

Haftarah for Shabbat ha-Ḥodesh

Ashkenazic: **Ezekiel 45:16-46:18**

Sephardic: **Ezekiel 45:18-46:15**

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE HAFTARAH AND THE SPECIAL SABBATH

Shabbat ha-Ḥodesh is the last of a series four special Sabbaths that begin on the first Sabbath of Adar when that is a New Moon or on the week preceding if the New Moon falls during the week. Shabbat ha-Ḥodesh occurs on the last Sabbath of Adar, unless the New Moon of Nisan falls on a Sabbath. Shabbat ha-Ḥodesh gets its designation because of the opening proclamation of the special portion from Exod. 12:1-20 read on that day: “This month [*ha-ḥodesh*] shall mark for you the beginning of the months” (Exod. 12:2). This portion contains the commandment to offer a paschal offering and its laws and thus anticipates the ritual to be performed on the fourteenth of Nisan (see Rashi on B. Megillah 29a). The haftarah from Ezek. 45:16-46:18 (or 45:18-46:15) has a central section dealing with the paschal offering and sacrifices during the ensuing week (45:21-24). If Shabbat ha-Ḥodesh occurs on a New Moon, the haftarah normally read when the New Moon falls on a Sabbath (Shabbat Rosh Ḥodesh) is deferred in favor of the special haftarah for Shabbat ha-Ḥodesh.

The special Torah reading from Exod. 12:1-20 and the haftarah from Ezek. 45:18-25 are clearly linked. Both stress the Passover ceremony and festival of unleavened bread. For its part, the Torah instruction describes the inaugural Passover ceremony in Egypt as well as provisions for subsequent enactments. The haftarah describes the festival for the New Temple period and stresses the formal purifications at that time. Taken together, the two descriptions reflect distinct historical poles. The first of these, the Passover of Egypt, recalls when Israel was liberated from bondage and called by G-d to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). The Passover of the future anticipates a time when Israel will be restored to its homeland and its sacred duties. In the first ceremony, blood was smeared on the doorposts of each clan dwelling for the people’s protection (Exod. 12:13). In the ritual found in Ezekiel, blood is to be (twice) smeared on the doorposts of the Temple (among other places) for the purification of the Temple (Ezek. 45:19).

Building upon these thematic connections, other correlations may be noted. For example, the daubing of the entrance to the home and Temple with blood marks them off as two types of space. The first embodies the family, whose bonds are biological and legal. The family is the nuclear core of personal history and religious rite and preserves a parochial character by virtue of intimacy and a common name. Alongside this dwelling stands the Temple, whose space is communal and whose rites have an official and public status. The Temple opens its doors for collective worship and thus transcends the private histories of its worshipers. How one may live in both homes—standing firm in loyalty to hearth and blood, but open to the larger commitments a divine dwelling symbolizes—is a question each reader must answer repeatedly.

FOREWORD

The vision of the future Temple and city is dated to 573 B.C.E. (Ezek. 40:1).

The haftarah envisions various regulations pertaining to the rebuilt Temple. The Ashkenazi reading opens with the proclamation that the “entire population” must provide a regular contribution of products for the Temple service; and the text then goes on to state that it is the obligation of the prince to offer the requisite offerings for the New Moon, the Sabbath, and the festivals from his holdings, for the expiation of all Israel. This emphasis on expiation continues in the next major unit, in which we learn of a series of purgation rites to be performed in the first and seventh months of the year. Further details are then given of the offerings for the fixed occasions, and the decorum of physical passage “within the inner court is regulated for the common people and the prince. Rules for inheritance gifts by the prince to his sons or subjects are also regulated.

The Ashkenazi reading thus begins and ends with matters of gifts (in the first case, the offering by the laity via the prince; in the latter, the donation by the prince to others and focuses on the details of the Temple purgations and the sacrificial offerings. Sephardi custom recites only the unit on purgations and offerings.

Chapter 45

OBLIGATIONS

¹⁶ In this contribution [offering], the entire population must join with the prince in Israel.

The text states that the community must contribute the produce for Temple offerings.

As a haftarah’s prologue, “this offering” must be prospective, referring to the gifts that the people shall donate, which the prince must then prepare as offerings.

