Torah and Haftarah Reading for Tisha B'Av and Other Fast Days

From the Etz Hayim Humash
of Egypt, have acted basely. 8 They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

9 The Lord further said to Moses, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. 10 Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.” 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, saying, “Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. 12 Let not the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and an-

8. to turn aside from the way  The text does not say, “from Me” ; the people have adopted pagan modes of worship, but still they worship the God of Israel.

9. I see Divine “seeing” as opposed to Aaron’s “seeing” in verse 5.

stiffnecked A frequent image of obstinacy, derived from the farmer’s experience with work animals. When an animal’s neck is stiff, it is hard for the driver using the reins to turn it in any direction.

10. a great nation The phrase evokes the divine promises made by God to Abraham and is seized on at once by Moses.

11. Moses rejects God’s offer to make his own descendants the sole heirs to the promises made to the patriarchs. This unselfish characteristic is again displayed in verse 32.

12. The effect of the events of the Exodus would now be undone, for the basic objective of the events in Egypt was that the Egyptians might “know” the Lord, i.e., recognize His incomparable nature.

9. a stiffnecked people Ami is quoted in the Midrash, “Is that a criticism? Rather it is to their credit. That stubbornness is what has permitted us to remain Jews” [Exod. R. 42:9]. According to Abraavah, to be stiffnecked means to be unable to turn one’s head and look down the road to see the consequences of one’s actions.

10. let Me be In the words of the Midrash: Who is stopping God—that God must say, “Let Me be”? It seems to be a hint that God wants to be talked out of such fierce anger [Exod. R. 42:9]. This may have encouraged Moses’ intercession on the people’s behalf. A striking midrash pictures God as a wife and Moses as God’s husband [ish ha-’elohim, “the man of God” [Deut. 33:1], understood as “the husband of God”] exercising his right to cancel God’s vow, as a husband in ancient times could annul a vow that had been made by his wife in his hearing; see Num. 30:14 [Exod. R. 43:4]. The Midrash envisages God saying, “Whenever I win an argument with My children, as at the time of the Flood or of Sodom and Gomorrah, I lose” (i.e., God ends up destroying culpable human beings). “Whenever I lose an argument, I win” (as here, when Moses persuades God not to punish Israel) [PR 21].

11. Moses implored The unusual Hebrew verb translated as “implore” (va-y’hal) resembles the verb meaning “to be sick,” which prompted the Midrash to suggest that Moses became physically ill when he realized what the people had done. God then responded, not so much to Moses’ argument as to the strength of his love for and identification with his people [Exod. R. 43:4].

12. Let not the Egyptians say Should God renounce the people now, not only Israel will suffer but God’s reputation, so to speak, would be diminished as well.
nihilate them from the face of the earth. Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.” And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

Thereupon Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, tablets inscribed on both their surfaces: they were inscribed on the one side and on the other. The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing, incised upon the tablets. When Joshua heard the sound of the people in its boisterousness, he said to Moses, “There is a cry of war in the camp.” But he answered,

“It is not the sound of the tune of triumph, Or the sound of the tune of defeat; It is the sound of song that I hear!”

As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became en-

13. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel

14. the Lord renounced

15. hearing the two tablets

16. God’s work... God’s writing

17. Joshua

18. But be answered

19. As Moses approaches the camp and wit-
raged and hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

20 He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it. 21 Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” 22 Aaron said, “Let not my lord be angry. You know that this people is bent on evil. 23 They said to me, ’Make us a god to lead us;’ for that man Moses, who brought us from down from the mountain.’ This implies a single source of water for the entire camp so that, apparently, no individual could escape drinking the mixture. 24 AARON’S APOLOGIA (vv. 21–24)

Moses breaks his silence. The question he puts to Aaron is actually a harsh rebuke.

21 great sin This is a legal term. Found in ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts, it always refers to adultery, suggesting here that the worship of the Golden Calf is an act of gross infidelity.

22–24  Aaron excuses himself by reviling the people and glossing over his involvement in the making of the calf image. He also claims that he did not fashion it, implying divine approval!
the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.' So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off!' They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!'

Moses saw that the people were out of control—since Aaron had let them get out of control—so that they were a menace to any who might oppose them. Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for the Lord, come here!" And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin." The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. And Moses said, "Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day—for each of you has been against son and brother—that He may bestow a blessing upon you today."

The next day Moses said to the people, "You..."  

out came this calf As though it produced itself.

selection of the levites (vv. 25–29)
The destruction of the Golden Calf sparks a riot among its worshipers. The Levites are called in to suppress it and to punish the guilty ones.

25. since Aaron... out of control This is a clear rejection of Aaron’s lame excuse and a condemnation of his action.

26. all the levites Moses' own tribe. They remained faithful to the Covenant and maintained the purity of Israel’s worship. This is the foundation story for the special place of the Levites in Israelite religion.

