

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: PROPHETS and the NEW YEAR'S CALL

The annual reading cycle links a passage from the Prophets with weekly Torah portions and holiday readings. For most of the year, the "*haftarah*" (sounds a bit like "half Torah," but the words are not related; plural: "*haftorot*") relate to a theme in the Torah portion. Ten weeks before the new year, *haftorot* have their own separate arc.

Three weeks leading up to Tisha B'av (7/26 this year), "afflict" us, criticizing our failings. After that, seven *haftorot* of comfort offer hope and remind us that change is possible. Together they suggest a journey toward change for the new year.

NOTE: Although traditions vary, these are common readings for seven *haftorot* of comfort.

Portion Name	Torah verses.	Prophetic reading.	Shabbat date for 2023 reading
<i>Ve'etchanan</i> ("I pleaded").	Devarim 3:23 - 7:11.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 40:1-26.	Shabbat, July 29.
<i>Eikev</i> ("If you follow").	Devarim 7:12 - 11:25.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 49:14-51:3.	Shabbat, Aug 3.
<i>Re'eh</i> ("See").	Devarim 11:26 - 16:7.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:11-55:5.	Shabbat, Aug 12.
<i>Shoftim</i> ("Judges").	Devarim 16:18 - 21:9.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 51:12-52:12	Shabbat, Aug 19.
<i>Ki Teitzei</i> ("When you go out").	Devarim 21:10 - 25:19.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:1-10	Shabbat, Aug 26.
<i>Ki Tavo</i> ("When you come").	Devarim 26:1-29:8.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 60:1-22.	Shabbat, Sep 2.
<i>Nitzavim</i> ("Standing").	Devarim 29:9-30:20.	Double portion with <i>Vayeilech</i> this year.	
<i>Vayeilech</i> ("He went").	Devarim 31:1-30.	HAFTARAH: Isaiah 61:10-63:9.	Shabbat, Sep. 9.

(1) Isaiah 40:4

Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.*
Make the crooked** ground level
And the ridges become a plain.

*If a haughty person repents, if they're willing to be "low," God will raise that person back up. (B. Talmud Eruvin 54a)

**Conditions of "crooked ground," like exile, can be obstacles to observing Judaism. This might mean "extra credit" for extra effort. Others look forward to the day when living their faith will be easier for all. (based on *Kedushat Levi*, 18th Century Ukraine)

(5) Isaiah 54:9-10

For this to Me is like the waters of Noah:
As I swore that the waters of Noah
Nevermore would flood the earth....

For the mountains may move
And the hills be shaken,
But my loyalty shall never move from you,
Nor My covenant of friendship be shaken
— said GOD, who takes you back in love

COVENANT OF FRIENDSHIP

"The 7 Noahide Commands" (p.8) focus our attention on some very basic ideas about acting "human." They also remind us of how easily humans mess up. Still, we are also promised: "GOD takes you back in love."

Isaiah 54:1-10, with its "covenant of friendship," appears as a *haftarah* twice/year: Once, with the Noah story, early in the new year. It repeats, here, as the year is ending. Why the repetition? Do we need reminding? Does God?

(7) Isaiah 62:10

Pass through,*
pass through the gates!
Clear the road for the people;
Build up, build up the highway,
Remove the rocks!**
Raise a banner over the peoples!

*The word "pass through" -- "*ivru*" -- is related to the word for "Hebrews," the people who "crossed over." This brings us back to Brown's note: "Part of the process of becoming a Jew was to take a journey" (see p.5). Maybe part of the process of preparing to cross over into the new year is to take a journey toward becoming more thoroughly the Jews we want to be.

**The Aramaic translation says this is good news for those who "remove evil thoughts," which are "like a stone of stumbling."

"The 7 Noahide Commands with Some Sources"

Adapted by V. Spatz from a piece by Aharon Varady on The Open Siddur

Early Jewish sources speak of commandments, or *mitzvot*, for all of humanity, not just Jews. These *mitzvot* are related to the story of the Flood (Genesis 6-9), so they are often called "The (Seven) Noahide Commands." There are several different lists of commands in the ancient sources. One strong theme in all of them is protecting consent and avoiding violence. They warn us against the horrors people can do in our conquest of each other and the non-human world.

Studying these commands can remind us all of the need to address perversion of justice in society around us and to support those experiencing the harshest consequences.

Aharon Varady prepared "The 7 Noahide Commands" for The Open Siddur Project. He notes that there is a tradition of reading moral documents, including the Ten Commandments, after morning prayers. Aharon suggests a similar practice for these Noahide Commands.