In contrast, in the biblical context “this offering” arguably refers back to gifts provided by the people for the prince to offer, which differ from offerings the prince himself must provide. R Eliezer of Beaugency suggests that all persons would contribute equally.

¹⁷ But the burnt offerings, the meal offerings, and the libations on festivals, new moons, sabbaths—all fixed occasions—of the House of Israel shall be the obligation of the prince; he shall provide the sin offerings, the meal offerings, the burnt offerings, and the offerings of well-being, to make expiation for the House of Israel.

We then learn that the prince “nasi” is obliged to “prepare” these offerings for the people on all the fixed occasions of the year—“festivals, new moons, sabbaths”.

An ancient tribal title, frequently used by Ezekiel to refer to Israelite kings and the future scion of David The prince is the future leader. This leader has a special role in the new Temple service, which may explain the choice of this term Rashi considers the “nasi” to be the High Priest.

PURGATIONS

¹⁸ Thus said the Lord G-D: On the first day of the first month, you shall take a bull of the herd without blemish, and you shall cleanse the Sanctuary.

¹⁹ The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering and apply it to the doorposts of the Temple, to the four corners of the ledge [meaning of Hebrew uncertain] of the altar, and to the doorposts of the gate of the inner court.

²⁰ You shall do the same on the seventh day of the month [in the seventh month] to purge the Temple from uncleanness caused by unwitting or ignorant persons.

Special rites of purgation, to purify the Temple of uncleanness caused by “unwitting or ignorant persons”, are to be performed on the first and seventh day of the first and seventh months of the year. The ritual requires the application of the blood of a sin offering to the doorposts of the Temple, the corners of the altar, and the doorposts of the gate of the inner court.

²¹ On the fourteenth day of the first month you shall have the passover sacrifice; and during a festival of seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten.

So, already Targum Jonathan. The Hebrew formulation (*hag shevu'ot yamim*) is unusual; literally, “a festival of weeks of days”.

²² On that day, the prince shall provide a bull of sin offering on behalf of himself and of the entire population;

²³ and during the seven days of the festival, he shall provide daily—for seven days—seven bulls and seven rams, without blemish, for a burnt offering to the LORD, and one goat daily for a sin offering.

²⁴ He shall provide a meal offering of an *ephah* [of choice flour] for each bull and an *ephah* for each ram, with a *hin* of oil to every *ephah*.

²⁵ So, too, during the festival of the seventh month, for seven days from the fifteenth day on, he shall provide the same sin offerings, burnt offerings, meal offerings, and oil.

The fourteenth day of the first month is the occasion for the Passover offering; following it, fixed daily sacrifices are prescribed for the festival week. A similar cycle of offerings is set for the corresponding third week of the seventh month.

As compared with regulations in the Torah, there are discrepancies in the formulations in this section.

Chapter 46

SACRIFICES AND THE COURT

¹ Thus said the Lord GOD: The gate of the inner court which faces east shall be closed on the six working days; it shall be opened on the sabbath day and it shall be opened on the day of the new moon.

Hebrew *sheshet yemei ha-ma'aseh*. This is a unique biblical expression, but is well-known in Jewish liturgy from its use in the concluding benediction of the final Sabbath ceremony—the Havdalah service.

² The prince shall enter by way of the vestibule outside the gate, and shall attend at the gatepost while the priests sacrifice his burnt offering and his offering of well-being; he shall then bow low at the threshold of the gate and depart. The gate, however, shall not be closed until evening.

³ The common people shall worship before the LORD on sabbaths and new moons at the entrance of the same gate.

That is, those other than the priests, the Levites, and the prince.

⁴ The burnt offering which the prince presents to the LORD on the sabbath day shall consist of six lambs without blemish and one ram without blemish—

⁵ with a meal offering of an *ephah* for the ram, a meal offering of as much as he wishes for the lambs, and a *hin* of oil with every *ephah*.

Hebrew *mattat yado*. This would appear to introduce a voluntary element into the sacrificial gift, otherwise unknown in priestly traditions. Alternatively, “as much as he is able to give”; this is a Deuteronomic expression (Deut. 16:17), functioning like the common priestly usage *ka-'asher tassig yado*, “as much as he can afford”, found in Ezek. 46:7 (cf. Kimḥi).