27. This is indeed a harsh measure, made intelligible by the realization that the idolatry of the calf worshipers very nearly caused God to give up on everyone, ending the Israelite enterprise almost as soon as it had begun. The Midrash recalls that the Levites’ eponymous ancestor, Levi son of Jacob, did something similar when he slaughtered the men of Shechem to avenge the dishonoring of his sister, Dinah; see Gen. 34 [Sifrei Deut. 349]. The tribe of Levi would soon be asked to sublimate its fierce passion in the task of guarding and transporting the portable shrine. Just as the people have to learn not to treat an idol as an embodiment of God, God has to learn not to expect the average person to comprehend a totally abstract, invisible deity. The answer to the quest for a representation is not a Golden Calf but the tabernacle, as discussed in the previous and subsequent parashiyot.

27. Thus says the Lord This solemn formula is employed here to signify that the assignment to the Levites is beyond the right of any human authority to impose. It cannot be taken as a precedent for the disposition of future cases.

slay brother They must be absolutely impartial while carrying out their grim task.

Moses’ second intercession (vv. 30–34)
Moses, through his first intercession with God, secured the annulment of the divine decree to destroy Israel. Now he attempts to gain complete forgiveness for the people.

30. The next day After the carnage...
have been guilty of a great sin. Yet I will now go up to the Lord; perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin." 31 Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold. 32 Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!” 33 But the Lord said to Moses, “He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record. 34 Go now, lead the people where I told you. See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins.”

Then the Lord sent a plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made.

33 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Set out from here, you and the people that you have
got up to the summit of Sinai.
31-32. The prayer blends confession with a plea for pardon. And another element is introduced: Moses ties his personal destiny to his people’s fate. There can hardly be a more impressive example of selfless “love of Israel.”

 erase me from the record. This request seems to reflect a widespread ancient Near Eastern popular belief in the existence of heavenly “books.” Here, Moses’ request is framed in the figurative language of the book of life. He is asking to die if Israel is not forgiven.

33–34. God responds to Moses’ entreaty, demanding individual accountability. In addition, the people as a whole bear collective responsibility. Divine promises of national territory made to the people of Israel are unalterable, but total absolution for the sin of the Golden Calf cannot be given. The Israelites receive a suspended sentence; they are on probation. The punishment, however, will come in due time (see Ezk. 20).

35. This verse belongs after verse 20, where it would indicate that the water ordeal caused the guilty ones to be stricken—the goal of a similar procedure to be followed in the case of a suspected adulteress (Num. 5). The calf worshipers thus would have been readily identifiable to the Levites.

for what they did. This difficult phrase seems to mean that Aaron and the people shared the blame equally; they, for demanding a visible “god”; he, for yielding to them.

MOSES SEeks GOD’S CONTINUED PRESENCE (33:1–23)

Although Moses’ intercession saves the people from annihilation, the Israelites have not yet secured full pardon and reconciliation with God. The unifying theme of this chapter is Moses’ concern for the continued presence of God in the midst of His people, as symbolized by the mobile sanctuary.

WITHDRAWAL OF THE DIVINE PRESENCE (vv. 1–6)

Implementation of the punishment decreed in 32:10 has been suspended, only because of God’s promise to the patriarchs (32:13), not because of the people’s merit.

1. Set out. Hebrew: lekh alei; literally “go, ascend.” This is in contrast to 32:7, lekh rosh, “go,
brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring will I give it’—21 will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go in your midst, since you are a stiffnecked people, lest I destroy you on the way.”

4When the people heard this harsh word, they went into mourning, and none put on his finery.

5The Lord said to Moses, “Say to the Israelite people, ‘You are a stiffnecked people. If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now, then, leave off your finery, and I will consider what to do to you.’” So the Israelites remained stripped of the finery from Mount Horeb on.

7Now Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the Tent of Meeting, and descend,” signifying that there has been a reversal of fate.

you Moses’ request in the last part of 32:32 is emphatically denied.

the people: It is no longer “your people” as God said to Moses in 32:7. The shift connotes some softening of the effect of Israel’s alienation from God.

2. an angel: The promise of 23:20–33 and 32:34 is repeated, but here the emissary is not designated “My” angel. The change is ominous.

3. I will not go...lest I destroy you: Paradoxically, God’s withdrawal of His Presence is a merciful measure; it is intended to avert the inevitable destructive consequences of another episode such as that of the Golden Calf.

4. This decision has a shattering effect on the people, for it was the absence of a representation of God’s immanence that had provoked the demand for a material image in the first place.

5. leave off: The people have already done this. Hence, it is best to invert the order of verses 4–5, taking verse 4 as the response to the divine command.

6. from Mount Horeb on: From that time on, throughout the wilderness wanderings. It is a sign of the people’s remorse over their transgression. See Comment to 3:1.

Moses’ Exceptional Status (vv. 7–11)

This section continues the theme of God’s presence and connects with verse 3. Because God withholds His indwelling in the camp of Israel, Moses employs an extraordinary stratagem. He pitches “the Tent” outside the camp. This is not the tabernacle—which has not yet been constructed—but a private tent where he might commune with God.

