

HAFTARAH: Familiar Practices for Unfamiliar Reasons

By Samuel N. Hoenig

After the required aliyot are read, Kaddish is recited and the maftir is called up to the Torah. Several verses of the previous aliyah are repeated. The Torah scroll is lifted and rolled up. The designated section from the Prophets is now chanted.

The above scenario, performed every Shabbat and Yom Tov, seems simple and routine. However, this is far from the case. The practice of reading from the Prophets subsequent to the Torah reading abounds with ambiguities. For example, why is the reading of the section from the Prophets called *haftarah*?¹ Why is *maftir* an added aliyah and not the last of the required seven aliyot? Furthermore, why is an aliyah *leTorah* necessary, why can't there just be an aliyah *leNavi*, i.e. call up the *maftir* and let him immediately commence with the reading of the Prophets? What factors determine the selection of the *haftarah*? Finally, why is a portion from the Prophets read altogether?

Generally speaking, *maftir*, along with *shlishi* and *shishi* (the third and the sixth aliyot on Shabbat), is a coveted aliyah. It is set aside for those celebrating their Bar Mitzvah² or *aufruf*³ as well as those observing a relative's *yahrtzeit*.⁴ Similarly, on specific *Shabbatot*, *maftir* is reserved for the

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rav.⁵ However, the popularity of *maftir* is a relatively new phenomenon. According to the Talmud (*Megillah*),⁶ *maftir* is not such an honorable aliyah since even a minor may receive it. In Talmudic times, therefore, the *maftir* was compensated by receiving the additional honor of serving as the *shaliach tzibbur* (leader of the services).⁷ Furthermore, according to the Talmud,⁸ *maftir* is not considered an obligatory aliyah.

The reason *maftir* is read from the Torah before the chanting of the *haftarah* is because of *kavod haTorah*—if one were to read from the Prophets without first reading from the Torah, it would appear as if the Books of the Prophets were on the same footing as the Torah. (In order to satisfy the *kavod haTorah* requirement, it is sufficient to repeat several verses from the previous Torah aliyah.⁹) But why is the reading from the Prophets necessary at all? In order to appreciate the significance of the *haftarah*, we need to understand the meaning of the word.¹⁰ *Haftarah*, which comes from the root *petar*, has multiple meanings. According to some,¹¹ *haftarah* means completion or conclusion, as in the well-known phrase, “*ein maftirin achar haPesach afikomen*,”¹² (after eating the *karban Pesach* one does not “end” the meal with *afikomen*). Similarly, the reading of the *haftarah* marks the “end” of the

Shacharit service. Others maintain just the opposite,¹³ that *haftarah* means the beginning, referring to the beginning of the reading from the Navi (Prophets). Rabbeinu Tam¹⁴ believes that *haftarah* is related to *peter* as in *peter rechem*—to open. *Haftarah*, in this sense, signifies that as long as the Torah is being read, one is not allowed to converse, even concerning halachic matters. However, once the reading of the *haftarah* commences, one may “open” his mouth and speak, i.e. a *devar halachah*.

An intriguing explanation is offered by Rabbi David Abudraham¹⁵ (14th century Spain). Abudraham sees the word *haftarah* as stemming from *patur*—to be exempt: Abudraham explains that the *haftarah* was instituted in lieu of *Kriat HaTorah* (the Reading from the Torah) due to persecutions forbidding the public reading of the Torah. The sages thus instituted that a portion, thematically similar to the censored Torah portion, be read from the Prophets. By reading the *haftarah*, one exempts himself from *Kriat HaTorah*. Abudraham does not indicate the precise date of this *takanah*. However, according to Rabbi Eliyahu Bachur¹⁶ (1469-1549), Abudraham is referring to the religious persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes (168-165 BCE). Indeed, the author of the Book of Maccabees, when listing the Epiphanic decrees, states:¹⁷

And wherever they found the Books of the Law, they tore them up and burned them,

and if anyone was found to possess a Book of the Agreement or respected the Law, the king's decree condemned him to death.

Maccabees' references to the “Books of the Law” (Torah) explain why the ban was not extended to the Prophets as well: The persecutors did not view the Prophets as threats to their assimilationist policies in as much as they do not constitute the “Books of the Law.”

