

## ***Parashat Vaera* Exodus 6:2-9:36 - Haftarah Ezekiel 28:25-29:21 – January 1, 2022**

*Parashat Vaera* continues the story we know so well from its annual Pesach seder retelling. The battle of wills between God and Pharaoh begins: Moshe tells Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go free; he refuses. We read of the first 7 of the 10 plagues brought upon Egypt: water turned to blood; frogs; lice; flies; cattle plague; boils; hail. Pharaoh remains resolute in refusing to let them go; 3 times he agrees, only to change his mind afterward, hardening his heart each time.

In the haftarah that goes B'yachad, together, with the parashah, Ezekiel speaks of a time of restoration for the nation of Israel, in conjunction with 2 prophecies of doom for Egypt; these events took place around the time of the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE). Israel will be resettled securely in the land, while Egypt will be exiled from hers for 40 years (exactly the amount of time Israel spent in the wilderness).

There is a strong connection between the Torah and haftarah readings: God reiterates that all these things will take place so that “they will know that I am *Adonai*.” These words appear 5 times in the haftarah, once directed at Israel (28:26), 4 times at Egypt (29:6, 9, 16). The same or similar phraseology occurs 6 times in the *parashah*, once in reference to Israel (Exodus 6:7), once the Egyptians (7:5), and 4 times Pharaoh himself (7:17, 7:6, 8:18, 9:14). Clearly, both the people of Israel and Egypt need to be convinced of Hashem’s power.

Four times each in the parsha and the haftarah, we read the phrase, “**אֲנִי יְהוָה**”, “... I am the Lord”. There can be no doubt Who is Redeeming the people of Israel.

## ***Parashat Bo Exodus 10:1-13:16 Haftarah Jeremiah 46:13-28 - January 8, 2022***

*Parashat Bo* continues the story of the Exodus, beginning with the description of the last of the plagues: locusts, then darkness; both times Pharaoh agrees to let them go, and once again changes his mind. Finally, there is the death of the firstborn. God instructs the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and put the blood on the doorposts; for 7 days they are to eat unleavened bread.

In the haftarah Jeremiah issues 2 prophecies of doom against Egypt, predicting its downfall at the hands of the Babylonian King Nebuchednezzar. Egypt will be punished for having enslaved Israel. These messages are followed by 2 messages containing the promise that Israel will be released from Babylonian captivity.

The Torah portion and haftarah are connected *beyachad* very strongly by language. The name of the *parashah*, *Bo*, comes from the verb *lavo*, to come. This same verb appears in various forms 5 times in the haftarah (*lavo* in verse 13; *yavo*, it will come, v. 18; *ba*, comes, twice, v. 20 and again in v. 21; *ba-u*, they come, v. 22). There is also a homonym, *bo* (spelled with a vav instead of an aleph), meaning “on him”, appearing in verse 25.

The first plague in the *parashah* is locusts; the enemy in the haftarah is described as coming down like locusts (v. 23).

Finally, and most importantly, in the *parashah*, God finally exacts punishment on the Pharaoh of Egypt for refusing to let the people of Israel go free, demonstrating very vividly *Hashem's* power and authority over the gods of Egypt; in the *haftarah*, Jeremiah foretells that the God of Israel will inflict punishment “on Pharaoh—on Egypt, her gods and her kings...” (v. 25) The prophet speaks of the end of Egypt's reign.

Reading the *parashah* and the haftarah together delivers a powerful message: ours is a God who keeps promises.

## ***Parashat Beshallah* Exodus 13:17-17:16 - Haftarah Judges 4:4-5:31 - January 15, 2022**

*Parashat Beshallah* tells the dramatic story of our liberation from Egypt, and the parting of the Red Sea; the Israelites pass through on dry land, escaping Pharaoh and his army. Similarly in the haftarah the judge and prophetess Deborah and her husband Barak celebrate an unprecedented military victory over the Canaanites.

Both stories are told as narratives, and then as a beautiful song of praise. There are numerous things connecting these two texts *B'yachad*, together. Moses' song begins with the word  $\text{אָ}$ , then (Ex. 15:1); this word appears 5 times in Deborah's song (Judges 5:8,11,13,19,22). Moses' first words are  $\text{אָשִׁירָה לַיהוָה}$ , *ashira ladoshem*, I will sing to the Lord (15:1); this is echoed in the haftarah (5:3). Both texts speak of  $\text{עֹז}$ , strength (15:2, 5:21), the chariots ( $\text{מַרְכָּבֹת}$ ) of the enemy (15:4, 5:28), and their horses (5:22, 15:1— $\text{סוּסִים}$ ). Pharaoh's army is swept away in the Red Sea (15: 4-5), the Canaanites in the Kishon River (5:21). We read that not one ( $\text{עַד־אֶחָד}$ ) of either Pharaoh's (14:28) or Sisera's (4:16) men survived.