7. the Tent: The definite article seems to indicate a well-known, specific tent, although one has not yet been mentioned. Apparently, it was the site of Moses’ previous dialogues with God. It is possible that there were two different traditions regarding a “tent,” with the tabernacle in the heart of the camp serving as a shrine for sacrifices, without speech, and the Tent outside serving as a place for inquiring of God.

outside the camp, at some distance: The description draws attention to the Israelites’ alienation from God. The camp has become polluted spiritually through the impurity brought on by the episode of the Golden Calf.
whenever sought the LORD would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the Tent, all the people would rise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he had entered the Tent. And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while He spoke with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of the Tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. And he would then return to the camp; but his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth, would not stir out of the Tent.

Moses said to the LORD, “See, You say to me, ‘Lead this people forward,’ but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. Further, You have said, ‘I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.’ Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and walk in Your ways. Con-

9. at the entrance of the Tent: Not inside the tabernacle, where the divine Presence is said to rest continuously and where God converses with Moses from within the Holy of Holies. The place of communication here is at the entrance, where God’s self-manifestation is intermittent.

11. face to face: The same expression is used in Deut. 34:10, whereas in Num. 12:6-8 it is said that God communicated with Moses “mouth to mouth.” This figurative language is intended to convey the pre-eminence and uniqueness of Moses as a prophetic figure who experiences a special mode of revelation. His experience is personal and direct, not mediated through visions or dreams, and the message always is plain and straightforward, free of cryptic utterances.

Joshua: He remained inside the tent and did not share in Moses’ direct experience with God.

DIALOGUE WITH GOD (vv. 12-23)

This section depicts how Moses and God engage in the intimate talk mentioned in verse 11.

12. Moses now reverts to the subject matter of 32:34 and 33:1-3—the order to proceed to the Promised Land without the tabernacle, the token of God’s immediate presence in the camp of Israel. He complains that the aforementioned “angel” is unidentified. Is it to be human or celestial? Is God’s name to “be in him,” as is promised in 23:21, or not?

I have singled you out by name: Literally, “I know you by name...” This Hebrew idiom, with God as the subject, is applied to no one else in the Bible. It signifies a close, exclusive, and unique association with God.

13. let me know Your ways: Moses asks for comprehension, of God’s essential being—the attributes that guide His actions in dealing with humankind, the norms by which He operates in His governance of the world. “Ways” here is a play on the literal and the figurative meanings of Hebrew word derekh; it means both the right path through the wilderness and also God’s way of acting. His nature.
sider, too, that this nation is Your people.”
14And He said, “I will go in the lead and will
lighten your burden.” 15And he said to Him,
“Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave
this place. 16For how shall it be known that Your
people have gained Your favor unless You go
with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your
people and I, from every people on the face of the
earth?”
17And the Lord said to Moses, “I will also do
this thing that you have asked; for you have truly
gained My favor and I have singled you out by
name.” 18He said, “Oh, let me behold Your Pres-
ence!” 19And He answered, “I will make all My
goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim
before you the name Lord, and the grace that
I grant and the compassion that I show.” 20But,
He said, “you cannot see My face, for man may
tant concepts in biblical theology. See Comment
to 16:7. Here Moses is pleading for an exclusively
individual experience, one close at hand and im-
mediate, as a response to his personal request there
and then.
19. all My goodness  This refers to the com-
passionate attributes that God reveals in dealing
with His creatures (see 34:6–7).
proclaim . . . the name Lord  This name is
YHVH; see Comment to 3:14. This clause par-
allels the immediately preceding one—“I will
make all My goodness pass before you.” It re-
confirms God’s intention of voluntarily disclosing
to Moses His defining characteristics. This is ful-
filled in 34:5–7.
20. all My goodness pass before you  We en-
counter the reality of God when we experience
goodness in the world, from the
gift of life itself to the discovery of the capacity
to do good in our own souls, and the love and
generosity of people around us whom God has
inspired to do good.
20–23. What does it mean that a human be-
ing cannot see God’s face—but can see God’s
back? In the words of the Hatam Sofer, we can-
not see Me and live.” 21 And the LORD said, “See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock 22 and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

34 The LORD said to Moses: “Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered. 2 Be ready by morning, and in the morning come up to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to Me, on the top of the mountain. 3 No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen chiding Moses, cannot directly and closely observe God.

21. on the rock At the top of Mount Sinai (see 34:2). For a similar scene, see 1 Kings 19.

22. My Presence passes by Rashbam notes that God’s action is characteristic of covenant making, as in Gen. 15:17 and Jer. 34:18,19. The manifestation of God here would then be a ceremony that signals renewal of the Covenant.

23. My back This daring human image for God, contrasted with the usual biblical term panim, “face, presence,” refers to the traces of the divine Presence, the afterglow of His supernatural radiance.

must not be seen No human being can ever penetrate the ultimate mystery of God’s Being. Only a glimpse of the divine reality is possible, even for Moses.

RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT (34:1–35)

PREPARATORY MEASURES (vv. 1–3)

Moses, assured that God will manifest His Presence privately to him, is instructed to prepare for the experience, which actually initiates the reinstatement of the Covenant.

not see God directly. We can only see the difference that God has made after the fact. We can recognize God’s reality by seeing the difference God has made in people’s lives.

