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MASTER'S THESIS:

TEACHING THE MEANING OF THE *HAFTAROT* TO *BAR/BAT MITZVAH* STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the culmination of a project in which I researched the resources that are available for teaching the meaning of the *haftarot*[1] to *bar/bar mitzvah* students.[2] In my experience as a rabbinic intern, religious school principal and *bar/bat mitzvah* coach, I have found that most such students in liberal Jewish congregations have difficulty understanding their assigned *haftarot* using existing congregational resources.

This thesis begins with a discussion of the *bar/bat mitzvah* process in terms of published theories on developmental psychology, especially in the areas of religious awareness and moral values. The thesis includes a critique of the existing resources of which I am aware for teaching the meaning of the haftarot. As I did not find a resource specifically intended for *bar/bat mitzvah* students that I consider to be fully adequate for their needs, I began to create one and have included samples of such materials.

The new materials that I created were tested with a group of *bar/bat mitzvah* students at the independent liberal temple where I serve as rabbinic intern and religious school principal. Although the test group was not large enough for me to develop objective conclusions, the results of certain subjective observations are presented here, along with suggestions for improvement and topics for further study.

[1] Readings from the "Prophets" portion of the Hebrew Bible that are chanted on Sabbaths and major holidays
[2] Adolescents preparing for the Jewish "coming of age" rituals of *bar/bat mitzvah* which include *haftarah* chanting

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Rabbi Kenneth Emert, of Temple Beth Rishon, Wyckoff, NJ, gave me the opportunity, as his rabbinic intern, since 2008, to work with *bar* and *bat mitzvah* students on their *haftarah* speeches and to discover the deficiency of the current resources. He encouraged me to create new materials and to make this the subject of my thesis.

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Dr. Saul Wachs, my thesis advisor at Gratz College guided me in structuring this thesis and held me to a high standard in creating its contents. He especially emphasized the transformative nature of the *bar/bat mitzvah* process and the role that parents can play.

Finally, I thank my beloved wife, sweetheart and best friend, Marilyn, for her unwavering support in my pursuit of a rabbinic education and throughout our years of marriage.

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND, RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Introduction

Bar mitzvah (for boys) and *bat mitzvah* (for girls) are uniquely Jewish rites of passage from childhood into adulthood. The terms mean literally "son of the commandment" and "daughter of the commandment," referring to the taking on of the moral, ethical and ritual obligations of a Jewish adult, defined by the Torah (Pentateuch), as interpreted by the various denominations of Judaism. These rites coincide roughly with puberty – age 13 for boys and 12 for girls[3] – although it is common at many synagogues for both boys and girls to have their respective ceremonies shortly after their 13th birthday.

The origin of *bar mitzvah* can be traced to a saying in *Pirke Avot*, a Talmudic tractate which contains moral and ethical teachings of the early rabbis, that says "age 13 for commandments."[4] One of the first rabbis known to use the term *bar mitzvah* with its modern connotation was Mordecai ben Hillel, in 13th century Germany.[5] It became customary for a boy to be called to the Torah on the first Sabbath after his 13th birthday and to recite the blessings before and after the reading.[6] If he was able, he would chant a portion of the Torah and often the *haftarah*, a reading from the prophets.[7] The boy's father would then bless God for relieving him of responsibility for the child's actions.[8] A festive meal at which the boy would deliver a Scripture-based teaching often followed.[9]

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[3] Ronald Isaacs, *Rites of Passage – A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle* (Hoboken, NJ, 1992), p. 62
[4] Mishnah Avot 5:23/24 (numbering not uniform in all editions)
[5] Isaacs, p. 63
[6] Isaacs, pp. 63-64
[7] Isaacs, p. 64
[8] Isaacs, pp. 63-64
[9] Isaacs, p. 64

Although *bat mitzvah* ceremonies for girls, without being called to the Torah, were known in the 19th century, the first known *bat mitzvah* that truly parallels what is done for boys took place at a Sabbath service in New York in 1922.[10] Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Jewish Reconstructionist movement, gave his daughter Judith an opportunity to recite the Torah blessings and read a portion of the text, though not from the Torah scroll.[11] The custom was gradually picked up by most Conservative and virtually all Reform synagogues, with girls reading from the Torah scroll and in most cases performing exactly the same rites as boys do on becoming a *bar mitzvah*.[12]

While it is traditional in the US for *bar/bat mitzvah* students to speak about their Torah portions, some synagogues do expect the student to speak about the meaning of the *haftarah* in addition to or instead of the Torah portion.[13] Whether or not the student is expected to speak about it, I believe that his/her encounter with the *haftarah* text should include intellectual engagement with the material as well as the ritual skill of chanting it. From an educational point of view, the experience will be more meaningful for the student if he/she develops a degree of expertise, greater than that of the congregation, about the subject matter of the *haftarah*. In that way the act of chanting the *haftarah* in the synagogue service will be more than just a public performance. It will also be the culmination of having studied and learned something from the biblical heritage of Judaism. This may contribute to an aspect of the *bar/bat mitzvah* process that I have seen as motivational for some students: the act of proving one's Jewish competence.

[10] Jeffrey Salkin, *Putting God on the Guest List* (Woodstock, VT, 2007), pp. 14, 15
[11] Salkin, pp. 15-16
[12] Salkin, p. 16
[13] Isaacs, p. 65

Dr. Saul Wachs has called the *bar/bat mitzvah* experience "a window of opportunity through which we may reach the heart of the young person and create a memory that will have a lasting, beneficial effect."[14] He has said that *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation can be a "transformative process," in which the student engages profound ideas contained in his/her assigned Torah and *haftarah* readings and explores their personal significance.[15] Many of these texts are difficult and their meaning is often not obvious, when taken out of context, even to well-educated adults. Rabbis and other scholars have offered differing explanations of these texts for nearly 2,000 years and original commentaries continue to be written to this day. The *bar/bat mitzvah* student needs a resource which presents some of this material in a form that he/she can assimilate.

I have researched the resources that are available for teaching the meaning of the *haftarot*[16] to *bar/bat mitzvah* students. In my experience as a liberal Jewish rabbinic intern, religious school principal and *bar/bat mitzvah* coach, I have found that most such students have difficulty understanding their assigned *haftarah* portion using existing congregational resources. I have not found any resource specifically intended for such students that I consider fully adequate for their needs. I have begun to investigate how such a resource should differ from what exists. The purpose of this thesis is to explain why the existing resources are not suitable, to define a more appropriate resource and provide examples of its contents and to report on the experience of using this material.

[14] Saul Wachs, "Bar/Bat Mitzvah: A Window of Opportunity," in Helen Leneman, ed., Bar Bat Mitzvah Education (Denver, CO, 1993), p. 37
[15] Saul Wachs, personal communication, April 15, 2010
[16] Plural of *haftarah*

Jewish Tradition: Grappling with the Text

Dr. Barry Holtz defines Jewish education as an enterprise of "cultural transmission."[17] In liberal Jewish settings in the US, *bar/bat mitzvah* is often the driving force behind and the culmination of this enterprise. The Hebrew Bible and its interpretation are at the core of Jewish culture. In my opinion, the education of a *bar/bat mitzvah* student is not complete without at least one serious attempt to grapple with important questions raised by the biblical text. For many students this grappling is forced by the requirement to explain part of the Torah or *haftarah* portion that he/she chants. I always ask students to express what the text means to them personally and/or in modern life generally. This reflects a second definition of Jewish education that Holtz offers: initiation into the ongoing Jewish conversation.[18] Historically, much of the Jewish conversation has been dynamic vs. static; as Holtz says, "creating new interpretations"[19] of the biblical text. In terms of teaching the meaning of the *haftarot* to *bar/bat mitzvah* students one question we might ask is "How can we best equip the student to participate in this conversation?"

Holtz speaks of a "transformative tradition" in which a "deep and living connection to being Jewish" is cultivated along with the transmission of knowledge and ritual skills.[20] He says that a Jewish teacher's task is to help students engage in their own personal encounters with text and tradition.[21] This is what many of us try to do in the *bar/bat*

[17] Barry W. Holtz, *Textual Knowledge, Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice* (New York, 2003), p.37
[18] Holtz, p. 38
[19] Holtz, p. 39
[20] Holtz, pp. 39-40
[21] Holtz, p. 42

mitzvah process. Unfortunately, with respect to the meaning of the *haftarot*, I believe that we lack the necessary tools to effectively engage 12 to 13 year-olds with the text.

Developmental Psychology Concerns

An effective approach to the challenge of teaching the meaning of the *haftarot* should be informed by well-recognized sources on developmental psychology. A number of leading psychologists have defined stages of people's moral and spiritual development. While these stages may not be valid for everyone, their definitions are helpful in understanding how adolescents could be aided to learn the meaning of the *haftarot*. The following are some key teachings concerning adolescents from these sources.

Dr. Jean Piaget believed that from age 12, most people are able to think abstractly, systematically and hypothetically.[22] He said that children move from "a moral order imposed by adults" to an autonomous, internal sense of morality.[23] I have seen that *bar/bat mitzvah* students are often unwilling to accept the standard formulations of right and wrong that have been taught to them but rather need to establish their own moral positions. Accordingly, as suggested by Dr. Roberta Goodman, of Siegal College, *bar/bat mitzvah* students will understand their *haftarot* best if they can "determine the meaning and significance" for themselves, rather than having it dictated to them by adults.[24]

[22] Roberta Goodman, "Developmental Psychology," in Nachama Moskowitz, ed., *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook* (Denver, CO, 2003), p. 89
[23] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 90
[24] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 90

Dr. Erik Erikson taught that adolescence is a time of "struggling with self-definition."[25] He said that in adolescence one takes on the responsibility of determining "who one is and what one wants to do with one's life."[26] Erikson taught that adolescents accomplish this by listening to peers and sharing themselves with others.[27] Accordingly, they may rebel against having an educator, Jewish or otherwise, tell them what to think about a given subject and may instead embrace the values of their peer group. Goodman suggests that adolescents study texts in *chevruta*, with one or more peers. While I appreciate the merits of this, it may not always be possible for *bar/bat mitzvah haftarot*.

Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg, following Piaget, believed that all human beings are "capable of determining what is moral" and wanted to understand how to educate people in ways that would lead to the creation of a just society.[28] He defined the developmental stage that begins at age 13 as one in which people become capable of taking on a "third person perspective," represented in a set of "shared moral norms" by which they are expected to live.[29] He said that these shared norms lead to an emphasis on becoming "altruistic or prosocial" and on the importance of having good motives.[30] Goodman says that Kohlberg's ideas are useful in a Jewish context, where ethical behavior, adherence to biblical commandments and belief in God are deeply enmeshed.[31] This outlook is strongly represented in most of the prophetic texts that make up the *haftarah* readings.

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[25] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 91
[26] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 91
[27] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 93
[28] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 94
[29] Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco, 1989), p. 628
[30] Kohlberg, p. 628
[31] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 97

Dr. James Fowler published a theory of faith development, influenced by Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg and dealing with the whole person, in which he claimed that humanity involves making meaning of life's significant issues.[32] He says that in adolescence, we become attuned to the ways we are perceived by others as part of our development of abstract thinking and "form our own identity based on roles and relationships," "seek and value the approval and acceptance of others" and "look to non-parental role models in all aspects of life."[33] Fowler says that adolescents tend to see the meaning of texts as self evident and can get stuck on one viewpoint.[34] I have certainly found this in my dealings with *bar/bat mitzvah* students concerning *haftarot*.

Fowler believes that religious texts can help guide adolescents in understanding their relationships with others, the values they find important and the meaning and purpose they define for their lives.[35] This is certainly one of my goals in teaching bar*/bat mitzvah* students the meaning of their *haftarot*. Fowler says that adolescents need "mirrors" – "trusted others" in whom to see the image of their emerging personalities and from whom to get a reflection of the "feelings, insights, anxieties and commitments" that they are forming.[36] To some extent the prophets of the Hebrew Bible can serve as such mirrors, as their teachings can provide adolescents with validation of their feelings, beliefs and concerns. A primary task of the educator teaching youngsters the meaning of the *haftarot* or any part of the Bible is to help them see it as relevant in this way.

[32] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., pp. 97-98
[33] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 100
[34] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 100
[35] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 104
[36] James Fowler, Stages of Faith (San Francisco, 1981), p. 151

Fowler has written that many adolescents have a "religious hunger" for a God who "knows, accepts and confirms" their newly emerging selves.[37] *Bar/bat mitzvah* students can find such a God in many *haftarot* – one who is concerned with the lives of individuals and shows compassion for their struggles. Fowler says that as teens begin to relate to a "widened set of environments" they often experience identity crises in the discrepancies between their self-image and that which is reflected by others. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible often deal with identity crises, in their own lives and in the life of the Jewish people as a whole. In some cases the struggles of the prophets and of the Jewish people, as reflected in the words of the *haftarot*, may be instructive.

Goodman says that teens need to know that it is "acceptable to raise questions about God" and to struggle with the meaning and purpose of events in their lives.[38] She cites Erikson's teaching that identity confusion is the major developmental challenge of this phase of life.[39] The struggle to find meaning in a biblical text with respect to our modern lives and to teach that meaning to others may help a *bar/bat mitzvah* student to define his or her identity and what is important for him or herself. A *bar/bat mitzvah* student's encounter with his/her *haftarah* should require the student to grapple with the meaning of the text and to ask and answer questions about its relevance in his/her own life, in the life of our modern Jewish community and in the life of the larger society of which we are a part. Modern *bar/bat mitzvah* education should include this as one of its objectives.

