons for that punishment. The Egypt of the Sidra was punished for defying the command of HaShem to let us go free and its punishment was the series of the Ten Plagues. On the other hand, the punishment of the Egypt in the Haftorah, approximately one thousand years later, was, once again, because of Egypt's refusal to acknowledge that HaShem is the Sovereign of the world but also for Egypt's deceitful conduct towards the Jewish People, which, though nowhere near as cruel as the Egypt of our slavery, nevertheless did help to bring about great harm to the Jewish People.

2. At the time of our Haftorah, the world's political scene was dominated by the kingdom of Egypt and the growing world power of Babylon (roughly where Iraq and Iran are today). Babylon's king, Nevuchadnetzar, had his greedy eyes on the strategically-placed Land of Israel. Indeed, it is because of the Land of Israel's central position in the world that HaShem promised to Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov that their children shall inhabit that land, for He wishes them to influence the whole of mankind, to teach everyone of the Sovereignty of HaShem. The relatively narrow strip of land that is Eretz Yisroel is in fact a bridge between the two land masses that we call today Africa and the countries of Europe. Furthermore, this really rather small land connects all the world for it forms the seaboard along the Mediterranean Sea (the word "Mediterranean" means "middle of the earth" and that's what it is) and serves all that land which stretches all the way back to India and China. So, geographically, it is an important land, with much trade and commerce passing through and therefore the people who live there are ideally placed to influence the thinking and morals of all the nations of the world. That is our purpose and the purpose of our being given Eretz Yisroel. (See **SIDRA OF THE WEEK: כי תבא**)

3. But it is just because of its strategic importance that empire-builders have always wanted it and for exactly that reason that we have always needed HaShem's protection from the invader and the conqueror. Thus, when we are loyal to HaShem and His Torah and conscientiously keep His Mitzvos, then our Land and our People come directly under HaShem's protection. Even though we are encircled by enemies and covetous peoples, a veritable single sheep surrounded by seventy wolves, we are nevertheless safe under HaShem and we are living proof of HaShem and how we are His special covenanted People of the Torah. But when we turn away from HaShem and His Torah, then HaShem lets natural events and consequences take their course and conquerors and invaders threaten the peace of our land and its people. When that happens, two options present themselves. Our rulers can try to form allegiances with other local rulers and kings to fend off the threatened invaders. Or we can return to HaShem and His Torah and be protected directly by Him again.

4. Unfortunately, despite the warnings of our Nevi'im to return to HaShem and be protected by Him, the kings of Israel at the time of our Haftorah were persuaded to form alliances with the local kings to stand against Nevuchadnetzar. Even though Nevuchadnetzar had already started to lay siege to Yerushalaim and had declared his intentions of conquering Eretz Yisroel, the Jewish king thought that with the help of Egypt he could withstand the invader. For his part, Par'o Chofra, king of Egypt, coaxed the Jewish king to rely on his friendship and alliance and thus knowingly encouraged the Jewish People to ignore the warnings of the Nevi'im and to stand in rebellion against HaShem and His Torah. (Later, of course, Par'o returned to his country with his army and treacherously left the Jewish

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people to fall under the heel of Nevuchadnetzar who then destroyed the Beis HaMikdash and exiled the Jewish People to Babylon.)

5. But besides this deceit, Egypt and its king were guilty of direct rebellion against HaShem for their king proclaimed himself to be a god, saying, “Mine is the River Nile, the source of all Egypt’s wealth and weal, and I made myself!” In this, he, together with his minions, chose to follow in the footsteps of the Par’o of old who likewise claimed to be a god and not at all answerable to HaShem. For all this, proclaims Yechezkel in the name of HaShem, the Egyptian king and his people would now suffer forty years of exile. The land of Egypt shall be desolated, its people dispersed among the nations of the world. Even when they return after these forty years, they will never again achieve their powerful position among the nations of the world but they shall remain forever a lowly people among the nations.
6. This is the warning concerning Egypt proclaimed by Yechezkel and at the same time, of course, it is a warning to the Jewish People, too. But Egypt is deserving of punishment for taking a lead in misleading the Jewish People because they, more than any other nation, themselves had experienced the Hand of HaShem. Even though this was a thousand years earlier, nevertheless the Hand of HaShem against the Egyptians then was a clear and undeniable part of the people of Egypt. They, therefore, who knew of the almightiness of HaShem and His relationship with the Jewish People, should not have helped to entice the Jewish People away from the Torah by offering to form an alliance with them against the threat of Nevuchadnetzar, the king of Babylon.
7. Egypt’s foretold punishment was proclaimed against that people within the hearing of the Jewish People. For this prophecy is also to serve as a warning to the Jewish People, that when the time of reckoning comes, HaShem will also hold responsible all those who aided and abetted the Jewish People’s rebellion against HaShem for HaShem is the Father of all Mankind and Sovereign of all the world and He keeps careful account of all the misdeeds of all the peoples of the world.
8. The Haftorah then continues with another prophecy that Yechezkel is to proclaim, this time concerning Nevuchadnetzar. For not only does HaShem keep account of the misdeeds of the peoples of the world, He also keeps account of the frustrations and difficulties that they experience, too. Thus, sometimes a king and his fighting men might have tried hard to fight a battle against a people but HaShem does not grant that they should be successful for the victim does not at that time deserve such a fate. Nevertheless, sometimes HaShem considers that the frustrated fighter deserves some prize. So HaShem allows them another victory but this time over a people whom they did not even consider they could vanquish. And so it comes about that HaShem arranges that that people whom in HaShem’s “accounting book” is deserving of punishment, falls victim and becomes the reward of the other. In our Haftorah, Yechezkel is told to prophecy that Nevuchadnetzar, who had expended a great deal of effort in besieging the city of Tyre to conquer it, but without success, shall now prepare himself to take Egypt for its time for punishment had now arrived. HaShem has granted Nevuchadnetzar the country of Egypt as his consolation prize.
9. For us, the timeless lesson in all this is clear, namely, that behind the scenes of momentous events of the world, it is HaShem Who rules everything and everything is weighed in His scales of justice. And, in common with the declared theme of the Sidra “that you all shall know that I am HaShem, your G-d, Sovereign and Controller of all the world,” the Haftorah too restates that fact and teaches us that all Mankind shall acknowledge that HaShem is the Sovereign of the world.
10. Even the mighty Nevuchadnetzar eventually fell before Persia, Persia was conquered by Greece and Greece by Rome. Empires come and go but the eternal people of the Torah lives on. The way in which HaShem orders the events of powerful kings and the world’s nations, declares Yechezkel, should also be an encouragement to the Jewish People. For they can always return to HaShem and even after they are exiled for their disobedience to Him, the time will come when they will repent and HaShem will take them back again.