

Even Ephraim

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The Haftara for the second day of Rosh HaShana (Jeremiah 31:2-20) movingly describes the redemption of the Jewish people. “I will build you again, and you will be built, virgin of Israel! ... I will bring them from the north country and gather them in from the ends of the earth.” In immortal words, the Prophet Jeremiah speaks of Rachel weeping for the Jewish exiles. “So says G-d,” Jeremiah intones. “Refrain from crying ... Your children will return to their borders.” The Haftara concludes with a verse which plays a prominent role in the Musaf service of Rosh HaShana. “Is not Ephraim a dear son to Me? Is he not a delightful child? The more I speak of him, the more I remember him. I therefore yearn for him; I will show him my mercy, says G-d.”

It is a hauntingly beautiful Haftara. Yet, the passage’s relevance to Rosh HaShana is not readily obvious. National redemption – the major theme of the Haftara – is not an explicit theme of Rosh HaShana. Why was this Haftara chosen by the Sages for recital on Rosh HaShana?

Rashi (Megilla 31a) indicates that the choice of this Haftara for Rosh HaShana stems from the Haftara’s conclusion. The mention of G-d’s merciful remembrance of Ephraim parallels the Musaf prayers of *Zichronos*, which focus on G-d’s benevolent memory. It is difficult, however, to imagine that the sole connection between this beautiful Haftara and Rosh HaShana is an isolated verse!

I believe that a closer analysis of the Haftara yields a message which we all desperately need to hear on Rosh HaShana.

Reading the passage from Jeremiah which serves as the Haftara, one is struck by the numerous references to Ephraim and the Shomron:¹²

“You will once again plant vineyards on the mountains of the Shomron.” (v.5)

“There will be a day when the watchmen on Mount Ephraim call out, ‘Come, let us rise up to Zion, to our G-d.’” (v.6)

“... Ephraim is My firstborn.” (v.9)

“I have heard Ephraim agitating: ‘You have chastised me ... Allow me to repent!’” (v.18)

“Is not Ephraim a dear son to Me? Is he not a delightful child? The more I speak of him, the more I remember him. I therefore yearn for him; I will show him my mercy, says G-d.” (v.20)

The identity of Ephraim in these passages is unclear. Some (e.g. Mahari Kara) see “Ephraim” as a poetic term for the Jewish nation as a whole. Although this understanding fits the context of

¹² In writing this essay, particularly the section which follows, I benefitted greatly from reading “*Havein yakir li Ephraim*,” pp. 558-561 in *Iyunei Haftara* (vol. II) by *mori v’rabi* Rabbi Avraham Rivlin *shlit”a*, *Mashgiach Ruchani* of Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh.

Jeremiah's prophecy, it is problematic when viewed against the broader canvas of the Tanach. Throughout Tanach, "Ephraim" refers to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was created after the death of King Solomon and destroyed by the Assyrians in the Jewish year 3205.¹³ It would be atypical for the term to be applied to the Jewish people as a whole.

Another possibility is to see the Haftara as referring to the Northern Kingdom specifically. According to this reading, Jeremiah is predicting the restoration of the lost Ten Tribes of the north. But this is also a difficult reading. A prophecy predicting the return of the Ten Tribes would not have likely resonated with Jeremiah's audience, the Jews of the remaining Southern Kingdom of Judah.¹⁴ Jeremiah began his prophetic career during the reign of King Josiah, who ascended the throne in the Jewish year 3285 – eighty years after the Assyrian exile. In all likelihood, Jeremiah's prophecy was uttered to a group of Jews in the South at least one hundred years after the Assyrian exile; why would they be interested in a prophecy concerning the Northern Kingdom's restoration?¹⁵

An interpretation of Abarbanel can help us navigate between these two difficult readings. As mentioned above, one of the most famous passages in the Haftara describes how "a voice is heard on High Rachel is crying for her children, refusing to be comforted over her children because he is no more." Abarbanel points out the grammatical difficulty in the verse: Rachel refuses to be comforted over her **children** (plural) because **he** (singular) is no more! Abarbanel explains:

*Rachel had two sons: Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, were part of the [Northern] Kingdom of Israel and were exiled with the Ten Tribes. They never returned, and nothing is known of their fate ... But Benjamin was part of the [Southern] Kingdom of Judah, and was exiled to Babylonia, returned ... and was exiled again. Thus, Rachel cries over **both** her sons, who both experienced exile, but her full anguish ... is [expressed] over Joseph, who did not return ... **He** is no more.*

In his interpretation of this passage, Abarbanel shows us how the Haftara is holding out a promise of hope for both parts of the exiled Jewish people. Rachel is troubled by the exile of all the Jews. She is comforted by G-d that the members of the Southern Kingdom will return in the

¹³ See, for example, the Book of Hoshea from chapter 5 and on, as well as Ezekiel 37:19-28, and Isaiah 7:1-17.

¹⁴ Rabbi Binyamin Lau in his *Yirmiyahu: Goralo shel Chozeh* (pp. 47-52) argues that Jeremiah's audience in this prophecy was exclusively those Jews in the North who remained after the Assyrian exile. If we assume, as many commentators do, that chapters 30 and 31 in Jeremiah form one unit of prophecies of consolation, Rabbi Lau's view seems difficult to maintain. Those chapters contain many references to the restoration of the people of "Israel and Judah," concluding with a description of a rebuilt Jerusalem (31:37-39). The audience of these prophecies is certainly (at least in part) the residents of Judah, whom Jeremiah had already warned about the destruction of Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The Talmud (Megillah 14b) records a tradition that Jeremiah "went to bring back the Ten Tribes" in 3303, during the reign of King Josiah, and thereafter they were ruled over by the Kings of Judah until the Babylonian Exile. Even according to this tradition, however, it would seem that the Northerners lost any sense of being a distinct national unit, such that it is still possible for Jeremiah to speak of a restoration of "Ephraim" which has yet to take place. See Rashi to Ezra 2:64 who writes, based on Seder Olam, that remnants of the Ten Tribes comprised close to a quarter of the Jews who returned to Israel after the proclamation of Cyrus. As individuals they were not "lost," but they had lost any sense of a national identity.

near future, but even the members of the Northern Kingdom, who seem to be lost forever, will come back one day as well.

Thus, the Haftara is addressed to the residents of the Southern Kingdom, who are still in Israel at the time of the prophecy. The comfort delivered by Jeremiah is that not only will they ultimately return from Exile, but **even** Ephraim -- whose very name, a century after the Assyrian Exile, has become synonymous with being lost forever -- will one day return as well. The references to "Ephraim" and "the Shomron" in the Haftara indeed refer to the Northern Kingdom, but the message of hope, that even those seemingly lost forever will one day return, is meant to inspire their brothers in the South.

What is true of the Jewish people's national redemption -- that it will include even those who have wandered beyond the point of no return -- is just as true of every Jew's personal redemption: the process of repentance. Herein lies the link between our Haftara and Rosh HaShana: Any Jew can be an "Ephraim."

In the realm of personal redemption, "Ephraim" is that Jew who is so far lost, so thoroughly exiled, that he or she despairs of redemption. The message of the Haftara is that even an Ephraim can and will be brought back from exile. Even a Jew who has strayed very far afield can preserve the hope of true *Teshuva*.

Indeed, this is what Rashi means when he points to the divine remembrance of Ephraim as being the reason for this passage's choice as the Haftara of Rosh HaShana. The entire Haftara builds up to this verse, poignantly describing how Ephraim is seemingly abandoned, and then dramatically informing us that G-d loves and remembers even Epharim.

"Is not Ephraim a dear son to Me?" Let us never give up on an Ephraim!