[37] Fowler, p. 153
[38] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 104
[39] Goodman, in Moskowitz, ed., p. 104

The educational teachings of Wachs, Holtz and Goodman and of the developmental psychology authorities cited above suggest that the process of learning the meaning of one's *haftarah* should be active rather than passive. The student should be given questions to answer and dilemmas to solve – immersing him/herself in the text in ways that will deepen his/her understanding. Ideally, the student should be given an opportunity to teach what he/she has learned to the congregation before which his/her *bar/bat mitzvah* service takes place. To the extent that the student presents an original interpretation of his/her *haftarah*, the overall experience is likely to be far more meaningful than if the student simply repeats an explanation served up by adults.

Research Questions

This thesis attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Why are existing resources for teaching the meaning of the *haftarot* not suitable for modern, liberal *bar/bat mitzvah* students?

2. Based on the developmental psychology concerns summarized above, what should a better resource include?

3. What are some examples of a better resource according to my criteria? What have been the results of using the sample materials in the field?

CHAPTER 2: CRITIQUE OF EXISTING RESOURCES

There are many published resources in which the meaning of the *haftarot* is discussed. The following review is not meant to be exhaustive but rather to comment on those that are most likely to be used for teaching the meaning of the *haftarot* to *bar/bat mitzvah* students because they are single volume works of recent publication or booklets that are specifically intended for such students. In keeping with the purpose of this thesis, the resources reviewed here are considered only in terms of their usefulness in teaching *bar/bat mitzvah* students in liberal congregations and their parents. For most of these resources this does not appear to be their primary purpose. As stated above, this thesis was inspired by the shortage of good resources specifically intended for that purpose.

I chose commentaries on the *haftarah* that is read with the Torah portion *Va-Yetzei* (Genesis 28:10 – 32:3) for most of the examples below because this was the portion being studied in the annual cycle at the time of my writing of this section. Similar examples could be found in the respective commentaries on most of the other *haftarot*.

Congregational *Chumashim*

In general, congregational *chumashim*, single volumes containing the Pentateuch in Hebrew and English, with selected commentaries and the Hebrew and English texts of the *haftarot*, are not intended for the teaching of adolescents. They seem designed primarily for use by adult worshippers in the synagogue and for adult Bible study. The shortcomings of each of the major congregational *chumashim* are discussed below.

One common shortcoming of these *chumashim* is that they appear to assume general familiarity, on the part of the reader, with the overall outline of the Biblical narrative. This is often unwarranted, especially for most members of the liberal congregations with which I am familiar. This thesis was inspired by meetings with two member families at the independent temple where I serve, in each of which at least one parent is a medical doctor. They had read the *haftarah* text and commentaries, copied from the official Conservative and Reform *chumashim*, and didn't understand them. This told me that the issue was not intelligence but rather lack of knowledge of the overall context.

The Torah, *Haftaros* and 5 *Megilos* -- Nosson Scherman (Artscroll, Brooklyn, NY 1993) In this Orthodox *chumash*,[40] the *haftarot* are at the back of the book, after the end of the *Pentateuch*. The *haftarah* commentaries are minimal, with little historical background or context provided. A traditional, often idealized explanation is given and there is no suggestion that the reader attempt to draw his/her own conclusions about the text.

Etz Hayim, Torah and Commentary – David Lieber, ed., (RA/USCJ, New York, 2001) This official Conservative *chumash* places each *haftarah* and its commentary after the weekly Torah portion with which it is read.[41] The commentary for each *haftarah*, including its historical context, biographical information on the prophet or other principal figure and discussion of the relationship between the *haftarah* and the Torah portion or holiday, is well-written but is far beyond the reading level of a 13-year old. For example:

[40] Singular of *chumashim*
[41] *Haftarot* for holidays and other special occasions, with commentary, are grouped together at the back of the book.

> The diverse prophecies of this *haftarah* are unified by a symmetrical structure. Two frames enclose a centerpiece of consolation for Zion. Beginning with the outermost frame, at the outset (66:1) God proclaims His omnipresent majesty throughout heaven and earth—and thus no earthly temple can contain him. (*Haftarah* for *Shabbat* & *Rosh Hodesh*)[42]

Etz Hayim's efforts to place the *haftarot* in historical context may be lost on many liberal congregants because of their limited Jewish backgrounds. For example, in the following quote it would be useful to know that Jacob had been living in Canaan (now Israel), that Aram, from which Abraham, Sarah and Rebecca had come, is in the modern country of Syria and that the Israelites had split into two kingdoms after King Solomon died.

> The opening of this *haftarah* recounts Jacob's flight to Aram after deceiving his brother Esau. The first verses (12:13-15) are actually the end of a larger section of Hosea dealing with the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), the patriarch Jacob, and similarities between events in the patriarch's life and current national life (during the reign of King Jeroboam II, 784-748 B.C.E.). (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei, Ashkenazim*)[43]

The Torah, A Modern Commentary – W. Gunther Plaut, ed. (UAHC, New York, 1981)

This official Reform *chumash* places the *haftarot* for each of the five books of the Pentateuch at the end of that book and presents them with minimal commentary – at most two paragraphs in fine print. This makes it wholly inadequate as an educational resource for the *haftarot* and minimizes their connection to the weekly Torah portions. Dr. Plaut and the Reform movement did produce a separate book of the *haftarot*, with

[42] David Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim – Torah and Commentary* (New York, 2001), p. 1219; *Rosh Hodesh* is the first day of a new Hebrew month, which was celebrated as a holiday in ancient times.
[43] Lieber, ed., p. 188

commentaries, which is discussed below. They also produced a series of booklets for *bar/bat mitzvah* students that contain the Torah and *haftarah* portions for each week of the year. These appear to include the same information as is found in this *chumash*.

Books about the *Haftarot*

Many books have been written about the *haftarot*, at a variety of levels and for a variety of purposes. Some could be useful for the education of *bar/bat mitzvah* students, in the absence of a more ideal resource. Others are clearly intended for adult readers and some even for rabbis and other scholars. A selection of these is critiqued below.

The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot – Michael Fishbane (JPS, Philadelphia, 2002)
This is an outstanding compendium for the Bible scholar and should be on every rabbi's bookshelf. It is well written and thorough, but its contents are beyond the reading level of 13-year-olds and of many adult laypeople. The Etz Hayim passage on the *haftarah* for *Shabbat* and *Rosh Hodesh*, quoted above, is lifted almost verbatim from this book.[44]

The Haftarah Commentary – W. Gunther Plaut (UAHC Press, New York, 1996)
This official publication of the Reform movement is the best general anthology on the *haftarot* for the adult layperson that I have found. It contains a very readable general introduction to the biblical books from which the *haftarot* are drawn, an introduction to each *haftarah* including its connection to the weekly Torah portion, its setting and its message, commentaries on specific verses, essays on major themes of the *haftarah*

[44] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 326

and homiletic "gleanings" from *midrashim*[45] and other sources – Jewish and non-Jewish. This example illustrates the difference in Plaut's style and language from Etz Hayim:

> Hosea lived in the 8th century B.C.E., and was a contemporary of Amos. He resided and preached in the Northern Kingdom, which bore the name of Israel. However, Hosea calls it Ephraim, because its first king, Jeroboam (who had seceded from the united monarchy after Solomon's death) had belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei*)[46]

Plaut explains the background of the *haftarah* better than does Etz Hayim, but this text is still beyond the reading level of most 13-year-olds. A parent could explain it to his/her son/daughter, but my ideal is to give the student a commentary that he/she could read and then discuss with a parent, clergy person and/or *bar/bat mitzvah* teacher.[47] Parts of Plaut's essays and "gleanings" do relate the *haftarot* to modern life – in the case of this *haftarah*, the need for all members of society to be an influence for good[48] – but I believe that more could be done to connect the texts to issues with which *bar/bat mitzvah* students can identify. They should also be challenged with related ethical questions.

The Women's Haftarah Commentary – Elyse Goldstein, ed. (Jewish Lights, 2004)

[45] Stories, generally rabbinic, created to explain part of the Bible, to fill in apparent gaps or suggest new meaning.
[46] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (New York, 1996), p. 64
[47] Several ways that parents could and should be involved in the process of preparing their children for *bar/bat mitzvah* are discussed below.
[48] Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary*, p. 71

This excellent anthology is not necessarily feminist in outlook but is simply the work of a large group of rabbis, from various denominations, all of whom are women.[49] There is an essay for each *haftarah*, without the Hebrew or English text or comments by verse. The historical background is included in each essay. While the essays vary in style and perspective, the language is generally very readable, as this example shows:

> Living during the eighth century, Hosea rails against the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which he refers to as *Ephraim*. The eighth century was a period of general wealth and prosperity for the people of both the Southern and Northern Kingdoms. Hosea preached that this wealth had caused a decline in the steadfastness of the people. (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei*)[50]

This book is not consistent with other resources in organizing the *haftarot* by the weekly Torah portions. For example, it lists the Ashkenazic[51] *haftarah* (Hosea 12:13-14:10) for the Torah portion *Va-Yetzei* and lists the Sephardic[52] *haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei* (Hosea 11:7-12:12) as the *haftarah* for the Torah portion *Va-Yishlah* (Genesis 32:4-36:43). The Ashkenazic *haftarah* for Va-*Yishlah* (Obadiah 1:1-21) is not included. While most of the essays do attempt to relate the *haftarot* to modern life – in the case of the *haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei* to issues of repentance and marital fidelity, I believe that as with Plaut's haftarah commentary, more could be done here to bring in issues with which a *bar/bat mitzvah* student could identify and to ask thought-provoking questions.

The Haphtara Cycle – Stephen Rosenberg (Jason Aronson, 2000)

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[49] I surmise that they may have wanted to demonstrate, in this and a volume of Torah commentary, with the same editor, that they can explain and interpret the biblical texts as well as their male counterparts.
[50] Kathy Cohen, "Haftarat Vayeitzei," in Elyse Goldstein, ed., The Women's Haftarah Commentary (Woodstock, VT, 2004), pp. 30-31
[51] Ashkenazic is the adjective referring to *Ashkenazim*, Jews of northern European heritage.
[52] Sephardic is the adjective referring to *Sephardim*, Jews of Mediterranean heritage.

This anthology, by a highly-educated Modern Orthodox layman, is not overly heavy in Orthodox theology and should be well-received by liberal Jews as a useful resource. As in The Women's Haftarah Commentary there is an essay for each *haftarah*, without the Hebrew or English text or comments by verse, and the historical background is included in each essay. The language is readable, but assumes a moderate level background on the part of the reader, as illustrated by the following example:

> The *haphtarah* starts with the key sentence "Then Jacob had to flee to the land of Aram, there Israel served for a wife" (12:13), which takes us directly into the subject of the *sidra*, Jacob going to Haran and working to marry Rachel. More subtly, it also takes us into the situation of Hosea, who marries and works for his wife, however unsuitable, to demonstrate Israel's plight. We have to be rather careful what we mean by Israel, or rather what we think the *navi* means by it. (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei*)[53]

Rosenberg uses two Hebrew words *sidra*, meaning "the weekly Torah portion," and *navi*, literally "prophet," that many liberal congregants would not know. They may be explained elsewhere, but would be lacking if this section was copied out by itself. To his credit, Rosenberg does go on to explain the various usages of the name Israel and had already explained, earlier in his commentary, why Hosea's wife was "unsuitable."[54] The commentary for the *Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei* focuses primarily on history and the theme of repentance and does not give the reader other possible topics to consider. It also does not offer any thought-provoking questions or difficulties to challenge the student.

The Book of Haftarot – Sol Scharfstein (KTAV Publishing, 2006)

[53] Stephen Rosenberg, *The Haphtarah Cycle* (Northvale, NJ, 2000), p. 24
[54] Rosenberg, pp. 23-24

This book accurately describes itself as "easy-to-read." It includes a brief explanation of each *haftarah* and a verse-by-verse translation, preceded by comments on specific verses. Scharfstein explains the context of each *haftarah* well, as in this example:

> A time of prosperity began for Israel, and Samaria, the capital, was a flourishing city. Jeroboam II (784-748 B.C.E.) restored Israel's wealth and power but had no understanding of the people's religious and societal needs. He neglected the laws of the Torah and encouraged the people to worship idols. The kingdom of Jeroboam looked strong and powerful but internally it was rotten and unjust. (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei*)[55]

Scharfstein had already told the reader that "Israel" in this case means the Northern Kingdom. He does not explain that the Israelites had split into two kingdoms after the death of King Solomon. More importantly, Scharfstein does not suggest ways that the *haftarot* relate to our modern lives, nor does he give the student questions to grapple with or dilemmas to solve. Although this is the easiest to read of the books of its type, it does not fulfill the pedagogical mission of getting the student to engage with the text.

Resources Designed for Education

The *haftarah* resources designed for education take two forms: 1) collections of study guides for all the *haftarot* in a single volume and 2) pamphlets for each individual Torah portion and its associated haftarah. Examples of both types are discussed below.

