



Parashat Va-yeishev
Amos 2:6-3:8
December 13, 2014 / 21 Kislev 5775

Amos is the oldest of the literary prophets, one of the few who speak directly to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, whose kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. He is the paradigm of the prophet who, while leading a simple life, is called against his will but cannot refuse the command of God to preach to the people. At the beginning of his book, he is described as a simple "sheep breeder from Tekoa" (Amos 1:1). At the end of our haftarah, he proclaims, "My Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?" (3:8).

The haftarah for Va-Yeishev begins with a poetic "step parallelism" (for three transgressions...for four) which finds its greatest Biblical presentation here in Amos. The previous chapters were similar pronouncements against the six nations that surround Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. One would have expected Amos to stop with Judah, as the number seven is a significant number throughout the Torah. By surprising his listeners (and readers) with an eighth prophecy, Amos reveals his true target as the Northern Kingdom, the so called Ten Tribes, who will later become lost to history.

The focus of the haftarah is a problem that is at the same time both ancient and modern—the corruption of so called religious leaders and institutions and the people who frequent them. Their transgressions are both immoral and criminal. The immoral acts include a father and son having relations with the same woman, drinking wine in sanctuaries devoted to the Lord (during this time, the Northern Kingdom had its own religious/cultic shrines, such as in Beth El) and inducing nazirites, who are forbidden from drinking wine, to drink it. The criminal acts include selling poor (and even righteous) people into slavery and improperly taking garments as pledges in loans.

Amos strikes an unmistakable and loud warning to the people that their immoral and unethical actions will be called to account by God. This is especially true of the people of Israel, for whom God has greater expectations, because "you alone I have singled out..." (3:3). In beautiful poetic fashion, Amos reminds the people that their evil acts have consequences, even if they do not see it immediately, as "Can two walk together without having met? Does the lion roar in the forest who has no prey?" (3:3-4).

The haftarah connects to the Torah portion in multiple ways. Joseph, who in Rabbinic literature is called the tzadik (righteous one) is sold by his brothers into slavery. Judah and his sons both have relations with the same woman, his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Ultimately these actions in the

Torah have consequences that may not be seen immediately, but influence the future. Judah repents and ultimately one of his descendants will be King David. Joseph's brothers come to realize that they must protect each other, as they do with Simon and Benjamin and are ultimately reunited with Joseph.

Unfortunately this was not true of the Northern Kingdom. In spite of the warnings of Amos, they did not change their ways and were ultimately overrun by their enemies. The message to us is clear: our actions have consequences, both in the days of the Bible and in our lives today.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Steve Kane, Congregation Sons of Israel, Briarcliff Manor, NY. Rabbi Kane was ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1985. He holds a Master's Degree in Judaic Studies and a Bachelor of Hebrew Literature degree from the University of Judaism as well as a BA from Washington University in St. Louis and an honorary Doctorate from JTS.