



ORTHODOX
UNION

Nach Yommi

COMPANION

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Volume II:

Neviim Achronim - Later Prophets

Section D:

Trei Asar - The Twelve "Minor" Prophets

Hosea

Chapter 1

A Strange Request

G-d spoke to Hoshea, the son of Beiri. He lived during the reigns of Uzziah, Yoram, Achaz and Hezekiah in Judah; Yeravam the son of Yoash (Jeroboam II) was the concurrent king in Israel.

At the beginning of his prophecy, G-d told Hoshea to marry a prostitute and have children with her, the result being that others will question their paternity. (The reason for this is that adultery is the usual metaphor for idolatry in the relationship between G-d and Israel. G-d was putting Hoshea in a position through which he would understand G-d's "predicament" with Israel.)

So, Hoshea married a prostitute named Gomer and had three children with her, two sons and a daughter. G-d instructed Hoshea to name the first son Yizreel (Jezreel), a reference to the location where the family of Ahab was killed by Yehu in II Kings 10. (Ahab and Yehu were both kings of the northern kingdom of Israel.) Ahab's family were idolators, but Yehu himself maintained the golden calf idols, so G-d would do to Yehu as Yehu did to Ahab.

G-d told Hoshea to name his daughter Lo-Ruchama (no pity), since G-d will not be lenient with Israel forever. He will mete out strict judgment to the nation of the Ten Tribes, although He would have mercy on Judah and save them from Assyrian exile.

G-d instructed Hoshea to name his younger son Lo-Ami (not my nation), saying that they are no longer His people and He will no longer continue to be their G-d.

There is a disagreement among the commentators as to whether Hoshea actually married a prostitute and had children, if it was a prophetic vision, or just a metaphor. The Talmud (Pesachim 87a-b) and Rashi seem to take the literal approach, so we are treating it literally here.

Chapter 2

The Door of Hope

G-d told Hoshea that the Jews would be as numerous as the sands of the sea and instead of "not My nation," they will be called "the children of the living G-d." In the Messianic era, both the dispersed of Judah and the "lost" ten tribes will be gathered together in Israel under one ruler (Moshiah, the Messiah). Great will be the day of Jezreel. (In this chapter, G-d refers to the three names of Hoshea's children, which were negative signs

in the last chapter. Here, He reverses them into good things. The root of Jezreel is to sow or to plant. The idea is that the Jews will be gathered from the lands in which they had been “planted.”) Tell your brothers “ami,” “My nation” and tell your sisters “ruchama,” “mercy.” (These are the opposites of Lo-Ami and Lo-Ruchama, “not My nation” and “no mercy,” respectively.)

G-d says your “mother” is not His “wife” and He is not her “husband.” Let her remove her make-up and her lovers from between her breasts. (We have seen throughout Tanach that the marital relationship is a metaphor for the relationship between G-d and Israel, the lovers are idols and breasts are Torah. In short, G-d tells Israel to give up their idols.) If the wife in this metaphor (Israel) doesn’t do this, He will strip her bare as the day she was born and leave her to perish in the desert. (Compare this with Ezekiel chapter 16.) He will have no pity on her children because they are not His children, but the children of her affairs. She chose to go after her lovers, thinking they were the ones who provided all her needs. (Of course, they were wrong in this assumption; it was G-d.) G-d will close off her path with thorns. She will try to return to her lovers until she realizes it is futile. Eventually she will realize that she actually had it good when she was married and she will plan to return to her husband.

Because Israel refused to recognize that it was G-d providing her needs, He will take back the corn, wine and cloth He had given them, so they will have neither food nor clothes. He will expose her shame to her lovers and no man can save her. (Rashi says “no man” refers to the Forefathers - even their merits will be insufficient to save Israel from this punishment.) G-d will cut short all occasions of rejoicing - Sabbaths, festivals and New Moons. He will uproot the fruit trees that they credited idols with providing. He will punish them as He punished the idols they served. Therefore, G-d will lead her (i.e., them) into the desert, where they will contemplate things and realize how good they had it with Him. Then He will comfort them and provide them with vineyards (referring to leadership, according to Rashi, quoting the Targum Yonasan). G-d will open a “door of hope” (“Petach Tikva”) from their troubles and they will return to their more grateful days, as when they were a young nation.

The day will come when Israel once again calls G-d “my Husband” (an expression of love), rather than “my Master” (an expression of fear). The nation will no longer even mention the names of the idols they once mistakenly served. G-d will make a pact with all the creatures of the Earth, so that they will no longer be harmful, and He will end war. G-d and Israel will “renew their vows,” forever this time. They will be wed through righteousness, justice, kindness, mercy and faith, recognizing G-d. G-d will tell the Heavens to rain upon the Earth, which will give forth its produce. G-d will plant for them (Jezreel), have mercy upon them (ruchama) and say “you are My people” (ami). They will reply, “You are my G-d.”