⁶ And on the day of the new moon, it shall consist of a bull of the herd without blemish, and six lambs and a ram—they shall be without blemish.

⁷ And he shall provide a meal offering of an *ephah* for the bull, an *ephah* for the ram, and as much as he can afford for the lambs, with a *hin* of oil to every *ephah*.

⁸ When the prince enters, he shall come in by way of the vestibule of the gate, and he shall go out the same way.

⁹ But on the fixed occasions, when the common people come before the LORD, whoever enters by the north gate to bow low shall leave by the south gate; and whoever enters by the south gate shall leave by the north gate. They shall not go back through the gate by which they came in, but shall go out by the opposite one.

¹⁰ And as for the prince, he shall enter with them when they enter and leave when they leave.

¹¹ On festivals and fixed occasions, the meal offering shall be an *ephah* for each bull, an *ephah* for each ram, and as much as he wishes for the lambs, with a *hin* of oil for every *ephah*.

¹² The gate that faces east shall also be opened for the prince whenever he offers a freewill offering—be it burnt offering or offering of well-being—freely offered to the LORD, so that he may offer his burnt offering or his offering of well-being just as he does on the sabbath day. Then he shall leave, and the gate shall be closed after he leaves.

¹³ Each day you shall offer a lamb of the first year without blemish, as a daily burnt offering to the LORD; you shall offer one every morning.

¹⁴ And every morning regularly you shall offer a meal offering with it: a sixth of an *ephah*, with a third of a *hin* of oil to moisten the choice flour, as a meal offering to the LORD—a law for all time.

¹⁵ The lamb, the meal offering, and oil shall be presented every morning as a regular burnt offering.

Rules pertaining to the proper movement within the inner court are delineated. The various gates to be used for entrance and exit are indicated, along with rules pertaining to the times these gates are to be open. The people and the prince have different regulations. The contents of the obligations for festivals and fixed occasions are also given.

THE PRINCE AND HIS GIFTS

¹⁶ Thus said the Lord GOD: If the prince makes a gift to any of his sons, it shall become the latter's inheritance; it shall pass on to his sons; it is their holding by inheritance.

¹⁷ But if he makes a gift from his inheritance to any of his subjects, it shall only belong to the latter until the year of release. Then it shall revert to the prince; his inheritance must by all means pass on to his sons.

¹⁸ But the prince shall not take property away from any of the people and rob them of their holdings. Only out of his own holdings shall he endow his sons, in order that My people may not be dispossessed of their holdings.

Rules for gifts of inheritance by the prince are stated: if the gift is to any of his sons, this is an inheritance gift in perpetuity; but if it is to any of his subjects, this shall only be from the time of the gift until the year of release (Lev. 25:10), when it reverts to the prince. The prince, for his part, may not take property away from the people for his personal enrichment or inheritance.

This regulation seeks to curb such monarchic outrages as are feared in 1 Sam. 8:14 and documented in 1 Kings 21 (cf. R Eliezer of Beaugency).

CONTENT AND MEANING

The instructions in this haftarah vary considerably, despite the repeated concern for sacrificial purifications and the focus on the prince and his duties. Stylistically, three of the units (the Temple purification, beginning at Ezek. 45:18; the entrance-exit rule, beginning at 46:1; and the inheritance rules for the prince, beginning at 46:16) open with a prophetic introduction: “Thus said the Lord G-D” (the formula also occurs at 45:9, which formally begins the opening unit). The revelatory character of the rules is thus stressed, and legal style is frequently used (e.g., in 46:12, 16-17). Grammatically, the addressees vary with the shift in subject matter, though in some cases these changes are unexpected (e.g., 45:19-20; 46:12-13, 15).

The revealed nature of the prescriptions gives authority to the regulations but has perplexed traditional commentators, who have noted many contradictions with priestly rules in the Torah. These difficulties (see also the haftarah for Tetzavveh) contributed to an ancient rabbinic decision to withdraw the Book of Ezekiel from public use, but this act was canceled after the heroic exegetical effort of Hananiah ben Hillkiah (first century C.E.). “But for him the Book of Ezekiel would have been withdrawn, for its words contradicted the words of the Torah. What did he do? They brought up for him three hundred measures of oil, and he sat down in an upper chamber and expounded it” (B. Hagigah 13b). His interpretations are “no longer found among us” (said Kimḥi), but the effort saved the day. In other cases, the Rabbis actually quote Ezekiel as an authoritative source on certain matters of ritual law (see B. Mo’ed Katan 5a, citing Ezek. 39:15 and 44:9).