More importantly, there are strong women represented in both texts. Miriam led the women of Israel in song and dance in praise of Hashem; military victory in the book of Judges was brought about through Deborah and Yael. This Shabbat, Shabbat Shirah, is designated as Women's League Shabbat.

## ***Parashat Yitro Exodus 18:1-20:23***

### ***Haftarah Ashkenazim: Isaiah 6:1-7:6 and 9:5-6***

### ***Haftarah Sephardim: Isaiah 6:1-13 - January 22, 2022***

*Parashat Yitro* is named for Moshe's his father-in-law, who visited Israel in the desert, praising God and bringing a sacrifice when he heard about all that *Hashem* had done to redeem Israel from slavery. Seeing that Moshe was overwhelmed by trying to judge all the matters brought to him by the people, Yitro suggested he set up a system of judges to be rulers over thousands, then hundreds, fifties and finally tens: the first judicial system! The Israelites then journeyed to Sinai, where they witnessed Moses going up to receive the 10 Commandments from *Hashem*, amidst clouds, thunder, lightning, and shofar blasts.

In Isaiah's prophecy from the *haftarah*, dated approximately 724 BCE, he experiences a vision of God sitting on a throne, surrounded by angels who fly around singing God's praises. Isaiah is instructed to foretell the doom of the nation, and, ultimately, the redeemer that will come to sit on the throne of David and rule in peace.

The *parashah* begins with the establishment of a system of justice and ends with the revelation at Sinai; the *haftarah* reverses the order, beginning with revelation and ending with the establishment of justice. In Exodus, God recounts carrying the people of Israel "on eagle's wings" (10:4); in Isaiah's vision, God is surrounded by angels that have 6 wings each (6:2). The angels declare God holy (6:3); God says that Israel will be a "holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Both the people of Israel and Isaiah are afraid to look upon God; Mt. Sinai was *שע*, filled with smoke (20:15); so was the Temple for Isaiah (6:4). Mt. Sinai trembled (19:18), as did the walls of the Temple in Isaiah's vision (9:4). The people heard God's voice at Sinai (19:9), as did Isaiah (19:8).

Isaiah received a personal revelation of God; and we are enjoined to envision ourselves personally standing at Sinai. The opportunity for each of us to have a personal encounter with *Hashem* is still offered to us today; we encounter the Divine daily through prayer and study.

## ***Parashat Mishpatim Exodus 21:1-24:16***

### ***Haftarah: Jeremiah 34:8-22 and 33:25-26 - January 29, 2022***

In this week's parshah, Hashem continues to list the mishpatim, the laws, which form the terms of the brit (covenant) that defines the relationship between God and Israel. The list begins with laws governing the treatment of male and female slaves, then outlines laws regarding interpersonal relationships, damages owed for personal injuries, property damages, theft and giving false testimony. There are laws against bribery and oppressing the stranger; additionally, God requires observance of Shabbat and Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot).

The haftarah dates from about 588 BCE, during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem; Jeremiah instructs the people of Israel to release all their slaves, male and female; they initially complied with this directive, only to force them back into slavery a year later; by so doing, Jeremiah declared, they profaned the name of Hashem, and they would be punished. The Babylonian forces returned to Jerusalem to complete its destruction. So that the haftarah ends on a positive note, 2 verses are added on to the end that speak of a final reconciliation that will take place between God and Israel. The parsha tells the story of the brit forged between God and Israel at Sinai; in the haftarah, God, through Jeremiah, speaks of "the covenant [I made] with your [ancestors] when I brought them out of Egypt, the house of bondage." After the 10 Commandments, that covenant delineates the laws that require freeing slaves after 6 years of service; the haftarah shows how the nation was punished for not observing these laws. At the end of the parsha, the people say, "naaseh v'nishmah", "all that the Lord has said we will do and obey" (Ex. 24:7) In the haftarah, Jeremiah chastises the people by saying, "lo shamatem", "you did not listen".

The emphasis put on the treatment of slaves demonstrates the primary importance of the way we value and treat our fellow human beings. Observing the covenant with Hashem requires seeing the presence of the Divine in all those whom we encounter in our daily lives.