CHAPTER 34

1. The first set of tablets was fashioned by God alone. Moses passively received them. The second set will be a joint divine–human effort [Y. Nissimbaum]. This second set was written with a greater knowledge of human weakness, at the hand of an imperfect human being, rather than by a perfect deity. Heschel taught that God revealed the Torah to Moses in all its fullness, and Moses, a finite human being, wrote down what he could comprehend. The Talmud tells us that the fragments of the first set of tablets were carried in the Ark along with the replacement set [BT Ber. 5b]. That which was once holy retains its holiness even when it is broken. So too the elderly, the senile, and the infirm may not be cast aside. They must be accorded the reverence they have earned in their lives.

1. Carve God had given the first set to Moses.

words They are identified as the Decalogue in verse 28.

3. No one else This time Aaron is excluded, because of his role in the episode of the Golden Calf.
anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain."

4 So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. The LORD came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed: "The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."

GOD'S SELF-DISCLOSURE (vv. 4–9)

5. stood . . . proclaimed The text is ambiguous. The subject of the two verbs may be either Moses, as verses 2 and 33:21 indicate, or God, as the first clause and 33:19 would suggest. Or perhaps the first verb is governed by Moses and the second by God.

THE DIVINE RESPONSE (vv. 6–7)

These verses are the divine response to Moses' two requests—that he "know" God's ways (33:13) and that he "behold" God's Presence (33:18). God's mysterious passing before Moses answers to the second; the recital of the divine attributes, to the first. God's self-disclosure is confined to a proclamation of His moral qualities. To "know" them is to achieve a higher conception of Deity.

6. The LORD! the LORD! The Hebrew text also allows the first YHWH to be taken as the subject of the antecedent verb; thus "And the LORD proclaimed."

6–7. These two verses contain a passage recited and chanted on the High Holy Days and the Festivals. This summary of God's compassionate qualities is known as the "Thirteen Attributes of God" or the "Covenant of the Thirteen" (b'rît š'lish esreit).

visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children Bothered by the apparent unfairness of the text, a Hasidic interpretation takes it to mean that God holds parents responsible for not giving their children a proper religious and moral upbringing. We recognize the unfairness of such punishment, yet it is true that the bad habits of parents are often repeated by their children, for whom parents are the primary role models.
Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, “If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own.”

He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will work such wonders as have not been wrought on all the earth or in any nation; and all the people who are with you shall see how awesome are the Lord's deeds which I will perform for you. Mark well what I command you this day. I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Beware of making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land against which you are advancing, lest they be a snare in your midst. No, you must tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their sacred posts; for you must not worship any other god, because the Lord, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned

9. Moses emphasizes God’s merciful qualities in asking that the punishment in 33:3 be set aside. even though Allow for human frailty.

INAUTHENTIC AND AUTHENTIC WORSHIP (vv. 10–26)

This section concentrates on two fundamental issues that flow directly from the people’s sin: false modes of worship (vv. 10–17) and the legitimate festivals and ritual obligations to God (vv. 18–26).

APOSTASY (vv. 10–17)

Mindful of the act of apostasy, the renewed covenant contains stricter admonitions than those given before (23:23, 24) regarding the inroads of foreign forms of worship into the religion of Israel. If the people Israel is to be “distinguished . . . from every people on the face of the earth” (33:16), they must make themselves unique by exclusive loyalty to their covenantal relationship with God.

13. sacred posts Hebrew: asherim (singular asherah); pagan objects of worship often mentioned in the Bible. These wooden poles derive their name from the Canaanite fertility goddess Asherah, whom they symbolized.

14. any other god This Hebrew phrase in the singular—el aher—appears nowhere else in the

The Decalogue proclaims universal laws applicable to all humanity. This supplementary covenant deals with the specific rituals of the Israelite people. Our calendar and our kitchens would keep the Jewish people distinctive.

13. Why this troubling emphasis on destroying the holy places of the Canaanites and shunning their sacrificial occasions? The

Israelites were a young, impressionable nation, and the Torah is concerned that the highly sexualized, orgiastic fertility cult of the Canaanites would be irresistibly seductive for them (as the incident of Baal-peor in Num. 25 attests). Even decent people can be vulnerable to sexual temptation, which is why the Torah speaks out in such extreme, uncompromising terms against the Canaanite cult.
allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; 20 but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case.

21 Now the Lord was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan and enter the good land that the Lord your God is assigning you as a heritage. 22 For I must die in this land; I shall not cross the Jordan. But you will cross and take possession of that good land. 23 Take care, then, not to forget the covenant that the Lord your God concluded with you, and not to make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, against which the Lord your God has enjoined you. 24 For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God.

25 When you have begotten children and children’s children and are long established in the land, should you act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, causing the Lord your God displeasure and vexation, 26 I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish

20. iron blast furnace A metaphor for the severity of the Egyptian bondage (iron was smelted in ancient times at a temperature of about 2000°F).

His very own people Literally, “a people that is His inheritance.” The Hebrew word for “inheritance” (nâhâlâh) expresses not only God’s sovereignty over the Israelites but also His attachment to them. Inherited land was precious because it was received from one’s ancestors and passed on to one’s descendants; it was regarded as inalienable.

24. consuming fire God’s fiery destructive power had struck the Exodus generation several times.