Particularly nettlesome is the account of the purgation of the Temple in the first and seventh months. Nothing like it is mentioned in the Torah. Some commentators have associated these purifications with the altar consecration mentioned in Ezek. 43:18-26 (Rashi; Kimḥi) and judge this rite to be a one-time event like the Tabernacle purification of old (which also occurred on the first day of the first month; see Exod. 40:2). In this way, they tried to resolve any conflict between this ceremony and the rites of purgation on Yom Kippur, ten days after the New Year in the seventh month (Lev. 16:29). Notably, there is no reference to Yom Kippur in Ezekiel’s teaching, nor is there any reference to the festival of Tabernacles, which began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

The cultic traditions found in the haftarah also contradict specific sacrificial regulations found in the Torah. For example, according to Ezek. 45:24, the daily meal offering during the third week of the first and seventh months was to consist of “an *ephah* [ca. one and one-half bushels] for each bull and an *ephah* for each ram, with a *hin* [ca. one and one-half gallons] of oil to every *ephah*”. By contrast, the corresponding meal offering in the Torah is prescribed to be “of choice flour with oil mixed in: prepare three-tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram; and for each of the seven lambs prepare one-tenth of a measure” (Num. 28:20-21; 29: 3-4, 14-15). Such differences indicate that, diverse priestly traditions existed in ancient Israel or mark innovations for the future.

Despite the clear symmetry between the rites of the first and seventh months—purgations on the first and seventh days, and a week of sacrifices beginning on the fifteenth day of the month—special mention is made of the Passover offering required on the fourteenth day of the first month. The distinction between the sacrifice on that day and the week-long festival of unleavened bread agrees with ancient priestly regulations—as recorded in Exod.12:1-20, the additional Torah reading for Shabbat ha-Hodesh. But Ezekiel does not give a precise time for the sacrifice; whereas Exod. 12:6 specifies that the requisite lamb was slaughtered at “twilight” of the fourteenth day.

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Shabbat ha-Hodesh (Ezekiel 45:16–46:18)

Shabbat Ha-Hodesh is the last of the four special Sabbaths prior to Passover. It is typically observed on the last Sabbath of Adar. The Sabbath derives its name from the opening phrase of the passage from Exodus (12:1–20), which supplements the regular parashah: “This month [*ha-hodesh*] shall mark for you the beginning of months” (Exod. 12:2). Both the passage from Exodus and the haftarah were chosen because they anticipate the upcoming celebration of Passover—one from the perspective of the past, one anticipating the messianic future.

I. Theme

The haftarah juxtaposes regulations regarding offerings to be performed in the rebuilt Temple with laws pertaining to the conduct of the prince (*nasi*) in personal and religious matters.

II. Extending the Issues

1. Several of Ezekiel’s statements regarding the laws of the offerings and the purification of the Temple either differ from laws recorded in the Temple or focus on rites not ever mentioned in the Torah. Furthermore, Ezekiel fails to mention fundamental observances such as Yom Kippur. This pattern of absences, additions, and contradictions suggests that either Ezekiel knew a different body of priestly traditions than those preserved in the Torah, or he is providing a vision for laws that will become effective when a new Temple is built, superseding the old laws. What can these differences teach us? Must we try to resolve them? (See the *Commentary*’s overview of the Book of Ezekiel, pp. 546 ff.)

2. The prince embodies dual spheres of family and community, realms in which all religious Jews must balance commitment, time, and devotion. How can we live by this model?

III. Questions for Further Thought

1. What kind of cultural shift, if any, is implied by the Targum’s translation of *nasi* (“prince”) as *rabba* (“learned person”)? How does understanding the figure as either messianic or priestly (see note to Ezek. 45:17) alter the image of Israel’s future leadership?

2. Does putting blood on the doorposts of the Temple resemble the ritual preceding the Exodus? Is a mezuzah similar? Is this a ritual of magic or religion? What is the difference?