HAFTORAH

1. The word “Haftorah” is generally understood to mean “conclusion,” that is, the reading taken from the Books of the Prophets concludes the public Torah Reading of the day.

2. It was Mosheh our Teacher and his Beis Din who instituted that the Torah should be read publicly on Shabbos mornings, on Yom Tov mornings, on Rosh Chodesh and on Mondays and on Thursdays. This way, the Jewish People would not be without Torah for any three days. It was later that it became the standard practice that seven people are called up to read on Shabbos, six people on Yom Kippur morning, five on Yom Tov morning, four on Chol HaMo’ed morning and on Rosh Chodesh morning and three on Channukah and Purim and public Fast Days. Ezra HaSofer, together with his Beis Din, the Men of the Great Assembly, later instituted that there should be a public Torah reading on Shabbos afternoons, too, and that three people should be called up to the weekday Torah readings instituted by Mosheh.

3. The public Torah readings of Yom Tov were of the laws of Yom Tov, but originally those of Shabbos mornings were not fixed in the same way as they are today. It was only later that the weekly Torah readings were standardized throughout Jewry, with the same Sidra being read by all communities on any given Shabbos. (Occasionally, though, differences between the communities in Eretz Yisroel and Chutz lo’Oretz arose because of the Second Day of Yom Tov that the Chachommim instituted to be observed by those living outside Eretz Yisroel. Differences still arise nowadays, too, but within a few weeks things are restored to normal through the self-adjustments that are built into the calendar.) Another change in more recent centuries is the universal practice (in almost all congregations) that an official Torah reader reads for everyone who is called up, simply so as to avoid embarrassment to those who cannot read the Torah correctly or cannot read it with the proper cantilation and tune.

4. Later still, through the vagaries of exile and persecution, the Jewish people became less proficient in fully understanding the Torah in its original language, לְשׁוֹן הַקּוֹדֶשׁ, and it became necessary to teach the Torah in the language that most of the people understood it at that time, namely, Aramaic. (Aramaic, incidentally, is also the language of the Gemorroh.) It was at that time that the Divinely-inspired Aramaic translation (“Targum”) by Onkelos was introduced and this restored to all the Jewish people the meaning of the Torah as it was originally taught by Mosheh. Thus it came about that in order that everyone should understand what was being read, the public Torah reading also included the translation and brief explanation by a specially-appointed “Meturgemon,” that is, Translator. Each person who was called up to read did just that: he read his portion aloud to the congregation and, verse by verse, the translator translated. (Nowadays, of course, an Aramaic translation would serve no purpose for the ordinary listener and therefore this translation is no longer a part of the public Torah reading. Nevertheless, this תַּרְגּוּם אוּנְקְלוּס remains today an obligatory part of the individual’s review of the Sidra of the week, in his duty to “read the Torah twice and the Targum once.”)

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5. Ever since we received the Torah and right down to relatively recent times, the study of Torah has always been the main preoccupation and joy of the Jewish People. Hence, on those days on which they were freed from the weekday toil of earning a living, the people would seize the opportunity to devote themselves to Torah learning even more and there would be many long learning sessions on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Thus, after the Torah reading of Shabbos or Yom Tov morning, which signifies the end of the Tefillas Shacharis, usually there would be a Deroshoh by the Rabbi of the congregation before Tefillas Mussaf. (After the Davvening, the people would go home for the midday Shabbos or Yom Tov meal and invariably return to the Beis HaMedrash in the afternoon to study further, till Minchah.) The subject of the Rabbi's morning Deroshoh was usually based on a text taken from the Torah reading, in keeping with the aim of the Torah reading itself, namely, that the Jewish people shall learn Torah and study it continually, not only for the Mitzvah of learning HaShem's Torah but also for the practical reason that through learning Torah we can better fulfil the Word of HaShem, for "the ignorant cannot be pious" (Pirkay Ovos, Perek 2 Mishnah 6) and "great is the study of Torah, for Torah-study brings one to the correct observance of the Mitzvos" (Maseches Kiddushin, 40b).