Study Guide to The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot – Laura S. Leiber (JPS, 2002)

[55] Sol Scharfstein, *The Book of Haftarot* (Jersey City, NJ, 2006), p. 84

This teaching aid gives a good brief explanation of each haftarah, followed by a summary of the themes of the haftarah, suggestions for "extending the issues" and "Questions for further thought." Although the language is more accessible than that of the volume of scholarly commentaries with which it is associated, it is still above the reading level of most 13-year-old students, and lacks important background information that would be needed for use as a stand-alone guide, as seen in the following example:

> The parasha opens with Jacob fleeing to Aram to escape his brother Esau's wrath. Once there, he works for his uncle Laban and acquires Leah and Rachel as wives. This haftarah opens with Hosea recounting these events….The prophet then skips ahead to the Exodus. Hosea changes subject again, commenting on Ephraim's "bitter offense"….A threefold structure—of divine providence (Jacob's fateful journey and the Exodus), Ephraimite sin (the Ephraimites being Jacob's descendants) and divine punishment—repeats several times in the haftarah, lending a unity of theme to Hos. 12:13-14:1. The appended conclusion (14:2-10), in which Hosea urges repentance, tempers the darkness of the rest of the haftarah and injects a note of hope into the cycle of sin and punishment that Hosea traces back to the stories from Genesis. (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei*)[56]

Lieber does not tell us where Aram was located in relation to Jacob's home in Canaan, that the Ephraimites represented the entire Northern Kingdom of Israel (This is mentioned in a study question.) and that the Israelites had split into two kingdoms after King Solomon died. Lieber's "Extending the Issues" and study questions are excellent, but also are above the reading level of most 13-year-olds, as in these examples:

1. Explore how reflection on past actions (our own, those of our peers or government, or those of our ancestors) could induce repentance.

[56] Laura S. Lieber, *Study Guide to The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), p.19

Consider modern situations where the actions of previous generations are said to demand atonement from their descendants.

2. List other instances wherein a single, unified message emerges from seemingly disjointed textual passages.[57]

Teaching Haftarah – Lainie Blum Cogan and Judy Weiss (A.R.E. Publishing, 2002)

This large (636 pages) volume is a fine resource for the office of a rabbi, cantor or *bar/bat mitzvah* teacher, but is not likely to be purchased by individual students' families – pages would have to be copied out. For each *haftarah* there is a synopsis, but no text in Hebrew or English. The *haftarot* are not presented in their annual sequence but are grouped by prophet to save repeating some biographical and historical information that is common to multiple *haftarot*. The "12 Minor Prophets" are not discussed individually but in an overview. The overview information on Hosea, for example is very sparse:

> The Twelve Prophets are not compiled in chronological order. Hosea, Amos and Micah lived and preached in the eighth century B.C.E. The Book of Hosea is the first of the group, and in it the prophet develops the metaphor of God as the husband of an unfaithful wife (Israel). The Book of Amos is the third of the 12, although it is generally believed to be the oldest of the group. Like his younger contemporary Hosea, Amos preached in the Northern Kingdom (although he was from the South.)[58]

More information on each prophet is given in the synopses of the individual *haftarot* but this would not be available to the student who reads only the synopsis of his/her own *haftarah*. Nevertheless, the synopses are well written for a bar/bat mitzvah student:

[57] Laura S. Lieber, p. 20
[58] Lainie Blum Cogan and Judy Weiss, *Teaching Haftarah* (Denver, CO, 2002), p. 506

> The haftarah begins with a little history. Hosea recalls how God helped Jacob to prosper in Aram and how God helped Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He suggests by this recollection that God can help Israel, too. Yet the Northern Kingdom of Israel (called Ephraim by Hosea) is in grave danger of losing God's support because it continues to sin and worship idols. (*Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei*)[59]

This resource's best features, that I believe should be emulated by others, are its learning exercises, which are grouped in categories with the following headings:

- Insights from the Tradition
- Analyzing the Text
- Connecting the Text to the Sedra
- Extending the Text
- Personalizing the Text
- Other Resources[60]

Each of these sections includes opportunities for "active learning" and most of them include thought provoking questions to encourage the student to engage with the text. These sections include reference to great Bible scholars, medieval and modern, and their different insights and interpretations. The material seems geared for a teacher – rabbi, cantor or *bar/bat mitzvah* tutor – to work directly with the student, although much of it could be pursued independently. The teacher's role would be to determine which of the many exercises are appropriate for each student, to monitor the student's pursuit of them and to debrief the student after he/she has grappled with the text.

[59] Cogan and Weiss, p. 528
[60] Cogan and Weiss, pp. 528-536

In my opinion, even though this is a very rich resource, its material on any specific *haftarah* could not simply be handed to most students or families in liberal congregations with the expectation that they would learn the meaning of the text and create a *haftarah* speech or teaching. I believe it requires active teacher involvement.

The New Bar/Bat Mitzvah Maftir and Haftarah Book – Sheldon Levin (KTAV, 2008)

These booklets, intended to help individual students learn their Torah and *haftarah* portions, include Sol Scharfstein's commentaries. Accordingly, the same critique of the contents applies to these booklets as is offered above for Scharfstein's *haftarah* book.

Parashat HaShavua – The Weekly Torah Portion – Hara Person (URJ, 2006)

These booklets, intended to help individual students learn their Torah and *haftarah* portions, are based on the standard Reform *chumash*, and include good *haftarah* introductions, by Barbara Kadden, that are taken from the "Family Shabbat Table Talk" section of the URJ website. This material is very readable and provides the essential historical and theological background information. It also includes questions that are intended to encourage students to ponder issues in the text and find meaning that is relevant to their lives. The following, for the *Haftarah* for *Va-Yetzei* is a good example:

> If Jewish people are considered to be like trees, what does it mean that their "shoots will spread out wide"? How far back can you trace your own ancestors? Where did they live? How many children did they have? What are the differences between your lives? What are the similarities between their beliefs and the beliefs that you and your family have?[61]

[61] Hara Person, *Parashat HaShavua – The Weekly Torah Portion*, *Vayeitzei* (New York, 2006), pp. 45-46

The structure of this introduction seems out of order. It begins with the connection between the Torah portion and the *haftarah*. This is followed by a brief synopsis of the life of the prophet and then an overview of the meaning of the *haftarah*. I would begin with a connection to modern life and follow that with historical background and then a summary of the *haftarah* and a discussion of its connection to the Torah portion.

The following is a summary of the categories of deficiencies or shortcomings of the existing resources that are critiqued here. No single resource has all of these deficiencies, but every resource critiqued here shows at least one of them.

1. Limited commentary on the *haftarah* vs. the Torah portion
2. Assumption of a general familiarity with the biblical narrative and the history of the biblical period
3. Reading level above what is typical for a 13-year-old *bar/bat mitzvah* student
4. Terminology that is unfamiliar to students and parents in liberal congregations
5. Not enough discussion connecting the *haftarah* to modern life in terms to which a 13-year-old *bar/bat mitzvah* student can relate
6. No questions or not enough questions to stimulate the student to grapple with the biblical text and find his/her own connections to modern life

My proposed new resource, samples of which are presented in Chapter 4, is designed to correct most, if not all, of these deficiencies.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH PROCEDURE, METHODOLOGY

Goals of Lessons – Aims, Objectives

As discussed above, the primary goal of my written and in-person lessons about the meaning of the *haftarah* is to get the student to engage with the text – to think about what it means in terms of his/her life and/or our modern lives today. I consider the lessons to have been successful when the student can express this meaning in a conversation and/or in a speech to be presented to the congregation during the service at which his/her becoming a *bar/bat mitzvah* is celebrated. Ideally, the student will arrive at an original, personal connection with the *haftarah* rather than one I have suggested. Expressing these goals in a behavioral context:

- The student will learn that the Hebrew Bible, and specifically its prophetic section, is relevant and meaningful for modern life and in his/her personal life.
- The parent will feel that he/she has contributed to making his/her child's experience of becoming a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* more meaningful, in spite of the parent's lack of facility with Hebrew, Torah and *haftarah* chanting or the melodies of the service.
- The service at which the child's becoming a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is celebrated will be enriched by student's teaching of a part of the Hebrew Bible to which most of the people in attendance may not have given any thought or been aware of at all.

Target Population – Students of "Supplementary" Schools

This project concerns the needs of students who attend supplementary religious schools, such as the after-school/Sunday program at the independent temple where I

have been working as rabbinic intern and Hebrew School director. Such students generally attend religious school from two to six hours per week from age eight through age thirteen. During this time they are taught to read Hebrew and to chant the main prayers of the Jewish Sabbath services and are given overviews of Bible stories, Jewish history, the Jewish life cycle and holidays. Because of the limited time that they are in school and their frequent absences, in many cases, for sporting events and other activities, these students generally do not learn the biblical narrative in a serious way and do not have sufficient background to understand the context of their *haftarah* portions. The needs of these students are vastly different from those of students who attend Jewish day schools and are taught the Bible as a serious academic subject.

In order to be able to make sense of most of the *haftarot*, I believe that supplementary school students need to be given the historical context as well as an appreciation for the theological context within which each *haftarah* would have been understood in its own time. It should not be expected that they will come into the *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation process knowing what they need to know in these areas. Accordingly, one goal of this project is to provide them with that background, at an appropriate reading level. A higher goal is to draw their attention to issues within each *haftarah* and its context that will cause them to grapple with the meaning of the text in the context of modern life.

Attempts to Involve Parents

Engaging with the biblical text and seeking a connection to modern life can be an important opportunity for creating a meaningful family experience of Judaism. Parents

and students should be encouraged to explore the meaning of the text together. Some parents may feel that this is not their "job" and should be left to Jewish professionals. Other parents may feel that they lack the necessary background to be able to help their children in this process. Part of the purpose of creating teaching materials that are essentially "free standing" or "self-contained" is to enable the parents, as well as the students, to relate to the text without extensive background reading in other sources. In the course of working with families at the temple where I serve, I have seen parents quickly grasp the essence of the *haftarah* or Torah portion and explain it to their children in front of me. This has been a powerful experience for all concerned, myself included.

Parents should be encouraged to read the instructional materials along with their children and to discuss them prior to meeting with the rabbi, cantor or other educator. Parents should be encouraged, if not required, to attend a meeting with the Jewish professional responsible for this part of the *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation process with their children. If the student will be asked to explain the *haftarah* to the congregation, such a meeting should be held before the student begins to draft his/her speech. This will ensure that the student and his/her parent(s) understand the context of the *haftarah* and its historical meaning and will reduce the need for revisions later on. A second meeting with the student and his/her parent(s) should be held after the student has prepared a first draft of the speech and the educator has had an opportunity to review it.

Ideally, parents should receive a letter from the rabbi, cantor or other Jewish educator, prior to the start of this phase of the *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation process. The letter

would explain to them that we are trying to enrich their children's' experience of *bar* or *bat mitzvah* by engaging the entire family and making learning the meaning of the *haftarah* a basis for family discussion and the creation of significant Jewish memories. The letter should prepare the parents for what we want them to do in terms of helping their children to understand the material and to grapple with the issues presented.

One unstated objective of the *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation process, in many liberal congregations, is to strengthen the connection to our traditions of parents who are less Jewishly-engaged. Participating with their children in the process of exploring the meaning of the *haftarah* and connecting it to modern life could be a key part of this.

Structuring the Parent-Child Interaction

In the best case the parent(s) and child will engage the biblical text together. One way that this can be promoted is to assign study questions that require the child to ask the parent(s) for family information that the child would be unlikely to obtain for him or herself. Some of the *haftarot* lend themselves to this more than others. For example:

- In some *haftarot* a prophet is speaking to Jewish exiles or their descendants, in Babylonia, in the sixth century BCE, and encouraging them to leave their comfortable lives there and return to the Land of Israel. The student could be assigned to ask parents about the challenges that their modern ancestors faced in leaving their former homes in Europe or other places to come to North America.

- In some *haftarot* prophets are speaking to the Jews who had returned to the Land of Israel, from exile in Babylonia, in the sixth or fifth century BCE, and were discouraged by the conditions and challenges they found there. The student could be assigned to ask parents about the challenges of relocating to a new city to begin a new job change or to provide help and support to an ailing family member.

Not every *haftarah* lends itself to this sort of assignment, but the creative educator can often imagine an assignment that will require the student to ask his/her parent(s) for information. Such an assignment can be designed to promote a family discussion of the biblical text and why this personal information is relevant to the issues that it raises.

Assessment of Results

This project will have been successful if the new educational materials enable the students to achieve a greater understanding of their *haftarot* than would have been typical with the traditional materials that have been provided to their peers. Generally those materials have been copies of pages from the standard *chumashim* of the Conservative and Reform movements. This project will have been even more successful if the new materials help the students to make a stronger personal connection to the text and to identify more readily a meaning that is significant to our modern lives and/or their individual lives. The results of using the new materials are evaluated subjectively, in Chapter 5 below, on the basis of 1) students' and parents' comments on their understanding of the *haftarot*, 2) my observations from discussions with the students and parents and 3) the content of the students' speeches.