21. on your account Is Moses taking out his frustrations on the people, blaming them, for his own mistakes? It would be a very human thing to do, however unjustified in a leader.

25. long established Biblical Hebrew has two words for “old”: zaken, which is the opposite of “young”; and yâshan (used here with the connotation of growing stale), which is the opposite of “fresh” [Hirsch].
from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out. 27 The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a scant few of you shall be left among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. 28 There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone; that cannot see or hear or eat or smell.

But if you search there for the Lord your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul— when you are in distress because all these things have befallen you and, in the end, return to the Lord your God and obey Him. 31 For the Lord your God is a compassionate God: He will not fail you nor will He let you perish; He will not forget 32:36, 64, 29:16). Polytheism held that special ceremonies impeded to the statues all the powers that this verse denies them: sight, hearing, eating, smelling. The more educated idolaters certainly did not believe that the statue actually was the deity but that the god was absent from the statue before the special ceremony and might abandon it at will. The distinction between statue and deity, however, was easily overlooked, and many idolaters sometimes considered images to be the deity or fetishes possessing powers of their own.

30 in the end That is, after this. The Hebrew word for “return” (shuv) is a root word from which the term for “repentance” (shuvah) is derived.

31 compassionate God The Lord is not only impassioned (v. 24), but also compassionate. These are two aspects of God’s personality in the Bible: He both punishes and forgives.

nor will He let you perish; He will not forget the covenant God’s actions are thus contrasted with those of the Israelites. God will not act as they acted.

27. only a scant few of you shall be left Indeed in Jewish history, whenever disaster has befallen a major Jewish community, a saving remnant has survived to carry on.

28. There you will serve man-made gods Losing their relationship with God and attaching themselves to false gods who cannot see or hear (as contrast to God who saw their plight and heard their cry in Egypt) will not be just their sin but also their punishment. Abravanel, who lived at the time of the Inquisition and the expulsion from Spain, applied this verse to the Marranos of his time: “Many Jews will be brought to forced conversion, worshiping idols but knowing full well that they are made of wood and stone. Unable to practice the observance of Judaism, their seeking of God will be in their hearts and minds alone” (v. 29).
the covenant which He made on oath with your fathers.

32. You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you; ever since God created man on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have, and survived? Or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty hand and outstretched arm and awesome power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? It has been clearly demonstrated to you that the Lord alone is God; there is none beside Him. From the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; on earth He let you see His great fire; and from amidst that fire you heard His words. And because He loved your fathers, He chose their heirs after them; He Himself, in His great

BASED ON MONOTHEISM (vv. 32–40)

Following the warning of exile, Moses concludes with a final appeal to observe the commandments so that the Israelites may prosper and remain in the Land forever.

32. ever since God created man on earth As far back as human memory goes.

from one end of heaven to the other That is, from one end of earth to another. Heaven was pictured as a dome standing atop pillars situated at the ends of the earth.

33. A direct, visual encounter with God was thought to be too awesome to endure. This passage and 5:21–23 imply that hearing God was regarded as equally dangerous.

34. take . . . one nation from the midst of another This is the most telling point of Moses’ argument: The Lord took Israel out of Egypt, thereby showing the powerlessness of the gods of Egypt and that the Lord is the only true God (see Exod. 12:12).

by prodigious acts The signs Moses and Aaron performed before Pharaoh, including the Ten Plagues and the defeat of Egypt at the Sea of Reeds.

35. The events just described, witnessed by the entire nation, established that the Lord alone is God. This demonstration goes beyond the practical concern of the 2nd commandment, which prohibits worshiping other gods. Here Moses states clearly that there are no others.

36. Deuteronomy never describes God as descending to earth or as dwelling in the sanctuary. Unlike the previous books of the Torah, it avoids allusions to the physical or human nature of God. Divine transcendence is central to Deuteronomy.

37. He Himself Literally, “with His face.”

35. Because this verse refers to the revelation at Mount Sinai, it is the first in a collection of verses recited when the Torah scrolls are taken from the Ark on Simhat Torah, among Ashk’nazim. Among S’fardim, it is recited every Shabbat at that point in the service.
might led you out of Egypt, 38 to drive from your path nations greater and more populous than you, to take you into their land and assign it to you as a heritage, as is still the case. 39 Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. 40 Observe His laws and commandments, which I enjoin upon you this day, that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you for all time.

41 Then Moses set aside three cities on the east side of the Jordan 42 to which a manslayer could escape, one who unwittingly slew a fellow man without having been hostile to him in the past; he could flee to one of these cities and live: 43 Bezer, in the wilderness of the Tabernacle, belonging to the Reubenites; Ramoth, in Gilead, belonging to the Gadites; and Golan, in Bashan, belonging to the Manassites.

44 This is the Teaching that Moses set before the Israelites: 45 these are the decrees, laws, and a narrative appendix, relating that Moses designated three cities in Transjordan to provide asylum for accidental manslayers. The law establishing these cities appears in 19:1–13. (19:3–5 is abridged here) and Num. 35:9–34. According to Num. 35:14, six such cities were to be chosen, three of them in Transjordan.