6. During the time of the Hellenist Syrian occupation of Eretz Yisroel, the Jewish People suffered greatly. Torah life was cruelly suppressed and was in grave danger of being destroyed completely, especially when Antiochus IV Epiphanes decreed the public Torah reading prohibited under pain of death. (Antiochus took the Greek name "Epiphanes" meaning "blessed of the gods" but, because of his fanaticism and cruelty, even in his own lifetime he was known as The Madman and was commonly called by his nickname "Epimanes" meaning "made crazy by the gods.") With the promulgation of this evil decree, the Chachommim of the day instituted that a public reading taken instead from the Books of the Prophets, the נְבִיאִים, which was not included under the ban, should take the place, temporarily, of the public Torah reading. (The Books of the Prophets were chosen rather than the Writings, the כְּתוּבִים, because they can easier parallel the subject matter of the Torah Reading.) The Hellenist Syrians were eventually defeated (this victory is commemorated with the Festival of Channukah) but the Chachommim decided that it would be prudent to continue with the Haftorah arrangement nevertheless. In the relatively more peaceful times that followed, therefore, the Torah reading was followed by the reading of the Haftorah, with the person called up to read the Haftorah being honoured also with a concluding reading from the Torah, called "Maftir." (Usually, Maftir was simply a repetition of the last section of the Sidra of the week.) The foresight of the Chachommim was indeed shown to be accurate when some time later the Persian despot Yezdegerd II, a fanatical Zoroastrian, again forbade the Torah to be read publicly throughout his realm, and the Haftorah once again had to take the place of the public Torah reading.

7. Notwithstanding the original reason for its introduction, the Haftorah was retained also because it afforded an opportunity to the Rabbis of each congregation to teach a variety of Torah topics and to elaborate in their Shabbos and Yom Tov discourses upon other related matters. Basing themselves on the text taken from the Torah reading of the week, as had always been the practice, they also utilised the text taken from the Books of the Prophets that was the week's Haftorah. In this way, they

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were able to instruct their congregations in the teachings and Mitzvos of the Torah more widely and, of course, the learning of Torah is the primary purpose of the Torah reading in the first place. However, since the Haftorah was retained so as to generate more Torah-learning by the people on their rest days, therefore a Haftorah is read only on Shabbos, Yom Tov and public Fast Days, days on which there is more time for the people to devote themselves to Torah study.

8. Originally, at the time of its institution, there was quite a range of choice of Haftorah possible for any given week. Other than that the Haftorah had some connexion with the Sidra that would have been read publicly that week had it not been for the government edict which forbade it, the list of selections to be read as the week's Haftorah was not laid down firmly. It was this connexion between the week's Sidra and the Haftorah that ensured that the Jewish people, scattered as they were throughout so many different countries, were nevertheless at one and in solidarity in their study of the Sidra of the week in the privacy of their homes. Points of connexion between the public Torah reading of the week and a selected Haftorah were perceived and the week's Haftorah was chosen by each community and Haftorahs thus tended to vary considerably from community to community. Although a few Haftorahs are universal and date back to earliest times (and some of them are even mentioned in the Gemorroh) it was only later that in practice the weekly Haftorahs became standardised. (Some variant customs did persist and those variations are preserved down to this day in the different Haftorahs — Sefarad and Ashkenaz, for instance — that are read in different communities on some occasions.) Generally speaking, where the subject matter of the Haftorah is much the same as that of the week's Sidra, the choice of Haftorah is quite obvious to us. Other times, the Haftorah might be exclusively about only one of the many topics of the Sidra. And yet other times the only connexion might be a noteworthy phrase or even only an unusual word in the Torah reading of the day.

9. Starting from Mosheh our Teacher himself and right through the ages, the Chachommim often used the weekly public Torah reading as an opportunity to remind the Jewish People of impending events or commemorations such as Rosh Chodesh or the Four Parshios. This was important especially later, when Jewish people lived all over the world, many times far away from any centres of Jewry. These reminders took the form of the public reading of an extra section as a special Maftir instead of the usual Maftir. To this end, besides the Maftir which was chosen accordingly, the Haftorah, too (if there was a Haftorah reading) would likewise be topical of the special event. These specially selected Maftir and Haftorah readings were almost universally established from earliest times as the accepted readings for those special Shabbossos. (Shabbos Rosh Chodesh, with its special Maftir and Haftorah, or the special Haftorah on the Shabbos which is the day before Rosh Chodesh, are clear examples of this.)

