

Haftarat Vayeshev וישב

Torah: Genesis 37:1–40:23

Haftarah: Amos 2:6–3:8

God Remains Faithful Even When We Don't

General Overview

Once again, this haftarah consists of passages from the prophets that deal with the sins of Israel. Every prophet is different, of course, and therefore, writes in his own unique style. We see evidence of this by comparing the prophets Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos — the three that we have studied thus far. Isaiah seems to be the easiest to outline, with his thoughts poetically flowing rather logically from section to section. It is much more difficult, however, to see Hosea's organization and flow of thought. Furthermore, Amos is different from both Isaiah and Hosea. He is quite organized, very poetic, and openly employs several of the usual prophetic tools" such as the "burden," "visions," and "sermons of judgment." Our haftarah this week consists of an example of one of his burdens and one of his sermons of judgment.

The book of Amos itself can easily be divided into three sections. Chapters 1 and 2 consist of his eight prophetic burdens, some of which are directed against both the nations that surround Israel and Judah, as well as including Israel and Judah. Chapters 3–6 are comprised of his sermons of judgment against Israel and Judah. Finally, the last three chapters, 7–9, are a series of five visions of coming judgment. Amos concludes with a final section in chapter 9, which speaks of a promise of restoration and glory for Israel.

The main contents of our haftarah are rather typical of most of the book of Amos. The principle that Amos insists upon is that the external practice of religion divorced from right ethical conduct is unacceptable to God.ⁱ In other words, religion and conduct should be inseparable. Thus, we will see an abundance of criticism of Israel's social practices in this haftarah.

Connection to the Parasha

There seems to be a difference of opinion concerning why this passage was chosen as the haftarah for Parashat Vayeshev (Genesis 37:1–40:23). According to the *ArtScroll Chumash*, the point of similarity is in the story of Joseph's brothers selling him to Egypt. According to this view, as Amos was denouncing the sins of Israel, he was pointing out that,

They would sell the legal rights of poor people for a few pieces of silver — as Joseph's brothers did when they disposed of the problem he posed for them by selling him into slavery — and they would grind the poor into the ground, figuratively, and cover their heads with dust.ⁱⁱ

Thus, according to this view, the haftarah is a commentary on something from the Joseph story.

A. Social Sins (Amos 2:6)

The first crimes mentioned by Amos are *social sins*. Amos says that the people of Israel were abusing the poor who lived among them. The text says that one of the crimes they were doing has to do with their unjust legal system. When we read that they "have sold for silver those who were just" (2:6), Amos was referring to what was going on in the courts. Specifically, judges were being bribed to declare guilty those who were legally righteous (צדיק) or innocent of any punishable crime. Moreover, "the poor debtor who could not pay for a pair of sandals" (2:6), i.e. for the merest trifle, the judge would give up to the creditor for a slave.ⁱⁱⁱ!

There is a second expression of their social injustices mentioned in verse 7. Here Amos says that the Israelites were "trampling on the heads of the poor." The word translated "trample" (*hasohafim*, השאפים) can be left alone or also be rendered "pant" or "pant after." If it is rendered "pant" or "pant after" then the verse would read, "who pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor." The meaning would be something like,

the oppressing classes longed to see the poor brought to extreme anguish or that they were so avaricious that they craved the dust that the poor had cast on their heads.^{iv}

This would be alluding to the fact that in the ancient Near East, the poor often put dust on their heads as a sign of great sorrow.

Another way of looking at these words is to understand them like Rabbi Rosenberg states it:

They appoint officers to execute their decisions, and, when the poor do not comply with their orders, they seize them by the hair, drag them in the dust, and trample upon them, thus putting dust on their heads.^v

It is difficult to imagine how far the people of Israel had gone in their hatred and abuse for the poor among them. No wonder the Holy One was giving them a strong rebuke.

There is one final note before we close this week's study. The sages of old who compiled these prophetic passages into what are now the haftarah, usually tried to end the haftarah on a happy or encouraging note. Our passage in Amos is one of the few exceptions to this tradition.

However, if we look at the big picture of history, we can see that in a strange way ending this haftarah on a seemingly sad note, is, in reality, a great encouragement. Let us explain.

We have noted that Israel deserved the very severe correction that God gave to them, as He warned them through Amos. This discipline, indeed, was a most severe blow to the nation. It resulted in the fall of the northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722/1 BCE, and eventually culminated in the destruction of the

First Temple and subsequent fall of the Kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

In many ways, the discipline has continued to this very day. The annals of history are vivid records of the suffering the descendants of Jacob have had to experience because of their covenantal unfaithfulness.

However, the very fact that today, even as we write, we can say in truth that *Am Yisrael Chi* עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי, “The people of Israel Live!,” is a lasting testimony of the grace, mercy, love, and compassion, of a great God and Father who faithfully keeps His covenants with His people, sometimes despite whether they keep those covenants or not. Indeed, the fact that as we read this haftarah, there exists a political entity in the world called “The State of Israel,” and that the Jewish people have not been totally eradicated despite the wishes of all of the Hitlers throughout the centuries, is the positive note on which to properly conclude this week’s haftarah study.

Note: This is an excerpt from Briteinu: Haftarot.

ⁱ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 184–185.

ⁱⁱ *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 1143.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 253.

^{iv} Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 7: *Amos*, 294.

^v A. J. Rosenberg, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1, 121.