AI. Then This could refer to any time after the conquest of Transjordan, which took place shortly before Moses’ address. It is possible that Moses selected the cities after the actions described in 3:18–29. Because verses 41–43 are by the narrator, and not Moses, they were placed here to avoid interrupting his address.

43. The cities are listed in order from south to north.

Bezer In Moab.
in Gilead That is, upper Gilead.

44 Why was the institution of cities of refuge so important to Moses? Because he himself was once a manslayer (Exod. 2:11–15) and had to flee (Deut. R. 2:27).
In this haftarah of doom and destruction, the terror to come is first announced and then envisioned in a cluster of powerful images (Jer. 8:13–17, 9:7–9, 20–21). The calamities will be the result of deceit and dishonesty at the level of human relations in society (9:1–5), and the rejection of the Torah and proper worship at the level of religious practice (9:11–15). The prophet himself laments the horror to come, and women who know dirges are invited to bewail the onset of doom (see 8:18, 21, 9:16–21). The concluding teaching counsels proper conduct (9:22–23), although such behavior cannot diminish or prevent the severity of the predicted doom. The counsel of earnest devotion and proper behavior stands as a counterpart to the perversion of morality and of divine service, which have been denounced (9:1–5, 11–15).

RELATION OF THE HAFARAH TO THE CALENDAR

This prophetic reading’s account of national doom due to sin links it to the themes of the Tishah b’Av fast day, which recalls the destruction of the Temple. The prophet’s call for public wailers to recite words of mourning for the people and the Land evokes the central ritual of this day of sorrow—the public recitation of lamentations over Zion and Jerusalem.

The haftarah is dominated by rapidly alternating voices and perspectives: The divine voice (8:13,17), the voice of Jeremiah (8:18, 21,23), and the voice of the people (8:14,15). Verbal repetition adds another dimension to the haftarah. Thus, the fourfold repetition of “dirge” (nḥî or nēḥî) or the eightfold use of “nothing,” “not” (eîn or anîn) add to the dominant mood of desolation and despair.

Hebrew puns create unexpected connections between the units. Particularly notable is the network created by the phrases asof asifem (I will make an end of them, 8:13) and ve’în m’asef (and none to pick them up, 9:21). These phrases at the beginning and near the end of the haftarah enclose it in a framework of desolation. Also effective is the pun linking the words kînah (wailing) and mîkneh (cattle) in 9:9, which creates a striking relationship between the form of lament and the object of loss.

8

13 I will make an end of them—declares the Lord:
No grapes left on the vine,
No figs on the fig tree,
The leaves all withered;
Whatever I have given them is gone.

14 Why are we sitting by?
Let us gather into the fortified cities,
And meet our doom there.
For the LORD our God has doomed us,
He has made us drink a bitter draft;
Because we sinned against the LORD.

15 We hoped for good fortune, but no happiness came;
For a time of relief—instead there is terror!

16 The snorting of their horses was heard from Dan;
At the loud neighing of their steeds
The whole land quaked.
They came and devoured the land and what was in it,
The towns and those who dwelt in them.

17 Lo, I will send serpents against you,
Adders that cannot be charmed,
And they shall bite you
—declares the LORD.

18 When in grief I would seek comfort,
My heart is sick within me.

19 “Is not the LORD in Zion?
Is not her King within her?
Why then did they anger Me with their images,
With alien futilities?”

Hark! The outcry of my poor people
From the land far and wide:

20 Harvest is past,
Summer is gone,
But we have not been saved.”

Jeremiah 8:14. Because we sinned against the LORD
Evolves the confessional form hatanu, “We have sinned.”
19. Many commentators have understood the first two questions in this verse to be challenges spoken by Israel. They elicit God’s response (“Why then did they anger Me?”). Other commentators understand all three questions as spoken by God. It is a feature of the triple rhetorical question to create a graded intensification, in which the first two queries imply a negative response. This sets up the challenging and judgmental question at the end.
Because my people is shattered I am shattered;
I am dejected, seized by desolation.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Can no physician be found?
Why has healing not yet
Come to my poor people?
Oh, that my head were water,
My eyes a fount of tears!
Then would I weep day and night
For the slain of my poor people.

Oh, to be in the desert,
At an encampment for wayfarers!
Oh, to leave my people,
To go away from them—
For they are all adulterers,
A band of rogues.

They bend their tongues like bows;
They are valorous in the land
For treachery, not for honesty;
They advance from evil to evil.
And they do not heed Me
—declares the LORD.

Beware, every man of his friend!
Trust not even a brother!
For every brother takes advantage,
Every friend is base in his dealings.
One man cheats the other,
They will not speak truth;

Jeremiah 9:1–5. This passage exemplifies the reuse of patriarchal themes in prophecy. Here the Jacob cycle is deftly alluded to by a play on the name “Jacob” (Ya-akov): “For every brother [ab] has come in deceit [mirmah]. . . . Therefore is he called Jacob [Ya-akov] because he has deceived me [va-yahaveinei] twice.” The noun mirmah occurs in Jer. 9:5.

2. They bend their tongues like bows. Their arrows are the false and bitter words they speak (Radak). See also verse 7.
They have trained their tongues to speak falsely;
They wear themselves out working iniquity.
5You dwell in the midst of deceit.
In their deceit, they refuse to heed Me
—declares the LORD.

