

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : דברים

This Haftorah is from Chapter 1 of Sefer Yeshayohu, verses 1 — 27.

1. This Haftorah is the third of the three Haftorahs of Warning and Rebuke and is always read on the Shabbos before Tisha b'Av, the anniversary of the Destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. In this Haftorah, Yeshayohu chastises the Jewish people of his day for their rebellion against HaShem. But this rebellion is not a rebellion in the usual sense, where a group of people rise up to dethrone a king or depose a ruler. Rather, this rebellion consists of the various offences against HaShem's Torah that are so fiercely criticised by Yeshayohu. With his prophetic eye looking into the future, Yeshayohu warns the people that he sees Eretz Yisroel desolated, its towns burned to the ground, its produce expropriated by the invader, the Beis HaMikdash in ruins.
2. He rebukes the people as being ungrateful to HaShem for all that He has done for them and for their refusal to accept their responsibilities as HaShem's People. "See, heaven and earth, how I have reared children and raised them high, but they have rebelled against Me! Even an ox knows its owner; even a donkey knows its master. Yet Yisroel doesn't want to know Me any more, My People refuse to understand what is expected of them and they rebel against Me!" It was this rebellion against the Torah that would lead to the fall of the Jewish state, to the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash and to the exile of the People from their Land, calamities that Yeshayohu, by rousing the people to better their ways, tried so hard to avert.
3. Yeshayohu rebukes the people for their mechanical rituals, empty of any feeling: "Hear the word of HaShem, you selfish princes of S'dom! Listen to the instruction by HaShem, you self-seeking people of Amora! Do I then want your numerous sacrifices, brought without sincerity? You oppress the weak and then come to My Temple to bring sacrifices! Do you imagine that your sham Divine Service pleases Me? You come on pilgrimage to My Sanctuary — but if you ignore the rights of the oppressed, do you think I care for you to come trampling with your muddy boots in My Holy Palace? Who asked this of you? Not I! I don't want your insincere offerings; I reject your sacrifices, your prayers, your petitions for blessing, because your hands are stained with the blood of innocent people who have been wronged! Cease your exploitation of the weak and vulnerable, put a halt to your bribery and corruption! Instead, train yourselves to do good! Seek justice for the wronged, relieve the oppressed from their burdens, defend the unprotected orphan, fight for the defenceless widow!"
4. This Haftorah is read just before Tisha b'Av so as to bring to mind our duties and as an exhortation to us that we should improve our ways. The result will be that the exiles of the Jewish People will be gathered back again into our Holy Land, to live again in security under the sovereignty of HaShem and in obedience to His Torah, with the Beis HaMikdash rebuilt and functioning as in the days of yore.
5. The fiery denunciation of the Jewish People by Yeshayohu — and indeed by other Nevi'im, too — calls for a word of explanation. Despite the sweeping condemnation by

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the Nevi'im of the whole Jewish Nation, by no means was the whole of the Jewish People guilty of the offences that he criticises. To be sure, there were some people who were bad, and there were even people in high positions who were guilty of wrongdoing. But they were only a tiny proportion of the Nation as a whole. Nevertheless, the very fact that such people are tolerated in our midst does implicate us all, for if we tolerate wrongdoing we thereby condone it — and that is the complaint of the Novvi. Wrongdoing must not have a home in the Jewish People! Even a small number of wrongdoers taints the whole Nation.

6. To our ears, the language of the Novvi might sometimes seem to be very harsh, giving rise perhaps to the thought that some of the wrongdoing must have been very bad indeed to have evoked such severe criticism. Yet we have to remember that the Nevi'im did not mince their words and in addition they often spoke with deliberately attention-grabbing dramatic effect, too. If they saw something wrong, or if they heard of some shameful episode that reflected badly on the whole Nation, they spoke out fearlessly. Indeed, sometimes the wrongdoing was known only to HaShem and He told the Novvi to speak out. But in the same way that a stranger who listens behind the door while a father shouts at his son is bound to think to himself that the son must have done something really terrible to deserve such a telling-off, the fact is that the father speaks so harshly, not so much because the offence was so grave but more because the father knows the great potential of his son and that he expects so much more from him. So, too, is it with our Nevi'im. They know, as does HaShem Whose spokesmen they are, the great goodness of the Jewish People — and that makes the disappointment all the greater.
7. In much the same way, the modern-day constant, carping criticism by the Nations of the World of Jewish people (and of those entities which they see as Jewish) about things that they do (yet which they do not see as a fault in other peoples — after all, the same criticism can be levelled at others for very much the same things, or even worse, but never is) shows that the Nations of the World do indeed expect a higher standard of conduct from the Jewish People. In this light, the anti-Semitism (or Jew-hatred) that lies at the root of much of this criticism is in itself a back-handed compliment because it is an acknowledgement of the higher standard that is expected of us. There is no intention here to whitewash any wrongdoings; it's just to put things in proper perspective. That is, because of our antecedents we have a greater potential to be an ennobling influence in the world and our Nevi'im therefore demand more from us, as indeed does HaShem Himself, too. And in their own curious way, so do the Nations of the World (united or not).
8. Together with their harsh words of rebuke and warning, our Nevi'im always brought from HaShem a message of reconciliation and in this Haftorah are some of the most touching words of forgiveness. “Come, let us reason together,” says HaShem to his wayward People, “I tell you that even if your sins be as scarlet, if you will repent of your bad ways I will obliterate any trace of wrongdoing and you will be as white as new wool! If you be willing to obey Me, I will give to you to enjoy the best of the land! I will purify you and remove all your dross. Your capital city will once again be recognized as the City of Righteousness, the City of Faith in G-d! The Jewish People, driven into exile, will be redeemed from their exile in the merit of their justice and care for the poor and the disadvantaged and her lost ones will be returned home in the merit of righteousness.”