According to the above theory, it is clear why the *halachot* of the *haftarah* are patterned after those of *Kriat HaTorah*. These *halachot* include:

- The *haftarah* reading must contain a minimum of 21 verses, corresponding to the three-verse minimum for each of the seven Torah aliyot.¹⁸

- The *haftarah* must be thematically connected to the *sidrah*.¹⁹

- Similar to *Kriat HaTorah*, a *minyan* must be present during the reading of the *haftarah*.²⁰

- A total of five blessings are recited before and after the *haftarah* (one before and four after), corresponding to the “five” Books of the Torah.²¹

- Just as the Torah reading in Talmudic times was orally translated into Aramaic by a *meturgaman* (translator), the *haftarah* was orally translated into Aramaic.²²

- According to some authorities, the *haftarah* must be read from a scroll that was written in accordance with the *halachot* governing the writing of a *sefer Torah*.²³

By establishing these *halachot*, the institutors of the *haftarah* were highlighting that the *haftarah* reading served as a substitute for the banned Torah portion.

It is unclear why even after the Epiphanic decree on public Torah reading was repealed, the *haftarah* reading was retained²⁴ alongside the Torah reading. Nevertheless, certain halachic requirements were instituted to set off the *haftarah* reading, which is of rabbinic origin, from *Kriat HaTorah*, which is of Mosaic origin.

- Unlike *Kriat HaTorah*, even a minor may be called up to the *haftarah*.²⁵

- The reader of the *haftarah* must read from the Torah as well.

- The aliyah of *maftir* is not an inte-

gral part of *Kriat HaTorah*, but an “added” aliyah.

- According to most authorities,²⁶ unlike *Kriat HaTorah*, the *haftarah* need not be read from a parchment scroll.

All of the above made it possible to retain the *takanah* of the *haftarah* reading while at the same time stressing its secondary status.

There are at least two other theories as to the origin of the *haftarah* found in the writings of the *Rishonim*. According to Rabbeinu Tam, as quoted by Rabbi Isaiah of Trani,²⁷ the reading of the *haftarah* is attributed to Ezra the Scribe. As is well known, Ezra is responsible for instituting many *takanot*, including the reading of the Torah on Shabbat afternoons (*Minchah*) and the reading on Mondays and Thursdays of three aliyot (totaling a minimum of ten verses).²⁸ Though Rabbeinu Tam does not explain the rationale behind Ezra's *takanah*, it would seem that Ezra wished to emphasize the unity of Torah and Prophets and therefore appended various prophetic texts to the Torah portion.

A most fascinating theory, found in *Sefer HaPardes*,²⁹ an important collection of laws and responsa from the school of Rashi, maintains that the reading of the *haftarah* on Shabbat and Yom Tov is a relic of an old abandoned practice. In earlier times, upon the completion of the weekday morning service, time was set aside for the study of Mikrah (Tanach), Mishnah and Gemara.³⁰ Portions of the Prophets were also read (studied). In later times, when people were pressured to devote more time to earning a living, the practice was abandoned. Subsequently, they fulfilled their Torah and Ketuvim “quota” with the recital of *Shema* and *Pesukei deZimra* respectively, and the Mishnah and Gemara requirement with the readings of various texts found in the *Karbanot* section of the *siddur*, all of which are part of the *Shacharit* service. But what of Neviim (Prophets)? To satisfy this requirement, the custom of reciting

two verses from the Book of Isaiah (59:20-21) —on the future Redemption and the Torah covenant—was established. This was later expanded into the familiar *Uva leTzion* prayer. However, the original practice of reading a selection from the Prophets on Shabbat and Yom Tov, when people are not rushing to work, was retained.

As noted above, the choice of a particular *haftarah* was determined by the content of the weekly *sidrah*. The Talmud emphasizes that the *haftarah* should be, in some way, similar to the *sidrah*.³¹ This is true of all the *haftarot* from *Bereishit* through *Pinchas* (when *Matot* and *Masei* are read separately). Beginning with the period of the “Three Weeks” prior to Tishah B'av and continuing for seven weeks from after Tishah B'av until Rosh Hashanah, the *haftarot*, independent of their respective *sidrot*, concentrate instead on the themes of suffering and consolation, reflective of the pre and post Tishah B'av moods.³²

