

Haftarat Vayishlach וישלח

Torah: Genesis 32:4–36:43

Haftarah: Hosea 11:7–12:12

General Overview

The contents of this week's haftarah are similar to the previous haftarah of Hosea 12:13–14:10. Both passages contain a good amount of rebuke to Ephraim (the ten tribes of the northern kingdom called Israel) for their sins, especially the idolatry connected with Baal worship. There seems, however, to be one significant difference between these two passages. In our present haftarah, we get a greater glimpse of God's compassion and His desire to withhold the judgment due to Ephraim. In addition this haftarah also has a sizable section about their forefather, Jacob. The subject of Jacob concluded last week's haftarah, and it begins again in this week's. Accordingly, this commentary will give ample space to commenting on it.

Historical Background

Please refer to last week's haftarah for the historical background of this passage. It has the same background material because they are, in essence, connecting passages from the prophet Hosea.

Connection to the Parasha

Hosea 11:7–12:12 contains a large section recalling the life of Jacob. In particular, 12:3–7 focuses on the time in Jacob's life when he was returning from his twenty (plus) year flight from his brother, Esau. Thus, the opening content of this haftarah has been taken from Genesis 32:4–36:43.

It had been a long struggle for Jacob. Realizing that his brother would be angry with him for his deception of Isaac that had secured the family birthright, Jacob fled to his ancestral home in Aramea. There he met his beloved Rachel from Laban's family. However, on his wedding night he was tricked into marrying Leah. Yet, because he loved Rachel so much, Laban

and he worked out an agreement whereby Jacob would spend seven more years working in exchange for Rachel

During those years away from the Promised Land, the Lord was working on Jacob, bringing him closer and closer to Himself. It was not easy for Jacob to yield his members to righteousness instead of to his flesh. One of the major breaking points in his life came on the night before he finally met with Esau face-to-face. Jacob caused himself to be alone that night. Before dawn wrestled with the "Angel." Jacob prevailed, but not without a reminder of the fact that at any moment this Angel of the Lord could have defeated him. We will not go into all of the lessons God had in store for Jacob that night. Suffice it to say, however, that this was certainly a climax of years of struggling with God. Jacob may have survived the wrestling match, but clearly, God was the real victor because He now had Jacob devoted to Himself.

Hosea uses this story as an illustration for Ephraim to follow. Ephraim (Israel) had also been struggling with both God and man. If they would follow their ancestor Jacob's example, they would have been able to come out victorious, changed, and surviving with God

Exposition

The prophet Hosea is proving to be a difficult book from which to derive teaching outlines. His writing does not flow as easily as other prophets, such as Isaiah or Ezekiel. Nevertheless, we offer the following as a suggested outline for this week's study:

- I. Ephraim's Direction
- II. Ephraim's Example
- III. Ephraim's Hope

I. Ephraim's Direction

Let us begin our study by considering the horrible spiritual condition in which Ephraim walked. In essence, we saw this in last week's haftarah. But this passage

provides more detail that our previous one did not.

A. Their Hang-ups

In Hosea 11:7, we find a most unusual declaration from God about Ephraim's spiritual condition. From the Hebrew word *telu'im* (תלואים), we can see that they were people who were indecisive about God. The Hebrew literally says that they had a hang-up about giving themselves to God. Another way to put it is that, "they hung or swung toward turning from me [God]."¹

It was not that they were ignorant about which way they should turn their thoughts and their faith. The latter part of verse 7 indicates that, "Though they call them upwards, none at all will lift himself up." Another possible rendering of this is, "...and to the matter concerning which they call them, together they do not uphold it."²

The differences in the translation are indicative of the difficulty of the Hebrew behind them. Part of the problem is in understanding the little phrase *el-al*, על-ל. Perhaps Keil and Delitzsch may offer some assistance concerning to the best understanding of these words. They suggest a translation of "upwards."³ They go on to say that this verse means, "Upwards do they (the prophets) call them, but it does not rise, to return to God, or seek help from on high!"

Hence, the prophets were calling to the people of Ephraim, yet they had a hang-up—they could not decide whether or not to return to God. They were stuck in their sinful mire and could not respond to Him.

B. Illusion to Calamity

In addition to certain spiritual hang-ups, the people of Ephraim had another problem. According to 12:1 their second problem was deceitfulness and lying. In fact,

Lying and deceit are the terms which he applies, not so much to the idolatry which they preferred to the worship of Jehovah, as to the hypocrisy with which Israel, in spite of its

idolatry, claimed to be still the people of Jehovah, pretended to worship Jehovah under the image of a calf, and turned right into wrong.⁴

Apparently idolatry was not their only problem. In deluding themselves that Baal and other gods were the true acceptable way to worship, they fell into lying and deceitfulness.

