

Haftarah Helper 5781: First Two Days of Passover

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The Haftarat of the first two days of Passover recount celebrations of the holiday at two moments of dramatic transformation in Biblical history. At both moments, these celebrations renew the nation's commitment to its covenant with God, focusing the people on the practical and spiritual goals facing them. Specifically, the readings describe the Passovers of Joshua and King Josiah. Forty years after the Exodus, Joshua's celebration of the holiday renewed the Israelites' covenantal connection to both God and His Land before conquering it. Centuries later, Josiah revolutionized Judean society after generations of idolatry, and the national observance of Passover again demonstrated the nation's recommitment to their eternal covenant with God. When the covenant needs to be renewed, Passover is there as the central focus.

Day 1

Joshua 3:5-7¹; 5:2-6:1; 6:27

The Haftarah of the first day of Passover includes key passages, including the third-ever celebration of Passover, from the beginning, middle, and end of the story of the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan and the beginning of their conquest of the Land, the miraculous conquest of Jericho. This monumental undertaking affirms, incorporates, and fulfills God's covenant with His people. Joshua leads a mass fulfillment of the covenant of circumcision. This covenant of circumcision, in turn, incorporates God's covenantal promise to inherit the land (Gen. 17:8), which the forthcoming conquest begins to fulfill. Entering the land (Ex. 12:25, 13:5, 13:11&14) and circumcision (Ex. 12:43, 12:48) are prerequisites for the Israelites to make an annual Passover offering. Joshua, therefore, leads the nation in the first Passover offering in the Land - and that offering itself renews their covenant with God, as well.

These covenant-saturated events - mass circumcision, the Passover sacrifice, and crossing the Jordan - reenact the Exodus for a new generation who had, for the most part, not witnessed it a mere four decades earlier. Moreover, the beginning (3:7) and end (6:27) of the Haftarah emphasize that all of these actions solidify Joshua's standing as the nation's new leader (see also 4:14), another critical transition facing the people after Moses's recent death.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 3:5-7: Joshua leads a new generation through waters split by God, demonstrating Divine support for him as Moses's successor.

Joshua 3:7	יהושע ג:ז
The Lord said to Joshua, "This day, I will begin to make you great in the sight of all Israel so they will know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you."	וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֶחָל גְּדֹלְךָ בְּעֵינַי כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יִדְעוּן כִּי בְּאִשְׁרֵי הַיְיָתִי עִם־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ:

Verses 5:2-9: After crossing the Jordan River, Joshua circumcises the males who were not circumcised in the Wilderness.

Joshua 5:2	יהושע ה:ב
At that time the Lord said to Joshua, "Make flint knives for yourselves and again circumcise the children of Israel a second time."	בַּעֲת הַהִיא אָמַר ה' אֶל־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ עֲשֵׂה לָךְ חַרְבֹת צָרִים וְשׁוּב מִלְּאֶת־בְּגֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁנִית:

¹ Chabad Chasidim and some Ashkenazic communities read these verses.

Verse 5:10: In Gilgal, the Israelites make Passover offerings.

Joshua 5:10	יהושע ה':י
The children of Israel encamped in Gilgal and made the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho.	וַיִּחַנוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִלְגָל וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הַפֶּסַח בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעָרֵב בְּעַרְבֹת יְרִיחוֹ:

Verse 5:11-12: The Israelites then begin to eat the Land's produce, and the manna ceases to fall.

Joshua 5:12	יהושע ה':י"ב
The manna ceased the next day when they ate from the land's grain. The children of Israel no longer had manna; they ate the produce of the land of Canaan that year.	וַיִּשְׁבֹּת הַמָּן מִמַּחֲרַת בְּאֲכָלָם מֵעֵבֹר הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא־הָיָה עוֹד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִתְּבוּאֹת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן בַּשָּׁנָה הַהִיא: (ס)

Verses 5:13-6:1: A Divine messenger bearing a sword reassures Joshua of God's presence during the forthcoming conquest of Jericho, and instructs him to remove his shoes while standing on holy ground as Moses had done before him.

Joshua 5:15	יהושע ה':ט"ו
The [angelic] captain of the Lord's host said to Joshua: "Remove your shoe from your foot, for the place on which you stand is holy." Joshua did so.	וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂר־צָבָא ה' אֶל־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שֶׁל־גַּעֲלֶךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹמֵד עָלָיו קֹדֶשׁ הוּא וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כֵּן:

Verse 6:27: The conquest of Jericho solidifies Joshua's standing as the nation's military leader.

Joshua 6:27	יהושע ו':כ"ז
So the Lord was with Joshua; his fame was throughout all the country.	וַיְהִי ה' אִתְּיָהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיְהִי שְׁמֹעוֹ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:

Connections

The Midrash describes **God's appreciation of the mass circumcision** that took place under Joshua's leadership.