CHAPTER 4: NEW TEACHING MATERIALS

The following are examples of commentaries that are meant to be given to *bar/bat mitzvah* students to help them understand their assigned *haftarah* portions. Ideally, they should be used with the active involvement of a teacher who is familiar with the text of the *haftarah* and its place in the biblical, historical and philosophical context of Judaism. Nevertheless, I believe that these commentaries can be used as self-contained, stand-alone lessons that will be helpful to the student and his/her parents even if the rabbi, cantor or *bar/bat mitzvah* teacher is only involved in teaching the ritual chanting of the *haftarah* and its blessings (although this would be a regrettable situation).

The commentaries follow a format that I learned from my beloved teacher, Dr. Ora Horn Prouser, in a course on the *haftarot* at the Academy for Jewish Religion. In accordance with her guidance, each of these commentaries contains the following elements:

- Historical meaning of the text – How would it have been understood in its time?
- How the *haftarah* is related to the Torah portion – Why are they read together?
- Meaning of the *haftarah* today – How does it relate to our lives?

In each case, I have written an introduction that is especially intended to put the issue(s) or problem(s) with which the prophet dealt in terms to which a modern adolescent could relate. I believe that it is important to offer this in order to engage the student with the text before he/she begins to read the types of commentary that Dr. Prouser defined for our seminary course. I believe that the personal perspective which these introductions impart will motivate the student to read the instructional materials with greater interest.

I have also included a section titled “Historical Background” which I believe is essential for the supplementary school students of most liberal congregations and their parents. As discussed above, I have found that such students and their parents generally lack sufficient knowledge of the Bible, Jewish history and theology to understand why some of the issues addressed by the prophets arose or why they expressed their messages as they did. In each case, I put this section ahead of the section titled “Historical Meaning of the Text” in order to help the reader appreciate why each *haftarah* meant what it did at the time that it was spoken and why its message was significant.

The final section of each commentary, “Meaning of the *Haftarah* Today,” consists of suggestions for relating the reading to modern life. In each case I have encouraged the student to “think of other connections that are meaningful” to him/her. In fact, I prefer that the student be innovative here and offer an explanation that is both original and personal. To that end, most of my commentaries include in this section questions that are intended to provoke thought and discussion. I believe that most of the *haftarot* deal with profound moral and ethical issues that are as relevant today as they were in ancient times. As a teacher, I feel most successful when the students grapple with these issues, even if their positions on the issues are different than my own.

These examples are the actual commentaries that were used in teaching students at the temple where I work who celebrated their *bar* or *bat mitzvah* in October, 2010. Accordingly, some of them do not include discussion questions in the final section.

Haftarah for *Bereshit*: Isaiah 42:5-43:10 *(Ashkenazim)* 42:5-21 *(S'fardim)*

Introduction

Think about this: You're about to do something that you really want to do and Mom or Dad tells you not to do it. You go ahead and do it anyway. Usually when you do this you're punished. Mom or Dad is angry with you – not just because of what you did but because you didn't listen. According to one modern rabbi, this haftarah is related to that experience, which almost every teenager and young adult has had.[62] Many of our Jewish ancestors, the ancient Judeans, worshipped idols – the gods of other nearby nations – instead of God or along with God. Our ancient prophets, speaking for God, warned the people that they would be punished for being unfaithful to God, but the Judeans didn't listen. Besides, everyone else was doing it. (Sound familiar?)

After ignoring the prophets for many years, the Judeans were conquered and exiled from their land. Many of them probably remembered the prophets' warnings and believed that they had been punished by God. They needed to be assured that God still loved them. Haven't most of us needed to be reassured of Mom's or Dad's love when they were especially angry at us and punished us for doing something that they told us not to do? We needed to know that Mom or Dad would eventually forgive us.[63] The Judeans needed to know that God would forgive them and allow them to return to the Land of Israel. Their need for reassurance from God is what this *haftarah* is about.

[62] Amy Small, "Haftarat Bereshit" in Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2004), pp. 6-7
[63] Small, in Goldstein, ed., pp. 7-8

Historical Background

Judea, the southern part of the Land of Israel, was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. They destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and took many of its citizens into exile in Babylonia. Modern scholars say that Chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah, including this *haftarah,* were written or spoken by an anonymous prophet who lived among those Judean exiles in Babylonia, in the middle of the 6th century BCE.[64] They call him Second Isaiah. (The exiles called themselves children of Israel or Israelites.)

Second Isaiah's mission was to assure the exiles that God still loved them and cared about them. They may have felt that God had abandoned them and that they would never return to their homeland. They or their parents had been warned by the prophet Jeremiah that they would be conquered because of their sins.[65] Second Isaiah reassured the exiles that they still had a special relationship with God. He also taught them to hope that God would forgive them and return them to the Land of Israel.

We don't know in what ways the Judean exiles continued to practice their religion in Babylonia. They could no longer offer animal sacrifices to God because the Temple had been destroyed. They must have kept some of their other rituals and cultural practices alive because they didn't blend into the local population.[66] They were still a unique, identifiable group. Eventually, some of the Judean exiles did return to the land of their ancestors after Babylonia was conquered by the Persians in 539 BCE.[67]

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[64] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 534-535
[65] Jeremiah 1:13-16, etc.
[66] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (New York, 1996), p. xxxvi
[67] Fishbane, pp. 534-536

Historical Meaning of the Text

Most people in the ancient Middle East believed that if a nation won a war against another nation, the god of the winners must be more powerful than the god of the losers.[68] This would have meant that the Babylonian gods were more powerful than the God of Israel. Second Isaiah reminded the Judeans that their God was the creator of the universe.[69] God was also the creator of all the people in the world and had chosen the Judeans for a special role, unique among the nations.[70] The Judeans were to be a "light of nations" and God's witnesses, living proof of God's power in the world.[71]

Second Isaiah reminded the Judeans that the predictions of the earlier prophets, who had been speaking for God, had come true.[72] He said that God would now do "new things," miraculous things, to restore the people to their land.[73] Second Isaiah said that the Judeans had been deaf and blind and ignored the earlier prophets' warnings.[74] Because of this God had allowed other nations to make them suffer.[75] God had kept silent but now this was going to change.[76] The Judeans, the remnant of the twelve tribes of Israel, were precious to God, and would be given a special role to play in the world if they would only believe in God's message and be God's faithful witnesses.[77]

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[68] John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, (Garden City, NY, 1968), p. 23
[69] Fishbane, pp. 3-5
[70] Isaiah 42:5-6, 43:1
[71] Isaiah 42:6, 43:10
[72] Isaiah 42:9
[73] Isaiah 42:9, 13-16
[74] Isaiah 42:18-20
[75] Isaiah 42:22-25
[76] Isaiah 42:13-16
[77] Isaiah 43:1-10

How the *Haftarah* Is Related to the Torah Portion

Creation is the main link between this *haftarah* and the Torah portion. The Torah portion contains two different stories of the creation of the world and of human beings. In the first creation story, in Chapter 1 of Genesis, God creates by speaking.[78] In this *haftarah,* God, who held back while the Judeans were punished, now yells, roars and screams.[79] In the second creation story, in Chapter 2 of Genesis, God forms the original human being from the dust of the earth.[80] In the longer, Ashkenazic version of this *haftarah*, the prophet speaks of how God formed the Israelites.[81] He says that the Judeans, the last survivors of the Israelites, were created for a purpose – to be in a relationship with God and to show to other nations the truth of God's existence.[82]

Of course, most of us don't believe that God has a mouth or speaks the way humans do. We don't believe that God has hands that form a person or anything else the way we form shapes out of clay. But these terms helped the prophet to speak about God, who is beyond human description, in ways that his human audience could understand.

The first creation story, in Chapter 1 of Genesis, is especially known for its statement that God created light out of darkness: "Let there be light!"[83] Similarly, we see many contrasts of darkness and light in this *haftarah.*[84] The prophet says that God, or Israel, or God through Israel will free prisoners who sit in darkness (and bring them out into the

[78] Genesis 1:3
[79] Isaiah 43:13-14
[80] Genesis 2:7
[81] Isaiah 43:1,7
[82] Isaiah 43:7, 10; Fishbane, p. 10
[83] Genesis 1:3
[84] Fishbane, p. 11

light of freedom).[85] In later verses, the prophet says that God will turn the darkness of the Judeans' exile into the light of liberation[86] and open the eyes of the blind.[87]

Finally, some commentators say that exile itself is a connection between this *haftarah* and the Torah potion.[88] In the Torah portion God sets the original human beings, Adam and Eve, in a garden and gives them one commandment, which they break.[89] They are punished by being exiled.[90] Similarly, God gave the Israelites the land that the Torah says God promised to their ancestors along with commandments to guide their lives.[91] They prophet says that they caused their own exile by breaking the commandments.[92]

Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today

This *haftarah* has several possible connections to modern life. You could speak about one or more of these or think of other connections that are meaningful to you.

We Jews are survivors. The Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and any number of other people who conquered or persecuted us are gone but we're still here.

[85] Isaiah 42:7
[86] Isaiah 42:16
[87] Isaiah 42:18
[88] Lainie Blum Cogan and Judy Weiss, *Teaching Haftarah* (Denver, CO, 2002), p. 279
[89] Cogan and Weiss, p. 279
[90] Cogan and Weiss, p. 279
[91] Cogan and Weiss, p. 279
[92] Isaiah 41:24-25

Many people say that our existence is proof of God's involvement in human history.[93] That is one of the ways that we are God's witnesses, which this *haftarah* calls us.[94]

This *haftarah* is one of many that speak of a special relationship between God and the Jewish people. This *haftarah* is most famous for saying that God wants us to be an example to other people – a "light of nations."[95] This should not lead us to think that we're better than other people. You don't believe that an older brother or sister is "better" than you but your parents sometimes ask them to set a good example for you. Similarly, your younger brother or sister doesn't believe that you're "better" than they are, but your parents expect you, as the older child, to set a good example for them.

One prayer in the Jewish morning service begins *Baruch she-amar v'haya ha-olam* "Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being." Another blesses God as *yotser or u'vorei choshech* "Former of light and Creator of darkness." Similar verses in this *haftarah* speak of God as the world's Creator. Judaism teaches that God is above and beyond the world, yet is concerned with us and all humans, much as your parents live most of their lives in an adult world, but care very deeply about their children.

This *haftarah* is one of many biblical texts that say God chose us.[96] Chosen-ness can be an unpopular idea, but some Jews believe that we continue to exist because we have a God-given mission in the world. One Jewish prayer book tries to express this in

[93] Fishbane, p. 10
[94] Isaiah 43:10
[95] Isaiah 42:6
[96] Isaiah 41:8, 9

its English translation of the blessing before the reading of the Torah. After the words "who chose us" it adds the words "for divine service," which are not in the Hebrew.[97] This sense of mission is one reason for continuing to be Jewish in modern times.

***Haftarah* for *Noah*: Isaiah 54:1 - 55:5** *(Ashkenazim)* **54:1 - 10** *(S'fardim)*

Introduction

If you're preparing for your *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, you're old enough to know that family life is not always happy. People within families sometimes quarrel. Sometimes people do things that leave other members of their family feeling hurt and betrayed. Sometimes married people separate for a while. That may not have happened in your family but you probably know of other families where it has happened. Often, after a period of separation, married people who have had problems can reconcile – work out their differences – and get back together. Could this also happen between people and God?

Many of our Jewish ancestors, the ancient Judeans, worshipped idols, the gods of other nearby nations – instead of God or along with God – even though this is forbidden in the Torah.[98] Some of our prophets said that they were behaving like a married woman who is not faithful to her husband.[99] When Judea was conquered by the Babylonians and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the Judeans saw this as punishment from God for their having been unfaithful.[100] Judeans who had been exiled to Babylonia

[97] Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan Levine, eds., *Siddur Hadash* (Bridgeport, CT, 2000), p. 323
[98] Exodus 20:3-6, Deuteronomy 5:7-10, etc.
[99] Hosea 2:4-15; Jeremiah 3:1-3, 13, 20; Ezekiel 16:15-35; etc.
[100] Diane Sharon, Academy for Jewish Religion, BIB 402, class notes 10/22/07

needed to be convinced that they could reconcile with God and get back together.[101] They needed to be told that God still loved them and was prepared forgive them for what they did and return them to their land.[102] That is the message of this *haftarah*.

Historical Background

Judea, the southern part of the Land of Israel, was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. They destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and took many of its citizens into exile in Babylonia. Modern scholars say that Chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah, including this *haftarah,* were written or spoken by an anonymous prophet who lived among those Judean exiles in Babylonia, in the middle of the 6th century BCE.[103] They call him Second Isaiah. (The exiles called themselves children of Israel or Israelites.)

Second Isaiah's mission was to assure the exiles that God still loved them and cared about them. They may have felt that God had abandoned them and that they would never return to their homeland. They or their parents had been warned by the prophet Jeremiah that they would be conquered because of their sins.[104] Second Isaiah reassured the exiles that they still had a special relationship with God. He also taught them to hope that God would forgive them and return them to the Land of Israel.

We don't know in what ways the Judean exiles continued to practice their religion in Babylonia. They could no longer offer animal sacrifices to God because the Temple

[101] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 12
[102] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (New York, 1996), p. 19
[103] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 534-535
[104] Jeremiah 1:13-16, etc.

had been destroyed. They must have kept some of their other rituals and cultural practices alive because they didn't blend into the local population.[105] They were still a unique, identifiable group. Eventually, some of the Judean exiles did return to the land of their ancestors after Babylonia was conquered by the Persians in 539 BCE.[106]

Historical Meaning of the Text

The *haftarah* begins with Second Isaiah speaking of the Judeans as an abandoned and childless wife.[107] In the ancient Middle East, this was a much worse thing to be than it is today. In ancient societies, women did not have the opportunities to earn a living that they have in modern times. They usually needed a husband and/or sons to support and protect them.[108] Second Isaiah uses the word "widow" in its broadest meaning – any woman who was without a husband and in need of support.[109] His audience would have understood this image and could see how it applied to them. Many of the Judeans who lived in exile in Babylonia probably felt that they had been abandoned by God.