Their problems take another turn for the worse according to verse 2. As if idolatry and deceitfulness toward God are not enough, the text indicates that their illusion (that they can still be in a good standing before God even while falling prey to Baal) had turned into calamity for them. Since they rejected God and His protection from their enemies, they turned to godless nations for their security. Hence, the last part of verse 2 tells us that, at one point, Israel made a treaty ("covenant") with Assyria and were offering Egypt goods to placate them.

When the text uses the term "covenant" to describe their relationship with Assyria, it most likely meant some sort of a suzerainty treaty. Documents such as this provide that a stronger nation offer protection and relationship with a weaker nation in return for tribute and obedience. Indeed, Israel became a loyal Assyrian vassal when Jehu came to the throne.⁵ (Serving as Israel's king during the estimated years of 841 and 814 BCE.) At the same time that Israel was supposedly in a covenant with Assyria, she was also sending olive oil to Egypt in an effort to enlist her support against Assyria (2 Kings 17:4). This is why Hosea says that Ephraim was as unstable as a gale and entering into calamity.

C. Unfounded Confidence

Ephraim had yet a third and more serious problem: In 12:8–9, they were portrayed as a people who thought that their prosperity meant power. In addition, their prosperity caused them arrogantly to assert, "All my gains do not amount to an offence which is real guilt."

In the historical background to this haftarah, we noted that in Hosea's day (particularly during the reign of Jeroboam II, both Israel and Judah were in a period of great material prosperity. Their leaders, despite their intrigue, sin, and rebellions, had managed to extend the kingdoms to great distances beyond their borders and their national treasuries were overflowing. The prophets of God, however, saw that this prosperity provided them with a false sense of confidence. They thought that their riches would give them safety from external dangers and enable them to secure a unity within themselves. They were wrong on both accounts.

Hosea was telling the people of Israel that they could not derive any such security from their riches. Moreover, their riches could in no way remove the guilt they had before the Holy One.

In 12:8 there is an interesting play on words. The verse opens in Hebrew with the word *canaan*, כְּנָעַן. This word can be rendered two ways, both of which are related. It can be translated as a common noun meaning "merchant," or "trader," or it can be used as the proper, place noun "Canaan." The JPS, NASB, and NIV versions prefer "merchant." However, according to Keil and Delitzsch, there seems to be good contextual reason to render it as the place, Canaan. They say, Israel is not a Jacob who wrestles with God; but it has become Canaan, seeking its advantage in deceit and wrong.⁶

There is a connection between the word Canaan and the word "merchants:" The Canaanites, especially the coastal Canaanites, the Phoenicians, were famous commercial traders. Their market was the entire Mediterranean coastal area. As the text in Hosea implies, they were not always honest traders. Often times they traded deceitfully. Accordingly, we are reminded that,

Israel is called "Canaan" here, not so much on account of its attachment to Canaanitish idolatry. . . because, like a fraudulent merchant, it strove to become great by oppression and cheating.⁷

Apparently, they did not care about their dishonest business practices. They were becoming rich and further deceived. They began to think that their riches outweighed their guilt.

Apparently they had devised loopholes in the law to justify what they had been doing [in their dishonest business practices]. As a result they thought they were innocent.⁸

This then was another detail that Hosea furnishes for us in this haftarah concerning the nature of Ephraim's sin.

How much warning and rebuke do a people need from the mouth of a holy God who is about to pour out His wrath upon them? Passage after passage, the prophet, following the pattern of a previous prophet, Amos, describes in detail the sin Ephraim was committing. This was done in hope of awakening Ephraim to repentance.

Besides spelling out their sins, throughout this passage Hosea attempts to persuade Israel to repent in two other ways. Let us now move on to the second method.

II. Ephraim's Example

This passage introduces Ephraim's great patriarch, Jacob, to us. The prophet's intention seems to be setting Jacob before them as an example for Ephraim to follow in order to lead them to repentance. Let us see how this was intended to work.

Jacob found himself in trouble because of his spiritual condition, just like his descendants. True, he did not necessarily go into idol worship like Ephraim did in Hosea's day. Nonetheless, in the early stages of his life, his relationship with God was minimal, if any at all.

Our text indicates to us that, even in the womb, Jacob asserted himself as a supplanter, (12:4). The Hebrew text at this point makes a word play on Jacob's name and the verb "supplant." Both have the same root. Then, when he was an adult he "strove with a divine being." The Hebrew, again, is enlightening. The verb translated, "strove" (*sarah*, שָׂרָה) according to BDB is the same root from which we get the name

"Israel:' Moreover, that verb could be translated "persisted" or "exerted oneself." The object of this verb is *elohim* אֱלֹהִים, God. The suggested translation in BDB is that Jacob "persisted with God."⁹

From the next verse we know that Hosea had the incident in mind when Jacob wrestled with the "Angel:' Hence, Hosea is clearly acknowledging that the Angel was some kind of a physical manifestation of God Himself.

