

HAFTORAH OF THE WEEK : בהעלותך

***This week's Haftorah is taken from Sefer Zecharyah
(one of the shorter Books of the Prophets which make up "The Twelve")
from Chapter 2, verse 14 till Chapter 4 verse 7.***

(This Haftorah is also read on the first Shabbos Channukah.)

1. Looking back to the time before the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash built by Shlomo, it was unthinkable that the Jewish People, so well-established in their country and seemingly so secure, could have been exiled or that the holy Beis HaMikdash could be destroyed. But the Prophets earnestly warned that if the Jewish People would not better their ways and observe the Torah and Mitzvos properly, their warnings would become reality and the calamity would come. And happen it did. Nevuchadnetzar the king of Babylon invaded Eretz Yisroel, destroyed the Beis HaMikdash and dragged the People into exile in Babylon. But Yirmiyohu had foretold, too, that the Babylonian exile would last seventy years. Then, he said, when the people will have returned to HaShem and His Torah, they will return to Eretz Yisroel and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash. The obvious question was, "When will the return happen?" When, in fact, do the seventy years begin and end? Time would tell.
2. During their years in exile, the Jewish People had got used to living in strange lands. Sadly, many of the Jewish people had intermingled with the inhabitants of their lands of exile and intermarriage was rampant. People asked, "How can there ever be a return if the people are not worthy?" The leaders of the exiled nation tried hard to arouse the people to return to HaShem and His Torah and merit their return to Eretz Yisroel and the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash. But too many of the Jewish people were quite happy now where they were. It took the shock of Hommon to rouse the people to Teshuvah.
3. Following their return to HaShem, the Persian king gave permission for the Beis HaMikdash to be rebuilt and he actively encouraged the Jewish People to go and build up Eretz Yisroel again. But with this, came the jealousy of the Samaritans. These people were originally a break-away group from the Jewish People who had abandoned the observance of Torah and Mitzvos and they took their name from the region of Shomron, that is Samaria, where they lived. The Samaritans and their fellow transplants the Kutheans, who were brought by Sargon, the king of Asshur, from Kutta in Africa to repopulate the Holy Land after its desolation, had both quite a reputation for being cruel and they tried their utmost to strangle at birth the reborn Jewish state.

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Their libels to the Persian king about the Jewish returnees caused the permission to be revoked (the rebuilding was suspended for some years) and their physical attacks caused the Jewish People great harm and hardship.

4. [The Christians speak of “the good Samaritan.” Nowadays, of course, most people don’t know that the Samaritans were really quite malevolent, especially to us, and to contrast the “good Samaritan” with the mean Jew, as that Christian fable does, is about as twisted and insulting as to contrast a “kindly Nazi” with “a hard-hearted Jew.” It was intended at the time as a deliberate insult to the Jewish People and surely the organization of today called “The Samaritans” who do some very good work among the emotionally disturbed and the distressed, would not want to associate themselves with this kind of primitive nastiness. They should do themselves a favour and find a more suitable name!]
5. Zecharyah HaNovvi ben Berachia (not to be confused with Zecharyah ben Yehoyodoh, the Kohen Ga’dol and prophet who was murdered in the Beis HaMikdash on the orders of Yo’ash, King of Yehudah in the year 3067, approximately 375 years earlier) lived at the end of the Babylonian Exile and at the beginning of the era of the Second Beis HaMikdash. Zecharyah was a member of the Anshay Knesses HaGedoloh (the “Men of the Great Assembly”) which was the special Sanhedrin convened by Ezra. This Great Assembly consisted, unusually, of 120 rather than 71 of the greatest Torah leaders and included such personages as Nechemyoh, Mordechai, Chagai, Malachi and Zerubovvel. It functioned as the Jewish supreme legislative body for altogether eighty-six years.
6. Nevuchadnetzar had destroyed the Beis HaMikdash and the Jewish People had been dragged into exile, exactly as foretold by Yirmiyohu HaNovvi and approximately 70 years later, the mighty, invincible Babylonian empire of Nevuchadneztar was in its death throes and the Jewish exiles were about to return to Eretz Yisroel. With the demise of the Babylonian Empire, the new up-and-coming empire of Persia (with Media) was waiting to take centre stage of world affairs and it was an anxious time for the Jewish People. Under the Persians, the Jewish People hoped, they would go back to Eretz Yisroel and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash.
7. Zecharyah comes with a message of encouragement to the leaders of the Jewish People. There were two outstanding leaders at the time, Yehoshua ben Yehotzodok, who was to be the first Kohen Ga’dol of the rebuilt Beis HaMikdash, and Zerubovvel ben She’altiel (whom our Chachommim identify with Nechemyoh, (the name is from the word for “comfort” and means “HaShem will comfort”) who, together with Ezra, was so instrumental in bringing many of the exiles back to Eretz Yisroel. But in common with all prophecies of NaCH, Zecharyah’s message is not for his time only. His words of encouragement and about the end of the national exile speak of events that are far into the future, too. Specifically they are seen by our Chachommim as referring also to the

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events of Channukah. (This is one of the reasons for the choice of this Haftorah for Shabbos Channukah.) Zecharyah speaks of the Jewish People being acknowledged again by all the nations as being HaShem's Chosen People and he warns that HaShem will mete out just punishment to those nations that harmed His People in their exile.

8. In his prophecy, Zecharyah describes how Yehoshua ben Yehotzodok, the Kohen Ga'dol, stands accused in the Heavenly Court of not doing enough to stop the rampant assimilation — even his own sons married non-Jewish women. (As a result of this vision, so vividly described by Zecharyah, it appears that they did later divorce their foreign wives and Yehoshua is confirmed as the Kohen Ga'dol.) Zecharyah gives much encouragement to the leaders of the Jewish People in every generation, and even if they are criticised (and might even deserve criticism) nevertheless HaShem has chosen them to guide the Jewish People in the ways of the Torah. Zecharyah says that HaShem will protect and prosper the Nation in rebuilding the Beis HaMikdash and he predicts that the people will be settled in peace and prosperity on their land once again.
9. Zecharyah is next shown in a dream a vision of a miraculous Menorah. (This is the Haftorah's connexion with this Sidra and also its connexion with Shabbos Channukah.) The Menorah is of gold, above it is a reservoir of oil, with pipes feeding oil to each of the Menorah's seven lamps. And there are two tall olive trees above the Menorah, on either side of the reservoir, with oil flowing from them into the reservoir — in other words, the Menorah is self-sustaining. Zecharyah is told the meaning of this vision: The Menorah, the symbol of divine light and wisdom, needs nobody to do anything to fashion it: it is all from HaShem. The light that is to guide us in our lives is not of our own making; it is from HaShem. All that is needed is that we be resolved to be guided by its light, to benefit from its radiance.
10. Similarly, says HaShem to Zecharyah, tell Zerubovvel — and by extension, all those selfless and brave leaders of the Jewish People in all ages and in all places (another oblique reference in this Haftorah to the Chashmono'im leaders and fighters of the Channukah that was to occur in the future) — that it is not with the might of arms nor by their physical strength that they will succeed on behalf of My People. Only through My Spirit will the leaders of My People achieve anything for them — so says HaShem. But tell them, says HaShem, that those leaders have no need to be afraid of anyone. Even if their antagonists be as haughty and intimidating as a mountain, they will be no more of an obstacle than a level plain, they will all but disappear. Reverting to the immediate future of his time, Zecharyah assures Zerubovvel that the rebuilt Beis HaMikdash, with the foundation stone laid by Zerubovvel, will be admired by the Nations of the world and all will see that HaShem protects His Chosen People.