Second Isaiah tells the Judean exiles to shout for joy – God will take them back.[110] They will have many children and will occupy a larger territory than before.[111] He says that God had only abandoned them temporarily and that God was only angry at them for a short while.[112] Second Isaiah compared the relationship between God and the Judeans to romantic love and asked whether a husband can "cast off" the wife of his

[105] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (New York, 1996), p. xxxvi
[106] Fishbane, pp. 534-536
[107] Isaiah 54:1-6
[108] Plaut, pp. 14-15
[109] Plaut, pp. 14-15
[110] Isaiah 54:1, 5-6
[111] Isaiah 54:2-3
[112] Isaiah 54:7-8

youth.[113] The longer Ashkenazic version of this *haftarah* goes on to say that God will enrich and protect the restored Judean nation.[114] Some commentators say that this *haftarah* is speaking of Jerusalem as the mother or representative of the Judeans.[115]

How the *Haftarah* Is Related to the Torah Portion

The main connection between this *haftarah* and the Torah portion is the direct reference to the Torah's flood story: "For this to Me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry with your or rebuke you."[116] Just as in the Torah portion, God makes a new start with Noah and his descendants; this *haftarah* says that God will make a new covenant with the ancient Judeans who were in exile.[117] The prophet says that God is taking the Judeans back "in love."[118] Just as God has a special relationship with Noah in the Torah's flood story, God will have a special relationship with the Judeans in the new era that will begin with their return to rebuild Jerusalem, according to the Ashkenazic *haftarah*.[119]

Troubled times are often compared to stormy weather – such as the torrential rains that would have been needed to cause a worldwide flood. Perhaps with this in mind, one modern rabbi has suggested another connection to the Torah portion: the text speaks to the Judean people (or to Jerusalem, as mentioned above) as "Unhappy, storm-

[113] Isaiah 54:6
[114] Isaiah 54:11-17
[115] Lainie Blum Cogan and Judy Weiss, *Teaching Haftarah* (Denver, CO, 2002), p. 314
[116] Isaiah 54:9, translation from Fishbane, p. 15
[117] Plaut, p. 13
[118] Isaiah 54:10
[119] Isaiah 54:11-13

tossed one, uncomforted!"[120] Wouldn't the family of Noah, in the Torah's flood story, have been unhappy and storm tossed?[121] If so, might not the word "uncomforted" apply to them, as well as to the exiled Judeans and the devastated city of Jerusalem?[122]

Finally, neither God's covenant with Noah nor God's new covenant with the Judeans is purely a gift. Both covenants are reciprocal – they require something from the human side as well as from God.[123] In the Torah portion God demands that Noah and his family fulfill moral laws,[124] which are understood as applying to all humanity, since the Torah treats all human beings as Noah's descendants. At the end of the longer, Ashkenazic version of the *haftarah*, God demands religious loyalty of the Judeans.[125] God asks them to make a spiritual commitment and to realize that food for the soul that comes from a relationship with God is even more important than food that we eat.[126]

Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today

This *haftarah* has several possible connections to modern life. You could speak about one or more of these or think of other connections that are meaningful to you.

One modern rabbi, in connection with this *haftarah* and Torah portion, talks about God's frequent disappointment with humanity and with the Israelites.[127] In the Torah, the first

[120] Isaiah 54:11, translation from Fishbane, p. 15
[121] Jill Hammer, "Haftarat Noach," in Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2004), p. 11
[122] Hammer, in Goldstein, ed., p. 11
[123] Fishbane, pp. 12, 17
[124] Genesis 9:1-7
[125] Isaiah 55:3
[126] Isaiah 55:1-2
[127] Plaut, p. 19, including next three sentences of this paragraph

humans, Adam and Eve, break the one law they have been given; their son, Cain, kills his brother, Abel; and humans become so violent that God decides to wipe them all out and start over. Later, God chooses Abraham and his family to be partners in improving the world, but their children, the Israelites, are often faithless, disloyal and wicked. God continues to love the Israelites. How much patience would you have with a friend who constantly disappointed you? How many chances would you give him/her to improve?

Men and women are sometimes unfaithful to their wife or husband, as the ancient Judeans were unfaithful to God. We see news stories when public officials, movie stars and other famous people do this. Just as many Judeans were sorry for being unfaithful to God, some modern people who have been unfaithful to their wives or husbands say that they are sorry and ask to be forgiven. How did God know that the Judeans were truly sorry? Was the fact that they stayed separate from their Babylonian neighbors convincing? How do we know that a person who had been unfaithful is truly sorry?

What words do we use when we want to say that we will love someone forever? In this *haftarah* God says to the Judeans: "For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but My loyalty shall never move from you…"[128] In the 1930's, brothers George and Ira Gershwin, popular American songwriters, who were also Jewish, wrote these words: "The mountains may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble, they're only made of clay, but our love is here to stay!" Could they have been inspired by this *haftarah*?

[128] Isaiah 54:10, translation from Fishbane, p. 15

This *haftarah* is one of many biblical texts that say God has a special relationship with the Jewish people. We don't think we're "better" than other people, so how do we understand this? One Jewish prayer book tries to explain our special relationship with God in its English translation of the blessing before the reading of the Torah. After the words "who chose us" it adds the words "for divine service," which are not in the Hebrew.[129] This idea of a special mission is a good reason for continuing to be Jewish.

Haftarah for *Lekh-Lekha*: Isaiah 40:27- 41:16

Introduction

Think back to when you were very young. Did you ever do anything really bad? When you were punished by your parents did you wonder if they still loved you? In ancient times God seemed like a parent to many of our Jewish ancestors, the ancient Judeans. Even today many people think of God as a parent. When the Judeans were conquered by the Babylonians and carried off into exile, many of them felt that they were being punished by God. They wondered whether God still loved them. That is the main subject of this *haftarah*, although it has a number of other related themes.

History

Judea, the southern part of the Land of Israel, was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. They destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and carried many of its citizens into exile in Babylonia. Modern scholars say that Chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah, including this *haftarah,* were written or spoken by anonymous prophet who lived among

[129] Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan Levine, eds., *Siddur Hadash* (Bridgeport, CT, 2000), p. 323

those Judean exiles in Babylonia, in the middle of the 6th century BCE.[130] They call him Second Isaiah. (The exiles probably called themselves Israelites – children of Israel.)

Second Isaiah had a mission. He wanted to give hope to the exiles. They might have believed that they would never return to their homeland after spending many years in Babylonia. They or their parents had been warned by the prophet Jeremiah that they would be conquered because of their sins.[131] They may have felt that the exile was part of their punishment and that God had abandoned them. Second Isaiah needed to convince the people that God still cared about them and would forgive them.

We don't know if the Judean exiles continued to practice their religion in Babylonia. They could no longer offer animal sacrifices to God because the Temple had been destroyed. They must have kept some of their other rituals and cultural practices alive because they didn't blend into the local population. They were still a unique, identifiable group. Eventually, some of the Judean exiles did return to the land of their ancestors.[132]

Historical Meaning of the Text

It was a common belief in the ancient Middle East that if a nation was successful in war against another nation, it meant that the god of the winners was more powerful than the god of the losers.[133] The exiled Judeans, whose little kingdom had been devastated by

[130] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 534-535
[131] Jeremiah 1:13-16, etc.
[132] Fishbane, pp. 534-536
[133] John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, (Garden City, NY, 1968), p. 23

the Babylonians, needed to believe that their God really did have the power to release them from their captivity.[134] Second Isaiah used the Torah's creation stories to remind the Judeans that their God was the true power in the universe.[135] He taught that the gods worshipped by the Babylonians and other ancient peoples were really powerless.[136]

So why had the Babylonians defeated the Judeans? First Isaiah, a prophet who lived in the 8th century BCE, as well as the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had said that the Judeans would be punished for their sins – for worshipping idols instead of God and for treating their fellow human beings badly.[137] The book of Deuteronomy, in the Torah, said that God's covenant or promise to protect the Israelites was conditional. God would protect them only if they followed God's commandments, and they would be punished if they failed to live up to their end of the deal.[138] Deuteronomy, along with the words of the prophets, gave the exiled Judeans a way to understand their suffering.[139] As the book of Deuteronomy predicted, God had "hidden God's face from them."[140] Could the exiled Judeans get God to believe that they were sorry for their sins and welcome them back?

[134] McKenzie, p. 23
[135] Fishbane, p. 19
[136] Fishbane, p. 19
[137] Fishbane, pp. 533, 545, 548
[138] Deuteronomy 6:10-15, 8:19-20, 11:16-17, 28:15-68
[139] Diane Sharon, Academy for Jewish Religion, BIB 402, class notes 10/22/07
[140] Deuteronomy 31:16-18

This *haftarah* begins by saying that the exiled Judeans believed that God was ignoring their suffering.[141] Before answering this complaint, Second Isaiah reminds his fellow exiles that God's strength and wisdom have no limits. The prophet assures them that God will come to their aid with great power if they will only put their trust in God.[142]

But how would they be saved from exile? The Judeans had been told by Jeremiah that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler who conquered them, was God's instrument of punishment and destruction.[143] Now, Second Isaiah says *Mi he-ir mi-mizrach tzedek* "[God] will raise a champion from the East."[144] A great medieval rabbi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, said the prophet was talking about Cyrus, the emperor of Persia and Media, who is mentioned by name in Isaiah 45:1.[145] Ibn Ezra believed that Second Isaiah's message was that Cyrus would be God's instrument for releasing the Judeans from exile. In fact, when Cyrus conquered Babylonia he did decree that the Judeans could return to their homeland land and rebuild their Temple to God and many of them did go back.[146]

The *haftarah* ends with a confidence-building speech, the type a modern sports coach might give, using the words *avdi* "my servant," *b'hartikha* "I have chosen you" and *ohavi* "my friend" to assure the Judeans that they still had a special relationship with God.[147] God had punished them, but like your parents when they punish you, God still loved

[141] Isaiah 40:27; Fishbane , p. 20
[142] Isaiah 40:28-31
[143] Fishbane, p. 543
[144] Isaiah 41:2
[145] Fishbane, p. 20
[146] Fishbane, p. 20;
[147] Isaiah 41:8

them. The prophet says that the Judeans had been brought as low as worms but that God would make them strong again and they would celebrate receiving God's help.[148]

How the Haftarah Is Related to the Torah Portion

This *haftarah* is connected to the Torah portion by its mention of Abraham, whom God "recruits" in *Lekh-Lekha* to start the family that becomes the Jewish people. In the *haftarah*, God calls the exiled Judeans *Yisrael avdi…zera Avraham ohavi* "Israel my servant, the seed of Abraham my friend."[149] This is very meaningful because in the Torah portion God says to Abraham *l'zarakha etain et ha-aretz ha-zot* "to your seed I will give this land" – the land of Canaan (later the Land of Israel).[150] If the exiles knew the Torah story, the prophet's words would have been a reminder of the promise God made to their national ancestor – a man who is reported to have traveled to Canaan from Ur of the Chaldeans, a city in the same region where they were now exiled.[151]

Lekh-Lekha begins with a journey – both physical and spiritual.[152] God tells Abram (later Abraham) to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house for an unknown land that God will show him.[153] Abram is told *al tira* "fear not" – to believe that the God whose voice he hears will protect him and make from him a great nation.[154] Similarly, Second Isaiah tells the exiles *al tira* "fear not" and asks them to believe that God will

[148] Isaiah 41:14-16
[149] Isaiah 41:8
[150] Genesis 12:7
[151] Genesis 11:31, 15:7; Fishbane, p. 22
[152] Sue Levi Elwell, "Haftarat Lech Lecha," in Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2004), p. 14
[153] Genesis 12:1
[154] Genesis 15:1-5

release them from exile and return them to their homeland.[155] While many of the exiles may have wanted to return, others may have settled comfortably in Babylonia, as Jeremiah told them to do.[156] Leaving comfortable new homes would require strong belief in God.

Meaning of this Haftarah Today

This *haftarah* has many possible connections to modern life. You could speak about one or more of these or think of other connections that are meaningful to you.

We Jews are survivors. The Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and any number of other people who conquered or persecuted us are gone but we're still here. Many people have called Jewish survival, against all odds, one of the miracles of history. Some of us believe that Jewish survival is evidence of God acting in history.

This *haftarah* speaks of a special relationship between God and the Jewish people. It is based partly on relationships with our biblical ancestors and partly on continued faith in God's power.[157] Some of us dare to be different from our non-Jewish neighbors because we believe God wants us to fulfill obligations and to be an example to others. We don't claim to be better than other people but we believe that God has a purpose for us.

