

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : ויקרא

***This week's Haftorah is taken from the Book of Yeshayohu,
Chapter 43, verse 21 — Chapter 44, verse 23***

IN THIS WEEK'S NOTES ON THE HAFTORAH,
AS IN MANY OF THESE "HAFTORAH OF THE WEEK" SHEETS,
CONSIDERABLE USE HAS BEEN MADE OF THE ADMIRABLE SERIES
"THE MIDRASH SAYS ON THE WEEKLY HAFTAROS"
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1. The Sidra speaks of the laws of Korbannos and the Haftorah, too, is part of a message from HaShem delivered by the Novvi Yeshayohu concerning Korbannos. The Sidra speaks of the service of the Korbannos as part of the pure worship of HaShem and the Haftorah contrasts the shame and stupidity of the idolatry in Yeshayohu's time and the message of HaShem through Yeshayohu to the people concerning their absurd worship of idols.
2. Yeshayohu tells us that HaShem is disappointed at how the service of Korbannos has become corrupted. Korbannos are supposed to be a means of coming close to HaShem — as the very word קָרַבָּן itself shows, related as it is to the word "לְקָרַב", meaning, "to come close." Yet the people treat the service of Korbannos as if it was some sort of appeasement of HaShem, something to keep Him happy, as it were. This is all wrong, says the Novvi. "I formed this Jewish People that they shall recount my praises to the world, that they shall bring the whole world to acknowledge My Sovereignty," says HaShem, not that they shall bring Korbannos and weary themselves with all the different sacrifices that they impose upon themselves to bring. It is not the Korban that achieves atonement, says the Novvi, it is HaShem Himself Who grants atonement to those who repent sincerely from their wrongdoing — not the bringing of sacrifices or offerings. (In any case, the word "Korbon" means neither of these.)
3. It is perhaps difficult for us today to understand the lure of idolatry that seems to have so ensnared the ancient world and therefore a word of explanation is in place. In fact, the Gemorroh considers this very difficulty and says: "Do you think that the Jewish People, who know Almighty G-d first-hand and have themselves experienced His miracles, do you think that they are fools that they would prostrate themselves before sticks and stones? Only know this: Of course the Jewish People know the truth! But they have only ever worshipped idols because they wanted to allow themselves even the worst kind of immorality — in public!" In other words, when the people sought release from the high standard of moral conduct that the Torah demands, they embraced

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idolworship as the new, more easy-going religion. But of course, the “new morality” is nothing but the old immorality. We should remember that this applies just as much to today’s calls from the so-called “liberated,” “enlightened,” “modern” people who try to justify their defection from Torah and we should be aware that as it was in ancient times so it is today, no less.

4. There is another explanation, perhaps a little less damning, that might help us to understand (but not condone) the pervasiveness of idolatry in ancient times. We have to step right out of our own times and go way back to when the world was a threatening place. Man was very much at the mercy of the elements and his life was precarious indeed. His existence was fraught with danger and each day was a mighty struggle of survival, never mind progress and prosperity. With backbreaking work he had to prepare the ground from which his food grew and there was every chance that all his efforts would be in vain if the rains failed to come. Even if the rains did come, there was the real likelihood that pest and blight would destroy what did grow, in which case unmitigated hardship, hunger and starvation would result, with vulnerable children dying in front of the eyes of their parents. In addition, there was very little in the way of communication of news and transportation of goods. If the crops failed in one land there was precious little that could be done about bringing surpluses that might exist elsewhere.
5. Most craftsmen produced only pretty basic work and their handiwork was mostly only simple and crude. Every item was hand made, laboriously fashioned without the benefit of proper tools as we know them today. Even sharp knives were a rarity and in some places a sharp blade had to be hired by the day. The labour-saving devices and mass-production of today did not exist and there were no “manufactories.” The people worked at home or in the fields, with the great majority of the workforce (which included even the very young children, too) occupied with agriculture and the growing of food — and the failure-rate was generally devastatingly high, either through lack of rain, through pests or through blight. The standard of living was very low. Generally, life was rough and primitive. To be sure, there were some places where a powerful ruler was interested in progress (and the trade and taxes that this would generate) and he would sponsor the crafts, encouraging and patronizing inventiveness and innovation. But generally, rulers were despots, interested only in expanding their power through invasion and robbery and enlightened or noble rulers were few and far between.
6. In the home, life’s conveniences were very few. In addition to the preparation of food and cooking and generally running the home, spinning and clothwork were the responsibility of the woman of the house. Every span of thread was hand-spun, every scrap of cloth was laboriously woven by hand and every garment was painstakingly sewn, usually without the aid of a metal needle. People owned very little in the way of material goods because there were very few things to own. There was little to relieve the hard life.

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7. Generally, the idea of human rights and liberty was not yet born. In this, the Jewish People was thousands of years ahead of every other society for through the light of HaShem's Torah the weak are protected, human dignity is upheld and the human spirit is liberated and can progress. But overall, human beings were vulnerable and in their unprotected state felt completely at the mercy of the heat and the cold, storm and flood, illness and disease, the attacking beast, the marauding invader, the despotic ruler.
8. Almost helpless in illness and with almost no knowledge of hygiene and very little understanding of the causes of disease, men could only watch as illness and contagion sometimes wiped out whole communities within days. Superstition and often counter-productive defences against these relentless killers were as useless as were their puny efforts to defend themselves against wild beasts and brutal conquerors. Medicine and healing were in the main primitive and hardly understood with much of it a hit-and-miss affair. Altogether man therefore felt vulnerable and unprotected, buffeted by the elements and threatened by enemies, with his life and his very existence in constant danger from hunger and illness and attack. On top of that, because they needed to be near their fields, most people lived in small groups or in villages and not in towns, even though this would usually afford some sort of "safety in numbers." This, then, was the situation of the great majority of people in ancient times. It is in such circumstances that man turns desperately for protection to whatever he thinks will help him. In his constantly worried state, he panders to every superstition and is ready to worship any conceivable power that he imagines can possibly give him safety, even willing to enslave his spirit and his very being to the ever-more demanding capricious gods of his imagination.
9. But while all this might have been the state of the human condition generally, the Jewish People, even if they did have to contend with most of the harsh conditions of life, was blessedly without the despondency and hopelessness that was common to most of mankind. For they had been spectacularly taken by HaShem to be His People, to live their lives according to His Torah and they could thus rely on His resulting blessing and His fair rule of reward and punishment. The Jewish People has no need or reason to live with the randomness and unpredictability of the strange deities of the nations.
10. HaShem is therefore quite justified in His disappointment in His People when they, who should know much better, turn to other gods and this is His oft-repeated message sent to them through His prophets (as in this week's Haftorah). Indeed, even without knowing HaShem as we do, man's very vulnerability should really be reason enough for him to rely on none other than HaShem for with his inherent intelligence and power of reasoning he should come to realize the uselessness of idolatry and the resulting harm to him and that it is only HaShem Who is the G-d of all Mankind. He is the true Healer and Protector.