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 4:6	שיר השירים רבה ד:ו
Rabbi Levi said: When Joshua circumcised the Israelites, he piled up their foreskins into a hill. The sun shone upon them and they rotted, and their smell rose before the Holy One, Blessed be He. Its smell was [as pleasant as the Temple's] incense and a handful of myrrh on [its altar's] fire. At that moment [God] said, "When the descendants of these [people] come to sin and evil acts, I will remind them of this smell, have mercy on them, and transform My attribute of Judgment to Mercy." Why so? "I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense." (Song of Songs 4:6)	רבי לוי אמר בשעה שפיל יהושע את בני ישראל העמיד להם ערלותיהם גבעה, וזרחת עליהם חמה והתליעו, ועלה ריחן לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא כריית קטרת סמים וכריית קמץ של לבונה שעל גבי אשם, באותה שעה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לכשיבואו בניהם של אלו לידי עברות ומעשים רעים אני נזכר להם ריח זה ומתמלא עליהם רחמים והופך להם מדת הדין לרחמים, מה טעם אלה לי אל הר המור ואל גבעת הלבונה.

Day 2

2 Kings 23:1-9,21-25

Centuries after Joshua, King Josiah also led the people through a time of dramatic transformation, and his observance of Passover is also part of the nation's covenant renewal. Born into a society awash in idolatry and immorality under his grandfather King Menashe, Josiah ascends the throne at eight years old after his father, King Amon, is assassinated. He begins to return to God, instructing the priests to repair the Temple. They find an ancient Torah scroll and read it before Josiah. He weeps and rends his garments, fearful of its punishments for those who abrogate it. The prophetess Huldah is consulted; she confirms that God will punish the people for its generations of idolatry, as the Torah says.

The Haftarah describes the revolution that Josiah and his allies undertake to return the nation to compliance with the Divine covenant. The king assembles all of Judah to Jerusalem and reads the "scroll of the covenant" before them; they, too, affirm the covenant. First, they rectify generations of covenantal failure by obliterating idolatry throughout Judah; the Haftarah omits some of these events. Josiah then instructs the people to make Passover "as written in this book of the covenant"; 2 Chr. 25:1-19 describes this greatest Passover in Biblical history in great detail. For these mighty efforts to renew Judah's covenant with God, the Bible describes Josiah as one of Judah's greatest kings.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 23:1-3: In the Temple, King Josiah and the people dedicate themselves to the Torah's covenant with God.

II Kings 23:3	מלכים ב כ"ג:ג
The king stood by the pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments, his testimonies, and his statutes with all [their] heart and all [their] soul, to uphold the words of this covenant that were written in this book. The entire people stood [to accept] the covenant.	וַיַּעֲמֵד הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל־הָעַמֹּוד וַיַּכְרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַלְּפָנֵי ה' לְלַקֵּחַ אַחֵר ה' וּלְשַׁמֵּר מִצְוֹתָיו וְאֶת־עֲדוּתָיו וְאֶת־חֻקֹּתָיו בְּכָל־לֵב וּבְכָל־נַפְשׁ לְהִקְיִם אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת הַכְּתוּבִים עַל־הַסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה וַיַּעֲמֵד כָּל־הָעָם בְּבְרִית:

Verses 23:4-7: Josiah leads a campaign to destroy idols, remove idolatrous priests, and desecrate idolatrous shrines throughout Judah.

II Kings 23:4	מלכים ב כ"ג:ד
The king ordered the high priest, Hilkiah, the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the [Temple] door, to remove from the Lord's Temple all the vessels made for [the god] Ba'al and for the [idolatrous] Asherah [rite], and for all the host of heaven. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron and removed their ashes to Bethel.	וַיִּצַו הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל וְאֶת־כַּהֲנָי הַמְּשֻׁנָּה וְאֶת־שַׁמְרֵי הַסֵּף לְהוֹצִיא מִהֵיכַל ה' אֶת כָּל־הַכֵּלִים הַעֲשׂוּיִם לַבַּעַל וְלְאַשְׁרָה וְלִכָּל צַבָּא הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּשְׂרָפֵם מִחוּץ לְיְרוּשָׁלַם בְּשָׂדֵי מוֹת קִדְרוֹן וַיִּנְשֵׂא אֶת־עַפְרָם בֵּית־אֵל:

Verse 23:8-9: He disqualified Jewish priests who served idols from officiating in the Temple but permitted them to eat priestly food.

