

**You're Not It**  
**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5785**  
**October 3, 2024**

A story. It's a Saturday afternoon, and three rebellious Chasidic teens are caught smoking in a barn. Hauled before the rebbe, they are told to explain themselves.

"Well," the first boy says, "I forgot."

"What did you forget?" the rebbe asks.

"I forgot that it was Shabbat!"

They look at the second boy. "I forgot," he says.

"What did you forget?"

"Well," the second boy says, "I forgot that smoking was forbidden on Shabbat." *Never mind that it is bad for your health.*

The rebbe sighs. "Isn't anybody going to take responsibility here?" The rebbe looks at the third boy. "I suppose you forgot, too?"

"Of course," the third boy says.

"Well, what did you forget?"

So the third boy says: "I forgot to lock the barn."

A new year. A new hope. A new beginning.

And yet we come here, now, shaped and shadowed by the year that was.

An anniversary looms. Our community comes together this Sunday afternoon and Monday morning, for formal ceremonies and commemorations marking October 7. And my remarks on both Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur morning will address this moment in time more directly.

Yet almost everything, now, is seen through the prism of that lens. Even themes and topics we have tackled in the past reverberate in new ways, now. We come together. And we begin again.

What are we called here for? Who are we meant to be, and yet to be, as we answer a summons whose source, whose voice, whose claim upon us we do not fully understand?

Maybe this time is meant as a reminder. We make plans, but there are other purposes at work as well. There are things that loom larger than our desires and design. We are called to serve something beyond just, and other than ourselves. The universe does not revolve around our ego. We are not all there is. In the words of one of my teachers: **There is a God. You're not it.**

I was touched... I was moved this morning... when students who have become B'nai Mitzvah during the time I have been here chanted Haftarah. Weren't they wonderful? And. It sends a message. Teachers of Torah, and leaders of prayer! A Bar or Bat Mitzvah should be the *first time* you stand before the congregation in this way. The first time, not the last!

Our young people chanted the traditional portion for the first morning of Rosh Hashanah. But I wonder. I have a radical idea. At some point, look, maybe we should actually... change the portion. And use a different one, instead.

To explain this, first, some background. What is a Haftarah? So many of us had to learn one when we were young. Surprisingly, though... not all, maybe only a few of us knew, at the time, what we were doing. We were told to do this. We were not taught why, or what it was.

I can tell you one thing a Haftarah is *not!* It is not a “half” Torah! The words sound alike but are linguistically unrelated.

Torah portions, of course (kind of by definition) come from the Torah, the five books of Moses. The Torah portion is the *first* major Scriptural reading at a Shabbat or holiday morning service. And the Torah is the first of the three parts of the Hebrew Bible. Haftarah portions, the *second* Scriptural reading, comes from the Prophets, the *second* section of the Bible.

The word “Haftarah” means “conclusion,” or, even, “echo” or “repetition.” These readings were chosen to reinforce, reflect on, or echo the “main event,” the Torah portion. The Torah is the cake, and the Haftarah an icing of the same flavor. Or the Torah is the entrée, and the prophetic selection a carefully paired wine. It must match. It has to fit. The two are connected.

No one knows when the practice began. One theory looks to a time of persecution, when the public reading of the Torah was outlawed by our enemies. This theory speculates that we chose a passage from another part of the Bible which would “remind us” of what we should have been reading that day.

But there is something more subtle – even subversive – going on here. It was not the Biblical writers themselves who paired these portions! The Prophets would have been surprised – perhaps dismayed – to find their books cut up and their chapters scattered around in this way. It was the rabbis, at a later point in history, who made these matches.

And there are times, and there are ways, in which the selection from the Prophets shades, or shapes, or maybe even alters the message of the Torah portion. Sometimes – very, very carefully – the two passages even disagree.

This means that figuring out the “message” that the tradition is trying to send... is *not just* about listening to the reading from the Torah. It is the Torah, and the Prophets, and a delicate dance between the two! (So, if you leave too early, you may miss the point, or at least the lesson the tradition hopes to teach.)

Judaism is *not* the religion *of the Bible*. It is how we look back, learn from, and *reflect on* the Bible over time that gives shape to who we are and how we live our Jewish lives today.

So, that was the background. Now, knowing the subjective nature, the historical fluidity in these selections... I humbly suggest that we might someday set aside the *first* chapter of the book of Samuel, the traditional Haftarah for the first morning of Rosh Hashanah. I believe that a fitting match for this morning might be found in the *final* chapter of the same book, the last chapter, Second Samuel 24.

Why? What is this lesser-known tale about?

Second Samuel 24 tells the story of David who, at the height of power, orders a census. He enlists the commander of his army to carry out the task.

Now, there are times in the Biblical tradition when a census is ordered by God. Before a battle, or in anticipation of the allocation of land, it is important to know who you are, what forces are at your disposal, how many hands you have to fight or mouths you have to feed.

Here, however, King David acts on his own. It has the feel of self-importance. He just wants to know how strong he is. How powerful. It almost sounds like he is... counting his toys. Maybe he's... showing off?

