



**Haftarah Va-yetzei  
Hosea 12:13-14:10  
November 20, 2015 / 8 Kislev 5775**

In order to understand this haftarah and its relationship to the Torah portion and the message it desires to share with us; it is necessary to understand the context in which it allegedly took place. We assume that Hosea lived between 769-698 B.C.E., this is what we refer to as the 8th Century. At the time, what we refer to today as Israel, was actually two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom which called was called "Israel" and the Southern Kingdom, which is referred to in the text as "Ephraim", was originally referred to as "Judah". The kingdom of Judah or Ephraim consisted of Jerusalem and its environs.

The haftarah begins with a reference to Jacob fleeing to the land of Aram. Aram refers to what today we call Syria. This is the obvious connection to the Torah portion because on Shabbat morning we would have read about Jacob's flight to Aram. Let's face it it's a weak connection. I would hope that those who selected this portion to serve as the haftarah had something else in mind.

If this portion was written prior to 722, which was when the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was captured and destroyed by the Assyrians, one could understand the prophet observing the steady encroachment of the Assyrian empire and warning the people (the government consisting of priests and royalty) to repent. If the portion was written afterwards it could still serve as a warning.

If one begins to read from the beginning of Chapter 12 some of this becomes explainable.

"Ephraim surrounds Me with deceit, The House of Israel with guile. Ephraim is forever adding Illusion to calamity. Now they make a covenant with Assyria" 12:1-3

With this in mind, it seems that the prophet recognizes that Judah, (Ephraim, Jerusalem) has strayed and was adopting Baal worship, in a way similar that of the Northern Kingdom, and look what happened to them!

One can imagine how the rabbis felt one thousand or so years later, in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of the 2nd Temple, at a time when rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism of the Mishna and the emerging Talmud was being developed when they read the words of Hosea. One could think they selected this particular prophetic passage as the haftarah because they were attempting to unite the people in a common vision, one that fostered the belief that God would return them to the Promised Land when specific circumstances were met. But I'm not

sure because I think the rabbis reinterpreted Hosea's message so that it was understood differently from the time it was originally written.

I doubt they would have understood it as a tool to promote a return to the homeland but they could have used it as a proof text to encourage the people to observe Jewish law in the manner they were interpreting it.

Let me explain. It is possible that the selection of this passage as a haftarah reflected the rabbis' hidden agenda. Many of the Rabbis who lived in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba rebellion 135 B.C.E. migrated to Babylon. Babylon was one of the most sophisticated societies of the ancient world and already had a substantial Jewish community; one that had been exiled from Judah to Babylon five hundred years earlier. In the period between the 3rd and what some people claim to be the 7th centuries the Gemara, the major part of the Talmud was formulated. The Talmud reflected the religious and social understanding of the rabbis. It was highly unlikely that the rabbis believed that the creation of a 3rd Jewish nation was going to occur immediately. They left that to Messianic times. Yet they believed that by living a certain way, one could hasten the coming of the Messiah.

The haftarah could have been selected because it appealed to individuals. The rabbis could have conjectured that people's faith would be reinforced when they read the words of Hosea. It is possible that the people living at that time weren't looking for national guidance any more than we are today. They were looking for spiritual guidance.

What would be advisable to think about when reading this haftarah? Frankly, living in a world divided between two political parties is just like living during the time when the Northern and Southern Kingdom were fighting for survival. I don't need to think about that, especially if I watch CNN or read any serious newspaper. I know how it is playing out.

On the other hand for individuals seeking guidance from our traditions we can gain strength from the concluding words of the text.

"He who is wise will consider these words, He who is prudent will take note of them. For the paths of the Lord are smooth; the righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble."

*This week's Haftarah commentary was written for the Unraveller by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Biblical Leadership After Moses," "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership."*