6Assuredly, thus said the LORD of Hosts:
Lo, I shall smelt and assay them—
For what else can I do because of My poor people?
7Their tongue is a sharpened arrow,
They use their mouths to deceive.
One speaks to his fellow in friendship,
But lays an ambush for him in his heart.
8Shall I not punish them for such deeds?
—says the LORD—
Shall I not bring retribution
On such a nation as this?

9For the mountains I take up weeping and wailing,
For the pastures in the wilderness, a dirge.
They are laid waste; no man passes through,
And no sound of cattle is heard.
Birds of the sky and beasts as well
Have fled and are gone.

10I will turn Jerusalem into rubble,
Into dens for jackals;
And I will make the towns of Judah
A desolation without inhabitants.

11What man is so wise
That he understands this?
To whom has the LORD’s mouth spoken,
So that he can explain it:
Why is the land in ruins,
Laid waste like a wilderness,
With none passing through?
12 The Lord replied: Because they forsook the Teaching I had set before them. They did not obey Me and they did not follow it, but followed their own willful heart and followed the Baalim, as their fathers had taught them. Assuredly, thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to feed that people wormwood and make them drink a bitter draught. I will scatter them among nations which they and their fathers never knew; and I will dispatch the sword after them until I have consumed them.

16 Thus said the Lord of Hosts:
Listen!
Summon the dirge-singers, let them come;
Send for the skilled women, let them come.
Let them quickly start a wailing for us,
That our eyes may run with tears,
Our pupils flow with water.

18 For the sound of wailing
Is heard from Zion:
How we are despoiled!
How greatly we are shamed!
Ah, we must leave our land,
Abandon our dwellings!

19 Hear, O women, the word of the Lord,
Let your ears receive the word of His mouth,
And teach your daughters wailing,
And one another lamentation.
20 For death has climbed through our windows,
Has entered our fortresses,
To cut off babes from the streets,
Young men from the squares.
21. Speak thus—says the Lord:
The carcasses of men shall lie
Like dung upon the fields,
Like sheaves behind the reaper,
With none to pick them up.

22. Thus said the Lord:
Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom;
Let not the strong man glory in his strength;
Let not the rich man glory in his riches.

23. But only in this should one glory:
In his earnest devotion to Me.
For I the Lord act with kindness,
Justice, and equity in the world;
For in these I delight
—declares the Lord.

23. kindness, justice, and equity Hebrew: hessed, mishpat, and 'issuk. The last pair of terms recurs frequently in the Bible as both a human and a divine ideal (see, e.g., Gen. 18:19). The triad of elements is also found elsewhere, both for God (Ps. 33:5, 89:15) and for mortals (Isa. 16:5). This verse links these divine attributes—and knowledge of God—with the covenant ideal (see also Hos. 2:21; Guide III:53). The haftarah thus ends with a summary of covenantal virtues that serves as a counterpoint to the moral and religious sins denounced earlier (9:1–5, 11–15).
Words of admonition, exhortation, and comfort form this haftarah. They were spoken in the Babylonian exile sometime around 538 B.C.E. At that time, Cyrus the Mede conquered Babylon and decreed that his foreign subjects, including the Judeans, could return to their native lands and practices. Isaiah urges the Judeans to repent of their evil ways and plans (Isa. 55:6–7), and to do what is right and just, before their approaching deliverance from exile (55:12–13, 56:1). They should take comfort in the merciful and forgiving nature of God (55:7), whose promise of salvation is ensured (55:10–11). Eunuchs and foreigners who have attached themselves to God and the Covenant also receive words of comfort, allaying their fears of rejection. They are promised a place among the future worshipers in Zion if they remain observant (56:3–8).

Divine grace and loving kindness are characteristic of this haftarah. God’s care embraces everyone—native and alien alike—who turns to God and observes His commandments. Repenting sinners especially may take heart in God’s forgiveness, which is grounded in His utterly transcendent nature (55:8).

There are several types of prophetic discourse in this haftarah. The first is a direct call for repentance (55:6–7). To allay any concern that a full pardon might not necessarily follow repentance, God reinforces the assertion of His transcendent “plans” and “ways” by an analogy. Divine “ways” are said to go beyond those of mortals as the heavens are high above the earth. God’s ways of mercy are not only beyond scrutiny and expectation but also utterly beyond the grasp and understanding of human beings.

The second important type of prophetic speech here is the prophetic prediction and the assertion of its infallibility. The prophet articulates a new analogy, comparing God’s event-begotting word with rain that descends from above to fertilize the seeds of vegetation. Just as this rain falls and does not return to heaven, so will God’s prophetic “word that issues from My mouth...not come back to Me unfulfilled” (55:10–11).

The third type of prophetic discourse is the instructional exhortation, which appears in two forms. The first form is a brief statement of proper action at the beginning of Isa. 56. “Observe what is right and do what is just” (literally, “observe justice [mishpat], do righteousness [tsidkati]”). This call condenses the moral duties required of the nation, using the terms often employed in the Bible to characterize proper covenantal behavior. The second form elaborates on the initial call to “observe [shimru] justice” (Isa. 56:1) by proclaiming the happiness that accrues to one who observes or “keeps [shomer] the sabbath,” and who “stays [shomer] his hand from doing any evil” (56:2). One might even state that the two phrases characterize the Decalogue. Observing Shabbat is the first positive ritual commandment there, and staying one’s hand from evil applies to all the interpersonal prohibitions in the Decalogue.