The full document offers much more detail from ancient and some modern sources, in English and Hebrew. This summary includes some Hebrew expressions, with translations, but omits the original Hebrew sources and complete citations. It is reformatted for *Divrei Matir Asurim* with thanks to Aharon Varady and The Open Siddur Project.

While reading these commands, and their explanations, we can notice how society around us upholds them or fails to do so. We can look for opportunities to respond to violations of these commands... Some of us might notice opportunities we squander, failing to speak or act when we should. Some of us might need more positive ways to counteract violations, when we experience them ourselves.

Commands are bold. Explanations and introductions are regular type.

TO THE FIRST EARTHLING: One, or two, maybe three commands

Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai says:

The first human, *Adam Ha-Rishon*, was given only one command, regarding "estranged devotion" or "strange worship" [*avodah zarah*] (Gen 2:16-17)

Rabbi Yehudah ben Betirah says:

Also concerning blessing "the Name" (God) [*birkat hashem*] (Gen 4:26)

And some say: also concerning courts/legal system [*ha-dinim*] (Gen 18:19-21)

-- Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56b

Author information and citation, p.9

See also "Covenant of Friendship," p.7.

1. Avodah Zarah. Avoid estranged devotion (strange worship)

Don't idolize non-divine things. Don't deny interconnection in life. Do not despair by believing we're ultimately alone. Don't turn worship into self-congratulation or praise of conformity.

2. Birkat Hashem. Bless God's name.

Recognize the divine. Rabbi Abraham Twerski recommends prayer in 12-Step Programs, even for non-believers, as part of "the realization that we are not God" (from *Making Prayer Real*, p.121).

3. Ha-Dinim. Set up court/legal system.

God says (Gen 18:19) that Abraham and descendants must do what is "just and right." Jews and non-Jews today must address perversion of justice in the existing systems around us.

(cont. p.9)

TO NOAH AND DESCENDANTS: Seven commands, two versions

A) Also on Sanhedrin 56b, another set of commands begins with 1-3 above, adding four prohibitions:

4. incest, rape, corrupting intimate vows: *gilui arayot* [lit.: "forbidden sexual acts"] (Gen 6:2, 12)

Center consent in sexual relationships.
Regarding intimate relationships: Consider uneven power dynamics, in individual relationships and in the wider society.

5. bloodshed: *shfikhut damim* [lit.: "shedding blood"] (Gen 4:11, Gen 9:6)

Avoid inter-human violence, including neglect and dangerous situations in labor.

6. taking without consent: *gezel* ["stealing"] (Gen 2:16-17)

Don't cheat. Don't be dishonest. And don't take, or touch, things without consent.

7. devouring like a predator: *ever min hê-ḥai* [literally: "limb from a living creature"] (Gen 9:4)

Don't cause needless suffering in any creature.
Do not behave as a predator. Do not create conditions that make others desperate, more likely to prey on those more vulnerable, or more likely to become prey.

B) The school of Menasheh teaches a list without #2-3 above, adding, instead, the final two below:

1. estranged devotion: ***avodah zarah*** [literally: "foreign/strange worship"] (Gen 2:16-17)

2. incest, rape, corrupting intimate vows: ***gilui arayot*** [lit.: "forbidden sex acts"] (Gen 6:2, 12)

3. bloodshed: ***shfikhut damim*** [lit.: "shedding blood"] (Gen 4:11, Gen 9:6)

4. taking without consent: ***gezel*** ["stealing"] (Gen 2:16-17)

5. devouring like a predator: ***ever min hê-ḥai*** [literally: "limb from a living creature"] (Gen 9:4)

6. forced sterilization: *serus* [lit.: "castration/mutilation"] (Isaiah 56:3-5, Gen 9:24)

Prevent genocide and eugenics. Don't use castration to control labor or behavior.

7. unsafe conditions for captives: *kilayim* [lit.: "restraining, forbidden mixture"] (Isaiah 42:22)

Don't limit the movement of a captive, making them vulnerable to others in captivity. Don't force humans or non-humans together into dangerous situations for sport.

The biblical Flood story highlights how violent humans can be. These commands were developed, about 1500 years ago, from the biblical text to suggest how humans might do better. Readers today still use them to consider what it means to be a human among other creatures. We still struggle with what basics we can, and should, require of one another. And with how hard that "basic humanity" seems to be for us. ... See also "Covenant of Friendship," p.8.

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