There is one more little detail about these verses: The verb "persisted" is in the Hebrew imperfect tense. This tense stresses a continuous action. Could it be that Hosea was suggesting that up to that dramatic point when he encountered the angel, Jacob had been continually striving against or exerting himself against God, just about all of his life?

If that is true then his life surely becomes a great example for the people of Israel to follow. Ever since they became a kingdom opposed to Judah, Israel was continually exerting herself against the God who chose them. Indeed, there were many evidences that the people of Ephraim were in a continual strife against God.

However, they did not follow the example of their father Jacob when God met him on the way to his re-union with Esau, his brother. Jacob, though he resisted, submitted to God. He emerged as a changed man, forever in continual communion with his God. Ephraim, unfortunately, did not follow his path.

Despite the fact that Ephraim did not walk in Jacob's shoes and live for God following all of his troubles, Hosea implores them in 12:7 to come back to God and follow Him. Specifically, Hosea says, "you must return to your God. Practice goodness and justice, and constantly trust in your God." Why? Because in 12:5–6 we are told that Jacob found Him.

The God who brought Jacob through all of his difficulties and forgave him all of his sins is described as the Lord of Hosts. Notice that the phrase "Lord of Hosts" is

used in connection both to Jacob and to Ephraim. The words mean literally, "The Lord of Armies." This stresses the fact that since Jacob trusted in God, he was guaranteed protection from any potential harm Esau might have levied against him. Likewise, Ephraim did not have to rely on Assyria or Egypt. They could always count wholeheartedly on the Lord of Hosts to protect them.

It is possible to translate 12:6, "The Lord, the God of Hosts is the Lord—remember Him!" If only they would remember the Lord as Jacob did, then they surely would do as verse 7 implores them to do — return to Him. Once they returned they would have been able to ". . . wait in expectancy for God to bring them the same kind of blessing he had brought Jacob."¹⁰

III. Ephraim's Hope

We have come now to our last section in this haftarah, which we have entitled, "Ephraim's Hope." Here we see the third attempt which the prophet Hosea uses in the hope of convincing Ephraim to come back to God. The first method was to rebuke them for their sins. The second way was to give them the example of Jacob to follow. This final attempt, however, is quite different. It seems that there are at least two lines of thought here. The first is that Hosea is describing the grace and mercy that are found freely in God if Ephraim were to come back to Him. The second line of thought seems to be that, in the end, whether it originates with Ephraim or not, God's plan calls for Him to bring them back to Him — even despite how they believe and behave. Let us explore these lines of thought.

A. *No Destruction!*

The first great section describing God's mercy to Ephraim is in 11:8–11. This is a very tender passage where we find God expressing how His heart feels about His people, Israel — despite the fact that they rejected Him. We find God saying to Ephraim, "How can I give you up, O

Ephraim" (11:8)? To be sure God had spoken harsh words of destruction to Ephraim. Now, in these verses God says, that He has had a change of heart, "all My tenderness is stirred, I will not act on My wrath."

We know that God did discipline Israel because of their sins and wickedness. Some would say that because of this, God is contradicting Himself. However, we need to see the big picture in order to understand God's words here. On the one hand, the Assyrians came and destroyed Israel's capital, Samaria and dispersed a good number of the Israelites throughout the Assyrian Empire. But, in reality, this was not a total destruction. At least it was not like the kind of devastation that God levied upon Admah and Zeboiim (11:8). These cities were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah according to Deuteronomy 29:23.

If we read further in this passage we would see that in the future God would roar like a lion (*aryea*, אַרְיָה) and call for His people, including the Ephraimites, from wherever they' would be scattered and lead them back to their ancient homes (11:10–11).

Thus, while there would be an unspecified time period in which Ephraim would experience the severe discipline from their God, it would not be a permanent destruction. Unlike Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim. Ephraim would be rebuilt and settled again.

The question here is whether God would restore them in the future because of their future repentance. or just because He would decide to do it on His own. The text does not indicate. We are only told that it would be because He loves them. Whatever the cause, this passage surely is one of the great sections of hope promised by God through Hosea to the wayward people of Israel.

B. God's Faithfulness

In 12:10–12 we get a second glimpse of God's grace and mercy. Here, the prophet

reminds us that although He certainly took notice of their sin (c.f. verse 12), nevertheless, God promised to restore Ephraim.

The context for this section of hope is quite interesting. It comes right on the heels of a severe passage of rebuke, a few verses where some of Ephraim's many sins are exposed, (12:8-9). Then without any transition, 12:10 says, "I the Lord have been your God ever since the land of Egypt. I will let you dwell in your tents again."