But strutting and preening have no place in God's plan. A figure referred to as "David's seer," the prophet Gad, appears, and gives the king three choices as punishment for his audacity. There could be a seven-year famine which would strike the land. Or David could be in flight, pursued by his enemies for three months. Or, finally, there could be a pestilence, a plague which would strike the people, which would last for three days.

David makes his choice. Maybe it was the punishment of shortest duration. But it was also the one which affected and afflicted his people the most directly. He chooses for the people to suffer for what he did. He chooses the plague.

There is an irony here. What David accomplishes with a census is to count the people. But a plague... a plague immediately renders any such count obsolete! Indeed, as the punishment begins, as the plague hits we are told that, in the breadth of the land, from Dan to Beersheva, 70,000 people die.

It is only then, as David sees the consequence of his actions and his choices, only when the avenging angel prepares to strike down more people, it is only then that he utters these words:

הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי חָטָאתִי וְאֲנֹכִי הָעֹשֶׂה וְאֵלֶּה הַצָּאן מִה עָשׂוּ תְהִי נָא יְדָךְ בִּי וּבְבֵית אָבִי:

Behold, I, I alone have done wrong, and I alone am guilty.  
 And these poor sheep, what have they done?  
 Let Your hand fall upon me, and my father's house!

According to my teacher, Micha Goodman, this is the great self-own. This is the moment of self-awareness, of reckoning and responsibility. To serve, to shield, to protect the people! Finally, this is leadership, and this is who we are all called to be. Power exists for a purpose. And it's not about you.

What happens next? And where does this story take place? Location, location, location. Where this happens is key to what is going on here.

Immediately upon David's plea, the prophet Gad returns and instructs the king to build an altar to the Eternal, on the threshing floor of Aruna the Jebusite.

A threshing floor is a flat, level surface on which grain is threshed with a flail, to separate the useful and the useless part of the wheat. Symbolically, in the Bible, it is seen as a place of spiritual sorting as well, of separation – and revelation.

Offered the land for free, David buys the property at full price. And then:

וַיִּבֶן שָׁם דָּוִד מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיַּעַל עֹלֹת וַיִּשְׁלַמִּים וַיַּעֲתֵר יְהוָה לְאַרְץ וּמַעְצָר הַמַּגָּפָה מֵעַל יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And David built, there, an altar to the Eternal,  
and offered up sacrifices of burnt-offerings, and offerings of well-being.  
And the Eternal responded to the plea for the land,  
and the plague against Israel came to and end.

Thus ends the book of Samuel.

And, according to tradition, the threshing floor of Aruna, that was on the flat top of a mountain. And they called the mountain Moriah.

This, in other words, is *the very same place* where Abraham brought Isaac, in the Torah portion we read this morning. And, later, this is the very spot, the very place... where David's son Solomon would build the Temple.

Whatever else we may think of the story, this is where Abraham puts a higher call above his own concerns. And this is where David yields, puts ego aside, abandons avoidance, stops hiding, stoops down, steps up and owns his role as protector of the people.

*This* is the place of sorting and seeking, where character counts and values come clear, where pleas are heard, and reconciliation is real. This is a place of transformation. This is where, in our tradition, once upon a time, we came closest to God and, it is said, God came closest to us.

A folktale from our tradition:

*Once there lived two siblings who shared a field, whose houses were on opposite ends of the field. One brother was a bachelor, who lived alone. The sister was married, with many children. By day the siblings worked together, and they shared and divided the crops of the field equally.*

*Over the course of time, each sibling felt for the other. The bachelor was worried that his sister had all those extra mouths to feed, and needed extra food. And the married sister was worried that her single sibling lived alone, with no one to help him, so he needed the extra income.*

*And so it happened that in the dark of the night each of them would fill their arms with sheaves of produce and traipse off to the other's house, and in the morning each would be astonished to discover that their own supplies had not diminished.*

*This went on for several days, until finally, the two encountered one another on one of their nocturnal journeys. And then, at that point, as they looked at each other and realized what was going on, suddenly they heard a Voice from Heaven decree... that on such a site, filled with love and sacrifice, of caring and concern, of giving hearts... this would be the site upon which would one day be built... the Holy Temple.]*

The Temple is gone, now. Time marches on, even if the outer stones stand still. But the story stays, and the lesson is there to learn:

Power, like love, is at its most potent when not hoarded, but shared.

This is a question of balance. Caring for ourselves is good. It is sacred. It is holy! It is, in Jewish tradition, an obligation. Doing well, making a profit, even having power in and of itself... there is nothing wrong with that.



But... **When we act, we should also ask: who is this for? What is this about? What are our motives? Who does this serve?**

**Are we clear about our obligations to others? Are we aware of, do we know, do we own up to the impact we have?**

Whatever we may mean by God, our tradition seems to say that **God stays away when we care *only* for ourselves. God comes close when we look out for others.**

**There is a God. You're not it.**

*Shanah Tovah.*