[155] Isaiah 41:10
[156] Jeremiah 29:4-7
[157] Isaiah 40:31, 41:8

This *haftarah* is one of many biblical texts that say God chose us.[158] Chosen-ness can be an unpopular idea, but some Jews believe that we continue to exist because we have a God-given mission in the world. One Jewish prayer book tries to express this in its translation of the blessing before the reading of the Torah. After the words "who chose us" it adds the words "for divine service," which are not in the Hebrew.[159] This sense of mission is one reason for continuing to choose to be Jewish in modern times.

According to Jewish belief, there has been no prophecy of the sort described in the Bible for more than 2,000 years. Yet those of us who believe that our fate is somehow directed by God may think at times that we have received a message – a set of unusual circumstances, a strange dream or a quiet inner voice. Some of us, when faced with difficult choices, turn to God in prayer and ask what we should do. Sometimes we feel that we received an answer, even if it's only the confidence to follow our own judgment. Here are two more connections of this *haftarah* to modern life:

The 1982 Oscar for Best Picture was awarded to "Chariots of Fire," the true story of two heroes of the 1924 British Olympics team – a Jew and a Presbyterian minister. Each of them overcame prejudice to achieve worldwide acclaim as a runner. On the Sunday of the final races the minister defied his country's Olympic Committee and led a church service instead of running. Over scenes of runners training he is heard quoting words from this *haftarah*: *vkoyai Adonai yahalifu koah...yarutzu v'lo yigau, yailkhu v'lo yiafu* "But they who trust in God shall renew their strength…they shall run and not grow

[158] Isaiah 41:8, 9
[159] Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan Levine, eds., *Siddur Hadash* (Bridgeport, CT, 2000), p. 323

weary, they shall march and not grow faint."[160] Rabbi Harold Kushner spoke these same words at the funeral of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, the oldest man to have held this office, who seemed throughout his term to have more energy than many younger men.

***Haftarah* for *Va-Yera*: 2 Kings 4:1-37** *(Ashkenazim)* **2 Kings 4:1-23** *(S'fardim)*

Introduction

Have you ever wanted something very badly that was beyond your ability? Of course there are often things that we want badly and could buy if we had enough money. But there are other things that you might want to be or do and aren't able to do physically. You might want to be a star basketball player but just aren't tall enough, even though you have a pretty good shot. You might love to play piano and want to take part in competitions, but your fingers aren't long enough to give you the reach that you need.

[160] Isaiah 40:31

Many adults want very badly to have children but find that they aren't able to do so because of a medical condition. Today there are many doctors who specialize in helping people who are unable to have children because of physical limitations. Often people who are unable to have children are helped by agencies to adopt a child who is in need of a loving home. Such solutions were not available in ancient times, so many couples who wanted children, even if they were wealthy, remained childless.

The Torah portion *Va-Yera* is about a wealthy, elderly couple who wanted a child very badly. They were finally blessed with one by God. The Torah portion describes several crucial events in their lives. The *haftarah* for this Torah portion also deals with a wealthy, childless couple who were helped to have a child by an ancient prophet whom they had befriended. There are many parallels between these two biblical readings.

Historical Background

In the late 10th century BCE the Israelite kingdom which was united under King David and enriched under King Solomon was split into a southern kingdom, called Judea, with its capital in Jerusalem, and a northern kingdom, called Israel, with its capital in Samaria. The book of Kings, which was written by historians sympathetic to Judea, criticizes the northern kingdom for worshipping idols, including large statues of bulls.[161] These remind some readers of the golden calf that the Torah says the Israelites worshipped while Moses was on top of Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments

[161] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 523

from God.[162] There was a good deal of idol worship in Judea as well, but much of the emphasis in Kings is on the sins of the people in the northern kingdom of Israel.[163]

The book of Kings says that prophets were appointed by God to criticize the Israelites, north and south, for their idol worship and to urge them to change their ways. The early prophets were known as miracle workers as well as preachers. The most famous of these was Elijah. He is said to have staged a dramatic showdown with the prophets of the regional god, Baal, to demonstrate Baal's powerlessness and the great power of the one true God.[164] The Bible says that when Elijah could no longer carry out his mission, he was told by God to appoint Elisha to take his place.[165] Elisha was also known as a miracle worker. It seems that much of the authority of the early prophets came from their reputation as miracle workers, which suggested a strong connection to God.[166]

Historical Meaning of the Text

The prophet Elisha is believed to have been active in the late 9th century BCE.[167] He is said to have inherited double the powers of his mentor, Elijah.[168] The first part of the *haftarah* gives an example of a miracle that Elisha is said to have performed. A widow is about to lose her sons – they are being taken into slavery in settlement of her late husband's debts and she has no way to redeem them.[169] Elisha tells her that the small amount of oil that she has in her home will turn into enough oil to pay off the debts and

[162] Fishbane, p. 523
[163] Fishbane, p. 523
[164] 1 Kings 18:16-140
[165] 1 Kings 19:1-16
[166] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary*, (New York, 1996), p. 40
[167] Plaut, p. 33
[168] 2 Kings 2:1-14
[169] 2 Kings 4:1

to buy food for herself and her sons.[170] The text doesn't say that God gave Elisha the power to do this, but a person who is familiar with the stories about God acting through Elijah could assume that Elisha's powers came from the same divine source.[171]

In the second part of the *haftarah*, Elisha is befriended by a wealthy woman in the district of Shunem. She and her husband give him meals and a room to stay in whenever he passes their way in his travels.[172] Elisha learns from his servant that this couple is childless and that the husband is old and he tells them that they will have a son at the same season the next year.[173] The son later dies, or appears to die, and his mother goes to seek the prophet's help.[174] In the longer Ashkenazic version of the *haftarah*, Elisha revives the boy by lying on top of him and breathing into him.[175]

How the *Haftarah* is Related to the Torah Portion

Both the Torah portion and the *haftarah* tell stories about elderly couples whose wish for a child of their own is granted. Both the Torah portion and the *haftarah* tell stories about parents whose sons are saved by God's intervention, through an angel or a prophet.

The Torah portion *VaYera* describes how Abraham and Sarah, a wealthy couple with no children of their own, show great hospitality to a trio of men who are passing by their home.[176] The men turn out to be angels who speak on God's behalf, telling Abraham

[170] 2 Kings 4:2-7
[171] Fishbane, p. 24
[172] 2 Kings 4:8, 9
[173] 2 Kings 4:11-17
[174] 2 Kings 4:18-23
[175] 2 Kings 4:32-35, see next section of this commentary re the Sephardic version
[176] Genesis 18:1-8

that he and Sarah will have a son at the same season the next year.[177] The *haftarah* parallels this story with the announcement of the upcoming birth of a son to the wealthy but childless couple who give food and lodging to the prophet Elisha. As the angels' announcement comes from God, we can assume that Elisha speaks on God's behalf.

The Torah portion describes how Isaac is nearly killed when God tests Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his long-hoped-for son, Isaac, as a burnt offering.[178] This episode is called the *Akedah* or "binding" of Isaac and is read in synagogues and temples on the morning of the second day of *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year. We can almost feel the anguish of Abraham as he struggles with the horrible duty that God has demanded of him. At the last moment, an angel speaking for God tells Abraham to stop. Abraham looks up to see a ram, which he sacrifices in Isaac's place.[179] Similarly, in the *haftarah*, the wealthy woman's son dies or appears to be dead.[180] We feel her anguish as her only child appears to have been taken from her.[181] In the longer, Ashkenazic version of the *haftarah*, Elisha brings the boy back to life.[182] (In the shorter Sephardic version we only learn that the woman goes to seek the prophet's help.) Some *midrashim*, rabbinic legends, say that Isaac did die on the altar before Abraham could be stopped and was immediately brought back to life.[183] This makes the connection between the Torah portion and the *haftarah* even stronger.

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[177] Genesis 18:9-15
[178] Genesis 22:1-10
[179] Genesis 22:11-13
[180] 2 Kings 4:18-20
[181] 2 Kings 4:25-28
[182] 2 Kings 4:32-35
[183] Fishbane, p. 28

Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today

This haftarah has several possible connections to modern life. You could speak about one or more of these or think of other connections that are meaningful to you.

The first lesson of both the *haftarah* and the Torah portion is that hospitality is a great virtue. Although it should be practiced for its own sake, it is sometimes rewarded. It is important to point out that neither Abraham and Sarah nor the Shunamite couple expect a reward for welcoming their guests. We should treat others as we would like to be treated. This is the message of the Torah's greatest commandment, the "Golden Rule" in the book of Leviticus: "Love your neighbor as yourself."[184] Nevertheless, we may get great pleasure from making new friends and they may help us in unexpected ways. Can you think of examples of this from your own life?

Another message of both the *haftarah* and the Torah portion is that prophecies spoken in God's name generally come true. Some prophecies that we hear may seem as improbable as Abraham and Sarah or the Shunamite woman and her elderly husband having children. When Theodore Herzl (1860-1904) predicted, in 1897, that a Jewish nation could be recreated in the Land of Israel, many people thought that he was crazy. Only fifty years later, in 1947, the United Nations voted that Jewish settlers who were inspired by Herzl's dream could have their own nation. Was Herzl a prophet? He didn't say he was speaking for God. Was the creation of the modern State of Israel partly an act of God? Did it fulfill our ancient prophecies about the return of Jews to their land?

[184] Leviticus 19:18

Pirke Avot, a collection of the moral and ethical teachings of our early rabbis, says that we should not be like servants who serve their master on the condition of receiving a reward but rather like servants who serve their master without expecting a reward.[185] Returning to the "Golden Rule," which commands us, in God's name, to treat others as we want to be treated ourselves,[186] the people in our Torah portion and *haftarah*, Abraham and Sarah and the Shunamite woman and her husband, could be said to have fulfilled this teaching. All of them can be seen as serving God, our ultimate master, by practicing the Golden Rule. None of them did what they did because they expected a reward, but Abraham and Sarah and the Shunamite woman and her husband were nevertheless rewarded with sons. What good things have you done, without seeking a reward, that ended up rewarding you in unexpected ways?

***Haftarah* for *Chayei Sarah* 1 Kings 1:1-31** *(Ashkenazim & S'fardim)*

Introduction

For generations, many Jewish people have worked in family-owned businesses. Until modern times, among Jews and non-Jews, it was traditional for the oldest son to take over the family business. Even today, there are many families in which the oldest son is expected to take over the running of the family business. This often can lead to big fights within families when more than one son and/or daughter wants to run the family business and feels that he or she is more qualified or deserving than the others. This *haftarah* describes such a situation in ancient times. In the Torah portion there is no such problem because the potential rivals are eliminated before a problem can develop.

[185] Mishnah *Avot* 1:3
[186] Leviticus 19:18

In the *haftarah*, the "business" of King David was running a nation made up of 12 Israelite tribes. He had many sons by several wives. In the Torah portion, the business of Abraham, the first biblical ancestor of the Jewish people, was raising large flocks of sheep. According to the Torah, Abraham had a son, Isaac, by his wife, Sarah, an older son, Ishmael, by Sarah's maid, Hagar, and other sons by his second wife, Keturah, whom he married after Sarah died.[187]

The main topic of this *haftarah* is the question of who will succeed King David in running the "family business." It's a complicated matter. King David's last wife, Bathsheba, and his "court prophet," Nathan, steer the kingship to their candidate, Bathsheba's son Solomon. In Abraham's case the succession is much neater, because his wife, Sarah, anticipated a problem and because he planned better than King David.

Historical Background

As you study world history, you will see many examples of kings, queens and nobles plotting against each other. It was reasonable to expect that whoever became king of Israel after King David, in the middle of the 10th century BCE, was likely to have his rivals killed. King David had fathered a number of sons by several wives. Before this *haftarah*, in the second book of Samuel, we see that one of these sons, Absalom, had tried to become king while his father still ruled and was killed when his rebellion failed.[188]

[187] Genesis 25:1-2
[188] 2Samuel 15:1-12, 18:6-15

In ancient times, kings had many wives, who mostly came to see them only when called for. As you may remember from the Purim story, concerning Queen Esther, if a queen came to see the king on her own it would have been an especially important situation.[189]

The kings of Israel had "court prophets" who spoke for God but served in the royal court, as Nathan did in King David's court.[190] The second book of Samuel ("Second Samuel") says that King David had stolen Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, from one of his own officers and then arranged to have her husband killed.[191] King David was severely rebuked by Nathan for these terrible acts and admitted his guilt.[192]

Historical Meaning of the Text

The book of Kings has political and religious goals.[193] In this *haftarah*, the goal is to legitimize the rule of King Solomon – to explain why a younger son was King David's successor and to suggest that this was approved by God, indirectly if not directly.