During Talmudic times there were no fixed *haftarot* for each *sidrah*. The only fixed *haftarah* texts found in the Talmud are for special Shabbatot, e.g. the four *parshiyot*, Shabbat Chanukah and the Yomim Tovim.³³ This accounts for the diverse *minhagim* as to the choice of *haftarot* during the rest of the year.³⁴

A careful study of the *haftarot* will reveal that not only are they thematically connected with the *sidrot*, but they contain similar words and phrases as well. No doubt, these parallel words played a significant role in the “matching” of a *haftarah* with its *sidrah*. Textual similarities between the *haftarah* and the *sidrah* are especially significant according to Abudraham's view that the *haftarah* was to serve in times of persecution as a substitute Torah reading. These analogous words and phrases not only reminded one of the respective Torah portion but also created a textual as well as thematic substitute for the banned *sidrah*.³⁵

My hope is that these insights will serve to make the practice of reading the *haftarah* a more meaningful experience. JA

Notes

1. Although “*haftarah*” is the grammatically correct spelling and pronunciation, “*haftorah*” (with a *vav*) is found in both Hebrew, and English transliteration. See *The Haptoth: Translated and Explained by Dr. Mendel Hirsch* (London, 1966), 1; *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, edited by Dr. J.H. Hertz (London, 1967); *The Living Torah*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (NY, 1984), 1051-1375. See also Rabbi Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew English Dictionary* (Israel, 1990), 560.
2. J.D Eisenstein, *Ozar Dinim U'Minhagim* (NY, 1928), 50.
3. B. Adler, *Seder haNesaim keHilchatam* (Jerusalem, 1985), vol. 1, 193.
4. Rema, *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 376:5.
5. J.D Eisenstein, op. cit. p. 246. See also *Magen Avraham, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 282:14.
6. 23a.
7. *Megillah* 24a and comment of Rabbi Nissim (Ran).
8. Ibid, 23a.
9. However, see Tosafot, *Megillah* 23a, s.v. *kevan* that in Tannaitic times the *maftir* did not repeat the last verses of the seventh *aliyah*, but actually was the concluding *aliyah* of the *sidrah*.
10. As already noted, the more correct form is *haftarah*. The more common usage *haftorah* probably evolved from the fact that it is read after the “Torah” reading—thus “haf-Torah.”
11. *Sefer Abudraham haShalem* (Jerusalem, 1963), 173.
12. Mishnah, *Pesachim* 10:8.
13. *Aruch haShulchan, Orach Chaim* 284.
14. *Sefer Abudraham*. loc. cit. See also Levush, *Orach Chaim* 284:1. See Tehillim 22: 8 and Rashi & Ibn Ezra. loc. cit, *Pesikta Rabbati* 37 and *Derech Eretz Rabbah* 2.
15. Op. cit. p. 172.
16. *Sefer Tisbi*. “*patar*,” also *Tosafot Yom Tov, Megillah* 3:4.
17. 1 Maccabees 1:56-57.
18. *Megillah* 23a.
19. Ibid, 29b.
20. Ibid, 23b.
21. *Sefer Abudraham haShalem*, 172.
22. *Megillah* 24a.
23. Levush, *Orach Chaim* 284:1 and *Mishnah Berurah* 284:1.
24. For similar occurrences, see Tosafot, *Rosh Hashanah* 32b s.v. *beSha'at*.
25. *Megillah* 23a.
26. Magen Avraham, *Turei Zahav, Shulchan HaRav* and *Mishnah Berurah*—
Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 284.
27. *Sefer HaMachriah* (Jerusalem, 1998), 162.
28. Yerushalmi *Megillah* 4:1, *Bava Kamma* 82a.
29. *Sefer Pardes haGadol* (reprint of 1870 edition), cf. *Siddur Rashi* (Jerusalem, 1963), 37, *Shibbolei haLeket* (Jerusalem, 1962), 37-38.
30. *Kiddushin* 30a.
31. *Megillah* 29b.
32. Tosafot, *Megillah* 31b, s.v. *rosh chodesh, Sefer HaManhig* (Jerusalem, 1961), *Hilchot Shabbat*, sect. 33.
33. *Megillah* 23a, Tosefta *Megillah* 3. See comment of *Kesef Mishnah, Hilchot Tefillah* 12:12.
34. For a complete list of variant *haftarot* readings see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, v. 10, 702-727.
35. See my forthcoming article “Haftarah-Sidrah: Mirror Images” in the *Lander Festschrift*.