



PROBING

THE PROPHETS

BY RABBI NACHMAN (NEIL) WINKLER

Faculty, OU Israel Center

Rabbi Winkler's popular Jewish History lectures can be viewed by visiting the OU Israel Video archive: <https://www.ouisrael.org/video-library>

So...when did we start reading the haftarah; that is, during which historical period did the custom of reading a selection from the Nevi'im section of the Tanach? Rabbinic Scholars offer different suggestions. Some suggest that the custom arose at the close of the prophetic era and others pinpoint the time as the period of Ezra. The Abudraham (14th Century, Italy) writes that the reading of the haftarat was established as a “replacement” for the public reading of the Torah, a practice that was prohibited during the Seleucid Dynasty (312 BCE – 63 CE). Regardless of when the practice itself began, what would be read varied for many years. Although the Mishna delineates a number of haftarat that should be read on certain occasions, the choices for the bulk of the other haftarat depended upon one's geographic region or family tradition. [In fact, Rav Yosef Karo writes that there is no set order for which selection should be read and each person who reads the haftarah chooses any fitting portion that he prefers!!!!]

Interesting, but what does that have to do with this week's haftarah? In preparing this message, I was struck by the fact that three-quarters of this haftarah focuses on the prophet's message to the nation of Edom

– not upon Israel! I do not recall any other haftara that is read in shul but is not pertinent to the very audience that is listening! After all, the parasha has many stories that could be used as a springboard for a prophetic teaching: Ya'akov's fear of Eisav and his eventual rapprochement with him, his struggle with the angel, the story of Dinah, the addition of “Yisrael” to Ya'akov's name, etc.etc. And yet Chazal chose to comment on the generations of Eisav, on Eisav/Edom – but not on Ya'akov/Yisrael?!!

I would like to suggest that our Rabbis' choice had much to do with our nation's history. I have mentioned in past articles that Edom, the nation of Eisav, was an ongoing nemesis to Israel. Indeed, the enmity displayed by Edom to Yisrael was so intense that they became the very symbol of every enemy of Israel, something to which Ovad'ya hints when, while speaking of Edom, he includes the punishments awaiting “all the nations” who opposed Hashem's chosen people. In fact, when we study the prophecies of Yirmiyahu, Amos and Yechezkel, we find that the name “Edom” is often used as a general term for the foes of Israel-even those who, according to some commentaries, tormented Israel during the second Temple

Thank you to Rabbi Chanoch Yeres for the much-appreciated Shabbat afternoon shiurim which will resume ly"n in April/May

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when the nation of Edom no longer existed!

And this gets us to the point. Following the domination of the Selucid/Greek empires, it was Rome who lorded over the entire region, Rome who passed oppressive laws against the Judean State and Rome, who eventually, destroyed the second Temple. Rav Shimshon Rapha'el Hirsch explains that during the early years of Roman reign the Jews started referring to Rome as "Edom" – not due to any actual biological relationship but because of what Chazal saw in the very nature of that nation. As Rav Hirsch put it, they saw in the dynamic forces and principals of Rome – in its unparalleled greatness that built its Empire – "a cleverness and power unhindered by scruples of right or humaneness". It was in this that our Rabbis saw the connection to Esau – to his power as a hunter and his cunning, described with his description of having of "tzayid b'fiv"-trapping others with his mouth.

When we consider Chazal's identification of Edom as the symbol of Israel's eternal enemies, we well understand why they took the opportunity of using this parasha to teach future generations the comforting message of the last p'sukim.

Most significantly, however, is the final verse that teaches us "V'alu moshi'im b'Har Tziyon lishpot et Har Eisav..."-that Edom will be judged and punished through Israel and only then, with the fall of these enemies, "v'hay'ta LaShem Ham'lucha", G-d alone will reign over all of mankind. ■

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