After the death of Absalom, Adonijah was the oldest of King David's sons and therefore next in line to be king according to traditional rules.[194] At the beginning of the *haftarah*, King David is old and weak.[195] Adonijah gathers supporters and declares himself

[189] Esther 4:9-11, 5:1-3
[190] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (New York, 1996), p. 51
[191] 2 Samuel 11:1-26
[192] 2 Samuel 12:1-15
[193] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 524-525
[194] Fishbane, p. 31
[195] 1 Kings 1: 1

king.[196] Nathan, the court prophet, learns of this and goes to Bathsheba to warn her that if Adonijah succeeds, she and her son could both be killed.[197] Nathan tells Bathsheba to go to King David and ask him if Adonijah acted with the king's blessing, saying that he will follow and confirm her words.[198]

Bathsheba reminds King David that he had promised that Solomon would succeed him as king.[199] Both Bathsheba and Nathan play their parts beautifully.[200] King David, startled and angry, confirms his promise to Bathsheba that Solomon would rule after him and declares that he will be made king that very day.[201] The involvement of Nathan suggests that the choice of Solomon as King David's successor had God's blessing.[202]

How the *Haftarah* is Related to the Torah Portion

Both the Torah portion and *haftarah* tell about an old man passing on his relationship with God and his "business" to one of his sons. They tell us that both King David and Abraham are *ba ba-yamim* "advanced in years."[203] King David has no clear successor until the events described in this *haftarah*. In the Torah, Abraham has already sent away his older son, Ishmael, and makes it clear that Isaac is his successor, by giving him "everything," after giving gifts to his sons by Keturah and sending them away.[204]

[196] 1 Kings 1:5-10
[197] 1 Kings 1:11-12
[198] 1 Kings 1:13-14
[199] 1 Kings 1:17
[200] Fishbane, p. 30, Plaut, p. 49
[201] 1 Kings 1:29-30
[202] Stephen G. Rosenberg, The Haphtara Cycle (Northvale, NJ, 2000), p. 18-19
[203] Fishbane, p. 33
[204] Genesis 25:5-6, Fishbane, p. 34

In the Torah, Abraham is the model of righteousness and is blessed by God on many occasions.[205] By contrast, King David is not entirely forgiven by God for stealing Bathsheba and having her husband killed. Two of King David's sons rebel and try to become king while he is still alive, with an understood threat to the life of Solomon. In the Torah, Abraham's sons, Ishmael and Isaac come together peacefully to bury him.[206]

A *haftarah* usually reflects a theme of the Torah portion with which it is read, but in this case it seems that our early rabbis, who chose the *haftarot*, were intentionally showing a contrast between Abraham and King David. Perhaps Abraham was rewarded with a peaceful end to his life while King David was still being punished for his sins. Abraham was a careful planner while David delayed "putting his affairs in order."[207]

In both the Torah and *haftarah*, mothers play a huge role in securing the future of their sons. In the previous Torah portion, *Va-Yera*, Sarah gets Abraham to send Ishmael away, to prevent him from becoming a threat to Isaac.[208] In this *haftarah*, Bathsheba acts to ensure that her son, Solomon, and not his chief rival, Adonijah, will become the next king of Israel. Sarah's demand that Ishmael be sent away is confirmed by God when Abraham hesitates.[209] Nathan's role can be seen as showing that God supported Bathsheba's request that David keep his promise about Solomon being the next king.

Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today

[205] Genesis 12:2-3, 15:1-19, 17:1-12, 18:18-19, 22:15-18
[206] Genesis 25:9
[207] Fishbane, p. 34
[208] Genesis 21:9-10
[209] Genesis 21:11-13

This haftarah has several possible connections to modern life. You could speak about one or more of these or think of other connections that are meaningful to you.

This *haftarah* and Torah portion are only two of many examples in the Bible in which a younger son is chosen over an older one.[210] Is the Bible is trying to tell us that people should be evaluated according to their individual characteristics and not by their order of birth or other family relationships? We see this issue in the modern business world as many heads of family-controlled businesses, large and small, pass the authority to run the business to a younger son instead of an older one or to a daughter instead of a son. Sometimes the oldest child doesn't want to run the family business. Parents in such situations struggle to decide what is best for the business as well as for their children.

One modern rabbi says that Bathsheba's role is not fully appreciated.[211] She doesn't just speak the lines that she is given by Nathan but adds her own thoughts.[212] Also, Nathan doesn't go directly to King David when he learns of the rebellion but goes to Bathsheba first. This rabbi says it is clear that Bathsheba has an important role in the kingdom.[213] Can you think of similar situations? Some people say that the wives of many US presidents have had great influence over the decisions that their husbands made, even though the wives were not "elected." Do you think this is good or bad?

[210] Jacob vs. Esau (Gen 25:23, etc.), Ephraim vs. Manasseh (Gen 28:13-19), David vs. brothers (1 Sam 16:1-13)
[211] Beth Janus, "Haftarat Chaye Sarah," in Elyse Goldstein, ed., The Women's Haftarah Commentary (Woodstock, VT, 2004), p. 24
[212] Janus, in Goldstein, ed., p. 25
[213] Janus, in Goldstein, ed., p. 26

In the Bible there are many stories in which a parent deliberately favors one child over another. Do you think that it's ever possible for parents to treat their children equally? What if the children are very different from one another? What if the parents have to choose one child to fulfill a particular role in the family? What if the parents want to divide certain possessions like jewelry or antiques among their children? How can they do this fairly? Should parents base their behavior toward their children on what is best for each child or on what is best for the family as a whole? Do this Torah portion and *haftarah* help you appreciate some of the challenges of being a parent?

***Haftarah* for *Shabbat and Rosh Hodesh*: Isaiah 66:1 – 24** (repeat verse 23)

Introduction

What will the world be like in the far distant future? For over 2,000 years, most Jewish people have believed that God would someday give the world a complete "makeover." In this total transformation, all the wicked people would be punished and the good people would be rewarded. There would be universal peace – among people and even between different kinds of animals that are each other's enemies today.[214] All people would worship the one God.[215] Jewish people found support for these beliefs in the words of many ancient prophets.[216] This *haftarah* is part of that tradition of belief.

[214] Isaiah 2:2-4, 11:6-9
[215] Zechariah 2:15
[216] Isaiah 11:1-12:6; Ezekiel 39:25-29; Zechariah 14:16; Malachi 3:23-24;

In modern times, most Jews hope for a messianic age – a future time in which people will treat each other better than they do today; a time when there will be no more wars, no more poverty and no more hatred based on people's race or nationality. Many Jews believe that we can work toward such a future, whether or not we live to see it fulfilled. This *haftarah* is one of several that we read through the year that encourage this hope.

This *haftarah* also talks about God's preference for sincere worship over empty ritual. It talks about the restoration of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Near the end it talks about universal worship of God on *Shabbat* and on *Rosh Chodesh*, the first day of a new month.[217] That is why we read this when *Rosh Chodesh* falls on *Shabbat*.

Historical Background

In the 6th century BCE, the Kingdom of Judea, the southern part of the Land of Israel, was all that remained of the nation that had been ruled by King David. In the 8th century BCE, the Assyrians had conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel and exiled its upper class citizens.[218] In 586 BCE the Babylonians conquered Judea, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and carried thousands of Judeans into exile.[219] Almost 50 years later, in 539 BCE, the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylonia and decreed that the Judean exiles there could return to the Land of Israel and rebuild the Temple.[220]

[217] Isaiah 66:23
[218] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary, Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 529-530
[219] Fishbane, p. 540
[220] Fishbane, p. 534

Only some of the Judean exiles returned to the Land of Israel – many others were living comfortably in Babylonia and stayed there.[221] The rebuilding of the Temple did not go smoothly and the returned exiles may likely have been disheartened and depressed.[222] Prophets arose who encouraged the returned exiles to keep up their spirits.[223] Some prophets spoke of a bright future in which God would return all Israelite exiles to the Land of Israel and all nations would assemble to worship the one God in Jerusalem.[224] Some modern scholars say that this *haftarah* comes from one such prophet that lived among the returned exiles. They call him Third Isaiah to distinguish him from Second Isaiah, who lived in Babylonia,[225] and First Isaiah, who lived in the 8th century BCE.[226]

Historical Meaning of the Text

The *haftarah's* first verses make a statement about God's dual nature: "The heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool: Where is the house you could build for me…? …Yet this is the one to whom I look – the poor and the [humble] spirit who trembles at My word."[227] The eternal, all-powerful Creator of the universe is a God who cares about individual people! So, whatever temple the returned Judeans might build would have no meaning without personal intention in worship. Good and bad examples are given.[228]

[221] Lawrence Schiffman, From Text to Tradition (Hoboken, NJ, 1991), pp. 33-34
[222] W. Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (New York, 1996), p. xliv
[223] Plaut, p. xliv
[224] Isaiah 11:11-12; Zechariah 6:15, 8:7-8,
[225] Plaut, p. xxxiv
[226] Fishbane, p. 529
[227] Isaiah 66:1-2, translation adapted from Plaut, p. 586
[228] Isaiah 66:3-5

In the middle section of this *haftarah*, the prophet tries to build the people's confidence with visions of an easy rebirth of Jerusalem.[229] God will enrich the city and its people and comfort them as a mother comforts her children.[230] He says that God will punish Israel's enemies and pagan worshippers with great fury.[231] God will send some of the people who survive that punishment to spread the word of God's power far and wide.[232] This will inspire all nations to bring the exiled Israelites to Jerusalem to worship God.[233]

Finally, the prophet speaks of the messianic age – a time when God will make "new heavens and a new earth."[234] He tells the Judeans that their children will be part of that bright future, while the God's enemies will suffer gruesome, eternal punishment.[235]

How the *Haftarah* Is Related to *Rosh Chodesh*

The obvious connection of this *haftarah* to *Rosh Chodesh* is in the next to last verse: "And it shall be that from new moon to new moon and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship me, says Adonai."[236] The regularity of the lunar cycle may have been reassuring to ancient people, who were in awe of the forces of nature.[237] *Rosh Chodesh* was an important holiday for the ancient Judeans, who did no work then.[238] Later, it became a special occasion for women, honoring their monthly cycle.[239]

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[229] Isaiah 66:7-9
[230] Isaiah 66:10-14
[231] Isaiah 66:15-18
[232] Isaiah 66:18-19
[233] Isaiah 20-21
[234] Isaiah 22
[235] Isaiah 22, 24
[236] Isaiah 66:23, author's translation
[237] Ilene Schneider, "Haftarat Shabbat Rosh Chodesh," in Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2004), pp. 259-260
[238] Plaut, p. 592

The ancient Judeans may also have seen the lunar cycle as a sign of God's active role in nature as described in *ma'ariv aravim*, the evening creation prayer.[240] As this haftarah suggests, such a God could not be contained in any human temple.[241] Some commentators say that such a God didn't need the Temple or the sacrifices offered there, but the sacrifices could move the spirits of people to feel a connection to God.[242] Similarly, God doesn't need our prayers, but they can help us feel connected to God.

Finally, the word for new moon in Hebrew is *nolad* "newborn." New births are times of hope and optimism. Similarly, in this *haftarah*, the prophet spoke of a rebirth of the Judean nation and encouraged the returned exiles to be hopeful and optimistic.[243]

Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today

This *haftarah* has several possible connections to modern life. You could speak about one or more of these or think of other connections that are meaningful to you.

In modern times we have seen the rebirth of the State of Israel and the gathering there of Jews from everywhere in the world, often with the help of other nations, much as the prophet describes. Is this rebirth a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of this *haftarah*? Could this be an example of how ancient prophecies can be meaningful to us today?

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[239] Palut, p. 592
[240] Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York, 1985), pp. 200-201
[241] Plaut, p. 586
[242] Lainie Blum Cogan and Judy Weiss, Teaching Haftarah (Denver, 2002), p. 355
[243] Cogan and Weiss, pp. 357-358

In the time of this *haftarah*, the Judeans were trying to recover from a national disaster: the conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple. In our times, in the weeks and months after natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, or man-made disasters, such as the Gulf oil spill, the people who are affected need hope as much as physical help to deal with their suffering. Politicians often try to give messages of hope in such situations. Would religious leaders do a better job? What role should religion play?

Traditional Jews and many liberal Jews recite a prayer on *Rosh Chodesh*, in the middle section of the *Amidah* (the main standing prayer), called *ya'aleh v'yavo*, which asks that our prayers especially rise and come before God on that occasion.[244] Do you believe that prayer is more effective on some occasions than on others? Have you noticed that your family members seem especially affected by prayer on *Yom Kippur* and other holidays?

This *haftarah* offers a message of hope that all people will someday recognize the one God and worship God together. One modern scholar says that the monthly renewal of heavenly light can be a symbol of hope for "a future fellowship of all nations on earth."[245] In the 20th century there were two major attempts to create "a fellowship of nations": the League of Nations and the United Nations. Do you think that goal has been achieved? If not, how could greater progress toward this goal be made? What has been missing?

[244] Harlow, pp. 114-115, 216-217, 298-299, etc.
[245] Fishbane, p. 332

In Jewish mystical tradition, since medieval times, the lunar cycle has represented an increase and decrease in holiness and a strengthening and weakening of the connection between humans and God through the month.[246] Some mystics speak of people having an "inner light" which is renewed through connection to God and then reflected outward to other people to improve human relations.[247] Do you believe that you have a spiritual "inner light?" If so, how do you try to share that light with others?

This *haftarah* is one of many biblical texts that say God has a special relationship with the Jewish people. We shouldn't think we're "better" than other people, so how do we understand this? One Jewish prayer book tries to explain our special relationship with God in its English translation of the blessing before the reading of the Torah. After the words "who chose us" it adds the words "for divine service," which are not in the Hebrew.[248] This idea of a special mission is a good reason for continuing to be Jewish.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Results of Using the New Materials

The materials included in Chapter 4 as examples were tested with seven students at the independent temple where I serve. These students celebrated becoming *bar* or *bat mitzvah* during the month of October, 2010. They had been given the traditional materials from Etz Hayim and some supplementary material from Plaut's The Haftarah Commentary approximately one year earlier. At that time they were asked to read the

[246] Fishbane, p. 332
[247] Fishbane, p. 332
[248] Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan Levine, eds., *Siddur Hadash* (Bridgeport, CT, 2000), p. 323

materials and to complete several preparatory steps listed on the instruction sheet shown in Appendix A under “Haftarah Speech, Preparation.” Each student was given my new materials and was asked to read them prior to meeting with me, together with at least one parent, approximately one month before his/her *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. Because the group of test subjects for this study was small and the abilities of the students and the Jewish education of their parents varied widely, no objective conclusions could be drawn from these trials. Nevertheless, certain subjective observations could be made.