II Kings 23:9	מלכים ב כ"ג:ט
Nevertheless, the priests of the [idolatrous] altars did not come up to the Lord's altar in Jerusalem, but they did eat of the unleavened bread among their brethren.	אָדָּךְ לֹא יָעָלוּ כַּהֲנָי הַבַּמֹּזֵז אֶל־מִזְבֵּחַ ה' בְּיְרוּשָׁלַם כִּי אִם־אָכְלוּ מִצֹּאת בֶּתוֹךְ אֲחֵיהֶם:

Verses 23:21-23: Josiah leads the people in celebration of the greatest Passover in Biblical history.

II Kings 23:21	מלכים ב כ"ג:כ"א
The king commanded the entire people, saying, "Make Passover unto the Lord your God, as is written in the book of the covenant."	וַיִּצְוֵה הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-כָּל-הָעָם לֵאמֹר עֲשׂוּ פֶסַח לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כַּכְּתוּב עַל סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית הַזֶּה:

Verses 23:24-25: Josiah ranks among the greatest Biblical kings.

II Kings 23:25	מלכים ב כ"ג:כ"ה
No king before him was like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might according to all the Torah of Moses - and after him [no king] arose like him [, either.]	וְכַמֹּהוּ לֹא-הָיָה לְפָנָיו מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר-שָׁב אֶל-יהוָה כְּכָל-לִבָּבוֹ וְכְכָל-נַפְשׁוֹ וְכְכָל-מְאֹדוֹ כְּכָל תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה וְאַחֲרָיו לֹא-תָקַם כָּמֹהוּ:

Connections

Josiah and the people stood when dedicating themselves to the Torah's covenant. Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried records a custom that **those present when a baby boy enters the covenant of circumcision should, similarly, stand.**

Kitzur Shulchan Arukh 163:2	קיצור שלחן ערוך קס"ג:ב
It is customary that all present at a circumcision stand, as Scripture (II Kings 23:3) states, "All the people stood in the covenant," except the sandek who holds the baby while seated. After the father recites the blessing "to bring [the baby] into the covenant" and those assembled answer "amen," they all say, "Just as [the baby has now] entered the covenant [of circumcision], so may he [one day] enter into [the study of] Torah, the wedding canopy, and [the performance of] good deeds!"	נוהגין שְׂכָל הָעָם שְׂאֶצֶל הַמִּילָה, עוֹמְדִים, שְׂנֹאֲמַר, וַיִּעֲמֵד כָּל הָעָם בְּבְרִית, מְלִבְד הַסַּנְדֵּק שֶׁהוּא תוֹפֵס אֶת הַתֵּינוֹק, וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב. וְלֹאֲחֵר שֶׁבְרַח הָאֵב לְהַכְנִיסוֹ וְעָנּוּ אָמֵן, אוֹמְרִים כָּלֵם, כְּשֵׁם שֶׁנִּכְנַס לְבְרִית, כֵּן יִכְנַס לְתוֹרָה וְלַחֲפָה וְלַמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים.

Halachah extends Josiah's disqualification of Jewish priests who served idols from serving in the Temple, also banning them from offering the Priestly Benediction.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer and the Priestly Blessing 15:3	משנה תורה, הלכות תפילה וברכת כהנים ט"ו:ג
A priest who worshiped idols, whether under compulsion or in error, even if he repented, may never lift his hands [and recite the Priestly Benediction..] This accords with Scripture, "Nevertheless, the priests of the [idolatrous] altars did not come up [to the Lord's altar in Jerusalem]" (II Kings 23:9), [since Scripture] likens the Priestly Benediction to the Temple service: "To minister unto Him [at His house] and to bless in His name" (Deuteronomy 10:8). Similarly, a priest who converted to idolatry, even though he repented may never lift his hands [and recite the Priestly Benediction.]	כֵּהֵן שְׂעֵבֵד כּוֹכְבִים בֵּין בְּאֵס בֵּין בְּשִׁגְגָה אֶף עַל פִּי שְׂעֵשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה אֵינוֹ נוֹשֵׂא אֶת כַּפָּיו לְעוֹלָם שְׂנֹאֲמַר (מלכים ב כג ט) "אֵף לֹא יֵצְלוּ כַּהֲנֵי הַבַּמֹּת" וְגו'. וּבְרַכָּה כְּעִבּוּדָה הִיא שְׂנֹאֲמַר (דברים י ח) "לְשִׁרְתּוֹ וְלְבָרְךָ בְּשֵׁמוֹ". וְכֵן כֵּהֵן שֶׁהַמִּיר לְעִפּוּרֵם אֶף עַל פִּי שֶׁחֲזַר בּוֹ אֵינוֹ נוֹשֵׂא אֶת כַּפָּיו לְעוֹלָם.

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