Observing Shabbat and holding fast to the Covenant constitute the two conditions required of the foreigners and the eunuchs who would receive the benefits of inclusion in God’s Temple (56:4, 6). These benefits are declared in the fourth type of prophetic discourse found in this reading: the authorization of innovation (56:4–8). That foreigners could take part in the sacrificial service was unprecedented. It was a universalist proclamation of sorts, erasing the distinction between native and outsider in lay worship. The promise that the eunuchs would have a place in the House of God gives yet another expression to the prophet’s inclusionist temper.

The diverse discourses of the haftarah are bound together by theme words. The verb shma indicates not only the “turn” to God in repentance but also the “return” of rain and of the pro-
Seek the LORD while He can be found, Call to Him while He is near.
7Let the wicked give up his ways, The sinful man his plans; Let him turn back to the LORD, And He will pardon him; To our God, For He freely forgives.
8For My plans are not your plans, Nor are My ways your ways—declares the LORD.
9But as the heavens are high above the earth, So are My ways high above your ways And My plans above your plans.
10For as the rain or snow drops from heaven

Isaiah 55:6. Seek the LORD while He can be found. The phrasing echoes the Torah; Moses, anticipating a time of exile, told the people that “if you search there for the LORD your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul...” (Deut. 4:29–30). God’s compassion is stressed there (Deut. 4:31), as here.

Call. This imperative is either synonymous with “seek,” in the first clause, or it introduces a separate act of penitential prayer.

while He is near. The quality of divine closeness to those who call is presented as a distinguishing characteristic of Israel’s God in Deut. 4:7.

8. My ways. In the Torah, after the people sinned with the Golden Calf, Moses asked to be shown God’s “ways”; he received the revelation of God’s 13 attributes of mercy (Exod. 34:6–7). Centuries later, when Ezekiel taught God’s readiness to forgive the penitent, the exiles responded with wonder and doubt at God’s incomprehensible “way” (Ezek. 18:25,29); they assumed that iniquity had to be punished. Here, too, it appears that the people need to be convinced that God will forgive those who turn from evil. But God's
And returns not there,
But soaks the earth
And makes it bring forth vegetation,
Yielding seed for sowing and bread for eating,

11 So is the word that issues from My mouth:
It does not come back to Me unfulfilled,
But performs what I purpose,
Achieves what I sent it to do.

12 Yea, you shall leave in joy and be led home secure.
Before you, mount and hill shall shout aloud,
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13 Instead of the brier, a cypress shall rise;
Instead of the nettle, a myrtle shall rise.
These shall stand as a testimony to the LORD,
As an everlasting sign that shall not perish.

56 Thus said the LORD:
Observe what is right and do what is just;
For soon My salvation shall come,
And My deliverance be revealed.

2 Happy is the man who does this,
The man who holds fast to it:
Who keeps the sabbath and does not profane it,
And stays his hand from doing any evil.

3 Let not the foreigner say,
Who has attached himself to the LORD,
ways are those of compassion and of openness to repentance.

11. This idiom for the prophetic word is rooted in prophetic traditions about the effectiveness of divine predictions (see 1 Sam. 9:6; cf. 2 Kings 10:10).

Come back Hebrew: yashu, which plays on v'yashav ("Let him turn back") in verse 7.

13. A testimony Hebrew: shem; "a name" that is an "everlasting sign that shall not perish [lo yikkare]." Compare 56:5 below, where the eunuchs who observe the covenant will have a "name" (shem) in the Temple—"an everlasting name [shem] that shall not perish [lo yikkare]."

Isaiah 56:1. Do what is just The call to morally righteous behavior is a hallmark of biblical prophecy.

2. Who keeps the sabbath... And stays his hand This instruction epitomizes the ritual law and the moral law, the duties to God and to other human beings.

3. Who has attached himself Hebrew:
ha-niluah, a late technical designation for foreigners who join the community of Israel (see Zech. 2:15; Esther 9:27).

5. A monument and a name Hebrew: yad va-shem. This phrase seems to indicate a special place (Ibn Ezra; cf. Deut. 23:13), monument (cf. 1 Sam. 15:12), or Temple role that would compensate the pious eunuchs for their lack of progeny (cf. 2 Sam. 18:18). Nearly 2500 years later, it was adopted by the State of Israel as the name of its Holocaust memorial site, in Jerusalem.

7. house of prayer A new designation for the Temple. Its role as a place of prayer for everyone was spelled out by King Solomon in his prayer inaugurating the Temple (1 Kings 8:41–42). In Isaiah, foreigners who join the Israelite covenant and observe its duties are promised participation in the sacrificial service, making them equal in all respects to the native Israelites (Radak). This is a bold example of prophetic universalism; authorized by God. All may join the Covenant—and may worship with full rights.