

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : מסעי

***This week's Haftorah is taken from Sefer Yirmiyohu,
from Chapter 2 verse 4 till verse 28.
After that, Ashkenazzim add verse 4 from Chapter 3
and Sefaraddim add further the first two verses from Chapter 4.***

1. As was pointed out in last week's Haftorah sheet, the weekly Haftorahs now until the end of the Sidras of the Torah have a connexion with the calendar rather than with the Sidra of the Week. The "three Haftorahs of warning and rebuke" which started with last week's Haftorah lead up to Tisha b'Av. This week's Haftorah is really a continuation of the warning and rebuke by Yirmiyohu that was last week's Haftorah.
2. The point has been mentioned before that although the Jewish People through the ages merited to have "as many prophets as double the number of people coming out from Egypt," nevertheless only those prophecies which carry a message for future generations were included in the timeless Holy Scriptures. Those prophecies that were only topical or were only for a specific situation were not included.
3. This gives rise to the following question: Seeing that the warnings of many of our Nevi'im were against the idolworship that was rampant in those times (as indeed is the Haftorah of this week) and seeing that the silliness of idolworship was something that existed only in those times and was bound to disappear as people became more knowledgeable and sophisticated, how does it come about that these prophecies concerning idolatry should be part of Holy Scripture — and such a great proportion of Holy Scripture, too? After all, the absurdity of the idolworship of the ancient world is exactly that — it was nothing but a passing fad in the ancient world! So why should the prophecies and warnings about them be a part of the timeless Holy Scriptures?
4. The simple answer is that idolatry takes many forms and idolatry in modern times takes modern forms. So the prophecies about idolatry are not at all restricted to "those times" — they apply very much to today. *(For a further discussion about idolatry, see also the explanation sheet to the HAFTORAH OF ויקרא.)*
5. But it could also be that these prophecies and words of rebuke are not referring to the idolworship of those times, which in its crudely primitive form was only of limited duration (and which should not therefore be part of the timeless Holy Scriptures) so much as to the disloyalty of turning away from HaShem and His Torah. This turning away from HaShem can indeed be a temptation present in all times and all places.
6. First of all, we have to acknowledge that the ancients were not fools or idiots — and this is especially true of the Jews of ancient times. But idolatry was alluring and the Novvi often has to paint a dramatic picture to portray the foolishness of idolworship,

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with the bowing and scraping before sticks and stones, in ridiculous contrast with the pure worship of HaShem. In this Haftorah, too, the folly of idolworship is taken for granted and Yirmiyohu contrasts this fraudulent “religion” with a life of Torah and Mitzvos. Nevertheless, the main target of Yirmiyohu’s rebuke is rather the people’s folly and their stupidity in deserting HaShem and His Torah. “Ask from one end of the earth to the other,” says HaShem “whether such a nonsense has ever happened! You, the heavens, who have seen all kinds of bizarre happenings down here on earth, be astonished! Has ever a nation exchanged its rubbishy gods for other gods? No! And that’s talking of their rubbishy gods! Yet My Nation, which is honoured by all as the Nation of HaShem, has senselessly swapped their Glory for nothingness, for things that are of no use!” It’s the utter senselessness of it, Yirmiyohu proclaims, that is so unforgivable.

7. For us today to sneer and scoff at the Jewish people of those times, implying that they were somewhat soft in the head whereas we today are oh-so-clever and would never fall for the stupidity of idolworship is to miss the point of Yirmiyohu’s criticism. Yirmiyohu’s criticism is not so much about the idolworship; it is more because of our disloyalty to HaShem, to trust in inferior beings rather than in HaShem. HaShem says, “My People has done a double wrong. Firstly, they have forsaken Me, their source of living water. That would have been bad enough. But what have they taken instead? They make for themselves cracked cisterns which not only do they not give water, they cannot even hold the good water that is poured into them!”
8. The crude idolworship of those days was indeed only a passing phase, an aberration, a learning mistake in Mankind’s spiritual development. But as far as the Jewish People is concerned, *their* offence is their disloyalty to HaShem. They never needed to learn about HaShem through the mistake of idolatry because they have always known HaShem first hand. Their idolworship is not a real religious quest; it is nothing but a stupid excuse for wantonness. Their real offence is their disloyalty. Sadly, that fault, disloyalty to HaShem, is very much with us today and Yirmiyohu’s prophecy therefore does indeed apply all too well to all times — our times included.
9. So, even if it is true that a prophecy concerning the sin of idolworship as such is “not for all times,” sadly the temptation to be disloyal to HaShem and His Torah still exists and these warnings are unfortunately very much applicable in all ages. In olden days it was turning to cults and superstitions; at other times it was placing trust in alliances and treaties. In more modern times, it has been placing our trust in socialism or capitalism or communism or any of the host of “isms” that abound or, today, to place our trust in presidents and prime ministers of “friendly nations,”
10. The fact is that for Jewish people to pursue anything as an ideal at the expense of Torah and Mitzvos deserves the very same criticism by Yirmiyohu. His warnings and prophecies apply just as much as they did to the people of his time. We need these words of warning and rebuke today every bit as much as the people needed them in the time of the Nevi’im. The prophecies are indeed timeless and it would be well for us to listen carefully to what the Nevi’im tell us through the ages, down to our own day.