1. Students and parents found the material more understandable.

All students and parents commented that they found the new material more understandable than what they had been given previously. The following are representative of the comments I received from both groups:

a. Student (re material on the *haftarah* for the Torah portion *Lekh-Lekha*):

> …it has helped me much more than the material I received in the booklet…The comments you wrote helped me especially in understanding the purpose of [Second] Isaiah and one of the connections between my Torah and haftarah portions.

b. Mother: (re material on the *haftarah* for the Torah portion *Va-Yera*)

> This is terrific and it will really help (daughter’s name). I also had read through her haftarah this summer while she was at camp and thought it was somewhat challenging for a 13 year old.

2. Students found personal meaning in the *haftarah* text.

Although the new material on each *haftarah* includes a number of possible connections to modern life, several of the students found other meanings as a result of engaging with the text. The following are some examples of their original commentaries:

a. *Haftarah* for Torah portion *Bereshit*:

Today, Israel is a homeland for Jews from around the world. Establishing and keeping Israel as our homeland has not been easy. For centuries, this land has been under attack because of its location in the Middle East and these power struggles continue to this day.

b. *Haftarah* for Torah portion *Lekh-Lekha*:

Lekh-Lekha can be a reminder to all of us today that when you make a promise to someone, you are accountable to fulfill that commitment…I know that when my parents promise to come to a sports game or a school event, I trust that they will be there supporting me. I also know that when I make a promise, I have to be sure I can follow through with that commitment, or I may be thought of as an unreliable person.

c. *Haftarah* for Torah portion *Va-Yera*:

People struggle with many different things. Sometimes people have similar problems as their friends and neighbors and sometimes the problems are very different….For example, a child may want to get a new video game but not have enough money from allowance to afford it. Another person may not have enough money to buy food for their family, …Many people of all ages don't understand the difference between a want and a need. We can enjoy what we have and strive to get more, but we should also put ourselves in someone else's shoes and think about the life they are living and how it is different than ours.

3. Parents and children discussed the meaning of the *haftarot*.

When discussing the meaning of the *haftarah* for the Torah portion *Bereshit*, the student's mother embraced the message and explained it to her son in front of me. I believe that her elaboration on my explanation is reflected in these words from his speech, as well as what is quoted in 2. a., above:

> Jews have not only prospered in Israel, but have managed to turn this arid piece of desert into the dynamic center of industry, agriculture, education, art and business that it is today. The Jewish people have always been survivors. Throughout history there have been examples of fallen empires and religions, yet the Jewish people endure. Perhaps we do so because we learned…lessons that were discussed in my haftarah and Torah portion. Being good Jews, being faithful to our traditions, our community and each other is really the key to how we are able to survive and prosper as a people. It is a lesson that we should all continue to remember.

When I was discussing the *haftarah* for the Torah portion *Chayei Sarah*, with another student, she did not immediately appreciate the concept of a "family business." Her mother, who was present, reminded her of relatives who own a family business, to which the student was then able to relate. This is another example of how a parent can be a "partner in the process" of teaching the meaning of the *haftarah* to her/his child.

In general, I believe that it is important and valuable to involve parents directly in the process of preparing children for *bar/bat mitzvah*. It can make the experience of the child becoming a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* more meaningful for both the parent and the child if some part of the preparation was a joint effort. While many parents of students in liberal

congregations lack the facility with Hebrew to help their children with the prayers and/or Bible readings, discussing the meaning of the Torah and *haftarah* portions, after reading English materials about them, can be a great opportunity for collaboration. Other potential benefits of parent participation in the *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation process are discussed below under "Suggestions for Improvement" and "Topics for Future Study."

Suggestions for Improvement

One important way that my materials for teaching the meaning of the *haftarot* can be improved is the addition of more questions for the student in the final section of each commentary, titled "Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today." As I drafted these materials, over a one month period this past summer, I included more questions in this section of some of the later *haftarah* commentaries, at the suggestion of my thesis advisor.[249] If I were to reissue these materials to new students or for publication, I would certainly include more questions in every one. I understand that thought-provoking questions can be an important and valuable way to get the students to engage with the text and teacher.

Another important way that these materials could be improved is the inclusion of specific learning activities, as are found in Cogan and Weiss' Teaching Haftarah. Among these activities could be questions that require the student to have interaction with his/her parents and/or grandparents. This could promote more meaningful family participation in the *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation process. Another type of activity could be the creation of artwork representing one of the major themes of the haftarah for students who are interested in the visual arts. Yet another activity could be the creation

[249] Dr. Saul Wachs, e-mail message of August 18, 2010

of a dramatic scene to be enacted in the synagogue in lieu of a speech. I have seen this done very effectively by a student and a surrogate for his non-Jewish father at the independent synagogue where I was a member prior to my starting rabbinic studies.

It has also been suggested that my materials could be improved by making reference to some of the traditional Jewish commentaries and perhaps quoting or paraphrasing material from them.[250] The approach would be similar to the techniques used by Nehama Leibowitz and Harvey Fields in their respective Torah commentaries.[251] This could be done in such a way as to show that there are strong differences of opinion among the traditional commentators, which could encourage the student to grapple with the issues and find his/her own solution to the conflicts.[252] As with the inclusion of more questions in the section titled "Meaning of the Haftarah Today," the purpose would be to motivate the student to engage more fully with the biblical text.

Topics for Future Study

It has been suggested that it would be worthwhile to research the benefits to children and their parents of greater mutual participation in the process of learning the meaning of the *haftarot*. Will the student's understanding and explanation of the *haftarah* be richer as a result of learning from the parent's life experiences? Could the child use some of what he/she learns by incorporating some of his/her parents' hopes and aspirations for their children in the speech that he/she will give to the congregation?

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[250] Dr. Saul Wachs, thesis advisor,; Rabbi Kenneth Emert, Temple Beth Rishon, Wyckoff, NJ, private conversations
[251] Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot – Exodus* (Jerusalem, 1995) – and other volumes in the same series; Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times* – 3 Volumes (New York, 1990)
[252] Wachs and Emert, private conversations

Research has suggested that some of the activities which support children's emotional health and happiness as they move toward adulthood are family participation in religious activities and parental engagement in their children's homework,[253] one form of which could be learning the meaning of the children's Torah and *haftarah* portions.

It would also be interesting to research, with a larger group of test subjects, the benefits of using these materials in an organized program of group *bar/bat mitzvah* education. In many synagogues students and their parents are required to attend monthly or more frequent meetings and/or classes during their *bar/bat mitzvah* year. These materials could be used as the basis for lessons that the students would teach to the parents and other students who are assembled.[254] It is said that people in general learn academic subjects best when they have to teach them. Would this also be true for *bar/bat mitzvah* students and their *haftarot*? Would the opportunity for parents and children to sit together in an educational setting be meaningful to either or both populations?

APPENDIX A:
TEMPLE BETH RISHON
BAR/BAT MITZVAH SPEECH GUIDELINES

A. <u>Haftarah Speech</u> – Must be approved in advance by rabbi.

Preparation (based on packet you received from the cantor):

1. Read your haftarah (without commentary).
2. Try to read the commentaries – get out of them what you can.
3. List the major ideas which you found in the haftarah.
4. Read any additional material which the rabbi gives you.

[253] Frank Luntz, *What Americans Really Want…Really* (New York, 2009), p. 249
[254] Wachs, private conversation

5. Write in one or two sentences the main idea of the haftarah (thesis statement).

Speech – Put into paragraph form the following material:

1. From what book of the Bible is the haftarah taken?
2. In what century did the prophet live or did the events take place?
3. What is the theme or major idea of the haftarah?
4. What is the connection between the message of the haftarah and the message/theme of the Torah reading for that Shabbat or festival?
5. What does this haftarah mean to me? or What does it mean for us today?

B. Personal Speech – Does not require review by rabbi.

1. What becoming a bar/bat mitzvah means to me:
2. My mitzvah project:
3. Thank clergy and teachers.
4. Thank guests for coming.
5. Thank parents and other family members.

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

It has been suggested that the sample teaching materials presented in Chapter 4 should have more questions to challenge the student and to stimulate the discovery or creation of new meaning.[255] Because the samples in Chapter 4 are the actual materials given to the students in the test group, such questions are offered here as a supplement. If these materials are published, such questions will be included.

[255] Dr. Saul Wachs, thesis advisor, e-mail message of August 18, 2010 and subsequent phone conversations

Haftarah for *Bereshit*

If Jews are indeed God's "witnesses," why have we suffered so much in the course of our history? Was our suffering a sign that we were "out of favor" with God at various times? Why do the Jewish people still exist, in spite of many attempts to destroy us?

How have Jews fulfilled Second Isaiah's prophecy that we would be a "light of nations?" What have Jews contributed in the fields of science, medicine, literature, the arts and human rights? How have Jewish contributions compared to those of other groups?

How should we understand the idea of chosen-ness? Did God choose different groups of people for different roles in the world?[256] Were the ideas of one God, the Sabbath, historical progress, worship without a priest and the hope for a "messiah" – someone who would create a better future – Jewish "inventions," as some people claim, or were they a gift from God, who somehow inspired Jews to bring these ideas to the world?[257]

Haftara for *Lekh-Lekha*

See the questions re chosen-ness above for *Haftarah Bereshit*, plus the following:

What would the world be lacking if there were no Jews?[258] What is the message in the fact that several countries in Eastern and Central Europe whose Jewish populations were destroyed in the Holocaust are currently trying to recreate Jewish culture?

[256] Leo Baeck, quoted by Saul Wachs in phone conversation of November 29, 2010
[257] Dr. Saul Wachs, e-mail message and phone conversation of November 29, 2010
[258] Dr. Saul Wachs, e-mail message of November 29, 2010

How have Jews traditionally understood the chosen-ness? Is there a relationship between chosen-ness and holiness? Read Chapter 19 of the book of Leviticus in the Torah, especially verses 1-3, 9-18, 32-35. What does this say about being holy?

Have some Jews believed that we were better than other people? Can we find Jewish teachings that seem to hold us to higher moral and ethical standards than other people? In addition to the "Holiness Code" of Lev. 19, mentioned above, look at Amos 3:2.[259]

Haftara for *Va-Yera*

Ask your parents about examples from their lives of how making new friends has helped them in unexpected ways.

Ask your parents for examples from their lives of doing good things without seeking a reward that have ended up rewarding them in unexpected ways. .

Haftarah for *Chayei Sarah*

One of the great qualities of the Hebrew Bible, compared to other ancient literature, is that its heroes are "flawed" – they have many faults and do many things that are wrong, just like real people today. Can you think of people who are in the news – in sports, entertainment or government – are models in some ways but flawed in other ways?[260]

[259] Dr. Saul Wachs, e-mail message of November 29, 2010
[260] Dr. Saul Wachs, e-mail message of November 29, 2010

In spite of his sins, King David is considered a hero in Jewish history and is mentioned in many of our songs and prayers. Jewish tradition even says that the messiah, a future "redeemer" who will make the world a better place, will come from his family. For which of the modern people who are models in some ways but flawed in other ways do you think that the good points outweigh their flaws? For whom do the flaws matter more?

Haftarah for *Shabbat Rosh Chodesh*

See comments on chosen-ness for *Haftarah Bereshit* and *Haftarah Lekh-Lekha*.

Some Jews believe that the message of hope in this *haftarah* and other texts from the Hebrew Bible suggest that God will someday send a messiah – a special person – to reward good people, punish bad people and turn the world into a better place. Other Jews believe that we can bring about a "messianic age" by working gradually to make the world a better place. What can you do today to make the world a better place? What would you like to do as you grow older to help make the world a better place?

Also, the materials about the *haftarah* for *Chayei Sarah* should be asking questions on the subject of the Bible's frequent selection of younger sons over older ones to succeed their fathers – in their spiritual relationship with God and in the leadership of their extended family or of the Israelite people as a whole. It has been pointed out that by telling the student instead of asking what the Bible may be trying to teach, I would be depriving the student of an opportunity to grapple with the issue and arrive at possible

answers for him or her self.[261] If I were rewriting the beginning portion of the section titled “Meaning of this *Haftarah* Today,” I would express it as follows:

This *haftarah* and Torah portion are only two of many examples in the Bible in which a younger son is chosen over an older one. What do you think the Bible is trying to tell us by repeating this pattern? Do you know of any such situations in your family? We see this issue in the modern business world as many heads of family-controlled businesses, large and small, pass the authority tot run the business to a younger son instead of any older one or to a daughter instead of a son. Ask your parents if they know of such cases in their families or in their careers. Ask them what reasons there might be for parents making such a choice. What facts do you think parents should consider when deciding which of their children should take over a family-run business?

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[261] Dr. Saul Wachs, e-mail message, November 29, 2010

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