10. Today we can hardly imagine the public Torah reading of Shabbos or Yom Tov without a Haftorah following it. The result, of course, is a greater awareness of the teachings of the Prophets. And it is largely through the institution of the Haftorah that our Chachommim ensured that the Divinely-inspired Books of the Prophets are now studied and discussed by the Jewish People world-wide.

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HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : בראשית

This week's Haftorah is taken from Sefer Yeshayohu.
Sefaradim read from Chapter 42, Pessukim 5 — 21,
Ashkenazzim continue till Chapter 43, Possuk 10.

1 . The connexion to the Sidra is seen straightaway in the first Possuk of the Haftorah. The first Possuk of the Sidra — the first Possuk of the Torah — tells us that, "In the beginning, HaShem created the heavens and the earth." And so, too, the prophet Yeshayohu brings to the Jewish People a message from HaShem "Who creates the heavens and stretches them out, Who spreads out the earth and Who gives life and spirit to the people that live on it." And at first glance, that seems to be the end of the connexion with the Sidra.

2. But that's only at first glance. The Sidra Berayshis tells of the creation of the world. It also tells of how HaShem charged Man, HaShem's greatest creation, with the task to utilize the world in the service of HaShem and to protect the world from harm, "to work it and to guard it," and ultimately to make this world a place worthy of the Divine Presence. To achieve his purpose, HaShem endowed Man with huge potential. But Man is not to be a robot: HaShem wants Man to accomplish his task through his own efforts and of his own free will. Therefore, at the same time as endowing Man with his G-dly soul, HaShem has also created in him a strong will to go his own way, what our Chachommim call the "Yetzer HoRa" ("the Evil Inclination"). But if Man allows this Yetzer HoRa free rein, he will find that slowly but surely his life will be given over to his own uncontrolled urges and passions and it would destroy him. The antidote to this Yetzer HoRa is to follow the instructions of HaShem as given in His Torah. Thus there is built-in into the human being the potential for great goodness but he has also a capacity for doing terrible harm. The one is Man's purpose and leads to his happy fulfilment, the other results in the wreck and ruin of man's happiness. The one is compliance with HaShem's Will as expressed in His commandments to us, the מִצְוֹת, the other is the missed target, the sin, the חֵטְא, the transgression, the עֲבֵירָה, against HaShem's Word.

3. In the same way as the physical and material world was to develop after its creation, and is still being developed today with new discoveries and inventions, all the time improving and striving for perfection, so too Man had to start out on his own to find his way through his moral choices till he, too, attains his purpose. In the same way as a child sometimes has to learn from his mistakes and is trained in the harsh school of

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experience as he grows up into a responsible adult, so was it with Mankind, too. Mistakes were made at the beginning of the history of Mankind and HaShem, in His goodness, showed Man what corrections were needed. Sadly, when the people did not heed His messages and refused to better their ways, He had to punish them with major disasters. Later, HaShem chose the Jewish People that was descended from His friend, Avrohom, that they shall be a "light unto the Nations," to be the message-bearers from HaShem and show the way that Mankind is to go and progress and in this progress to find true fulfilment and genuine satisfaction.

4. But how sad it is when the message-bearer forgets his message! Considering their high calling, when they deliberately forsake their task, HaShem is greatly disappointed and brings upon them severe retribution until they come back to Him and once again serve as the model nation that HaShem has placed at the centre of the world. The Novvi Yeshayohu tells the Jewish People that HaShem declares, "You are My witnesses," and this is the rallying call of this week's Haftorah. It is a fitting introduction and is the mission statement, as it were, of the Jewish People, as we stand at the beginning of the new cycle of Torah Readings, of our rôle in disseminating the Word of HaShem to all the world.

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