Thus we note the repeated promise that Ephraim will someday again dwell in their own land. This passage also looks forward to the unleashing of God's discipline, i.e. the coming Assyrian dispersion, and further still, to the more distant future when Israel would be back in the land.

Why was there no transition between verses 9 and 10? Why did Hosea not say words to Israel such as, "If you would only repent and come back to the Lord your God!" Perhaps we are provided a hint to the answer to this question in the text itself. Hosea reminds them that God had been their God ever since He brought them up from Egypt. In doing so, he was reminding them of the miraculous exodus from Egyptian slavery. At that time, the children of Israel did not deserve to be brought out. They were not necessarily the godliest generation of Abraham's descendants. There were two reasons why God brought them out. The first reason was because He decided to have grace, mercy, and compassion upon them. The end of Exodus chapter two tells us that God heard their cries and decided to take action to redeem the miserable Israelite slaves.

The second reason He brought them out is because of His faithfulness to the covenant He made with their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God promised them that their descendants would live free in their own land and be intact as a people. Thus, whether or not they deserved to be released from slavery {and they were not worthy) God brought them out.

Perhaps by mentioning Egypt, Hosea may have been communicating this same truth concerning Ephraim. Because of their sin, the Holy One would indeed, castigate them. Yet God also promised that some day it would all end. He is a God who is gracious, merciful, and compassionate. Someday, the people of Israel would be gathered back into their own land again. Yet, at that time Israel would no more deserve it then as they did back in Egypt.

Second, however, just like with the Egyptian slaves, God still has a covenant with the patriarchs. This covenant would never be put aside or discarded. Thus, because of that covenant, God would bring His people back in the future.

If this interpretation is correct, then we have at least two truths being exposed here. 1) God is a God who is rich in mercy, grace, and compassion. He simply loves His people and hates to discipline them. He must always act justly, as He did when He brought Assyria down on to Ephraim. But, in the end, He always acts mercifully to those who are His own.

2) In addition, we find that God is most certainly a covenant-keeping God. In fact, it is safe to say that God *always* acts on the basis of His covenant faithfulness. Covenant faithfulness in this case means

that He would never loose His people. Despite the fact that they would be scattered all throughout the ancient Near East with all of the potential for intermarriage and assimilation, God would always faithfully keep His people in tact as a people. Thus, there cannot be true "lost tribes of Israel"

Furthermore, covenant faithfulness also means that if God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their physical descendants, He intends to keep that promise no matter how long it may take before it is fulfilled.

Accordingly, in these verses, Hosea provided the people of Ephraim with a rich treasure of hope. His heartache is that they would have to wait many centuries before they would be able to enjoy that treasure. For, in his day they did not repent and come back to God. Because of that, their enjoyment of God's blessings would be postponed until He fulfils His plan for them someday in the future, in the days of Messiah.

Study Questions

1. What new sins are described concerning Israel in this haftarah, which were not discussed in the previous one!

¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* {"BDB"}, p. 1067.

² The first translation was from J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, p. 135 and the second translation was from A. J. Rosenberg, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, vol 1, p. 70.

³ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol 10, p.140. For interest sake, *EL AL* is the name of the Israeli Airlines! This is the verse in the Bible from which they derive their name.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tammi Schneider, "Did King Jehu Kill His Own Family?" in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January/February 1995, p.31.

⁶ Keil and Delitzsch, op. cit., p. 143.

⁷ Ibid, p. 148.

⁸ Ibid, p. 148. We agree with Keil and Delitzsch. However, according to other passages they were just like the Canaanites in their religion. It is just that in this particular passage (12:8-9) they are compared to the Canaanites in their attitudes toward business and finances.

⁹ BDB, p. 975.

¹⁰ Leon J. Wood, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7: *Hosea*, p. 217.

2. What "hang-ups" did Israel have according to Hosea 11:7 ff?
3. What do you think? Should the Hebrew word *canaan* in 12:8 be translated as, "merchant" or "Canaan?" Explain your reasoning.
4. Why do you think that Hosea brought up the subject of Jacob in this haftarah passage?
5. What are some ways in which Jacob may have served as an example to the Ephraimites?
6. How does Hosea give Israel hope in this haftarah?
7. Is this hope based on Israel's repentance or not? Discuss the complete issue.
8. How can we resolve the apparent contradiction found in 11:8–10 when, on the one hand God says that He will not unleash His wrath on Ephraim, yet from history we know that the Assyrians defeated the Israel's northern kingdom and scattered them all over the empire?
9. On what basis will God bring the Ephraimites back to the Promised Land?
10. What is the connection between this passage in Hosea and the Torah portion, Parashat Vayishlach?

End Notes