Chapter 3

Another Wife

G-d told Hoshea to marry a second woman, in addition to the first wife. This woman will be beloved, but she’ll have a history of adultery. This is like the situation with G-d and Israel; He loves them, but they have a history

of infidelity. Hoshea betrothed this woman (or G-d betrothed Israel) with a dowry of 15 pieces of silver and a measure of barley. (The dowry symbolizes the 15th day of Nisan, when G-d redeemed the Jews from Egypt, the silver shekels and the omer of barley. There are other interpretations.) The bride was cautioned to not cheat on her husband.

The Jews would be a long period in exile with no king of the Davidic dynasty, nor sacrifices in the Temple. Afterwards, they would return and seek G-d and His anointed one. They will repent out of awe of G-d and can expect to receive His goodness.

Chapter 4

A Rebellious Cow?

Hoshea told the Jews to listen to G-d because He has some issues with them. There is no truth, kindness or knowledge of G-d among them. There is only deceit, corruption, murder, theft and adultery. The people have no limits. The land will therefore be destroyed and all the creatures that live there will be reduced. The people warn the real prophets not to rebuke them, preferring the comforting words of false prophets. Therefore, they will stumble in daylight, from a lack of leadership. The false prophets will stumble by night, from their own misleading words. The nation will thereby be silenced - they will have no response to this turn of events.

The people were silenced because they had no one to lead them in the proper ways. They rejected knowledge, so G-d rejects them from serving Him. They overlooked His Torah, so He will overlook their children. (This is because, when the Jews accepted the Torah, they offered their children as a guarantee that it would be kept. Rashi cites this familiar Midrash, found in Tanchuma and elsewhere.) The better things got for them, the more the Jews rebelled, so G-d will trade their honor for shame.

The false prophets, rather than legitimate kohanim (priests), eat the sin offerings of the people; they actually hope for the people to sin so that they can profit! Both the people and their spiritual leaders will receive the same punishment: they will eat and not be satisfied. They will be promiscuous, but not procreate. This is because they have ignored G-d. They have gone astray and turned to idols of wood. Their daughters are promiscuous and their daughters-in-law commit adultery, but G-d will not punish them with the "bitter waters" (see Numbers 5), since the husbands are equally guilty. The nation refuses to get the message, so G-d will knock them around a bit.

Even though the northern kingdom of Israel "cheats on" G-d, the kingdom of Judah is not (yet) guilty. They should be careful to avoid places of idolatry and not to swear in G-d's Name (which was often done falsely). Israel has acted like a rebellious cow, so now G-d is treating them like a sheep in a pasture. (The cow was fattened; the sheep has sparser food supplies.) Ephraim is too attached to their idols; they're a lost cause. They have introduced drunken bacchanalia. The wind will carry them off like a bird, into exile, where they will be ashamed. (Ephraim a common way of referring to the northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes, whose first king was from the Tribe of Ephraim.)

Chapter 5

A Moth, a Worm and a Lion

Now, Hoshea addresses the priests of Judah, although there is a difference of opinion as to whether he is speaking to the kohanim of the Temple or the idolatrous priests. The priests, the people and even the king will have to pay for their role in the current sad state of affairs; they are a trap. Their straying from G-d has gotten worse and G-d will punish all of them. G-d knew what was in the heart of Yeravam (Jeroboam), the first king of the Ten Tribes. The people of the northern kingdom used to be able to blame their idolatry on their wayward kings, who prevented them from going to the Temple in Judah. Once they had a king who permitted it, they lost that excuse. They don't seek to return to G-d, even given the chance. They will be humbled and will be tripped up by their sins. Not only Israel will be punished for idolatry, but Judah as well. They will finally return to G-d, leading flocks for sacrifices, but He will have hidden Himself from them. They cheated on G-d and intermarried, fathering non-Jewish children. Now, the month of Av will consume them. (Av is the month in which such tragedies typically occur. Both Temples were destroyed on the ninth of Av.)

Sound shofars and trumpets to warn people of the invaders. Call out to the Tribe of Benjamin that the enemy is right behind them. (Benjamin was part of the kingdom of Judah. They lasted longer than the kingdom of Israel, but they fell before the Tribe of Judah.) Ephraim (meaning the Ten Tribes) will be bewildered when G-d makes it clear to them that the Torah they willfully ignored is true.

The leaders of Judah are like those who move a boundary marker to steal land; G-d will pour His wrath out upon them. Ephraim has been wounded by their invaders as a consequence of trying to follow idols. G-d is like a moth, eating the clothes of Ephraim, and like a worm, causing decay in Judah. Israel will be subservient to Assyria; Judah will seek protection, but they will not be successful. How could anyone thwart the will of G-d whose strength is compared to that of a young, vital lion? If He wants to, He will tear or carry off as He wishes and no one can stop Him. He will withdraw from the people until they recognize their sins and humbly seek Him.

Chapter 6

Let's Know G-d

Hoshea says, "Let us return to G-d. He has wounded us and He will heal us. He will refresh us from the two Temples that were destroyed and will establish the third so that we may live before Him. Let's all agree to know G-d as surely as we know that the sun will rise in the morning. He will be to us like rain to the earth."

What can be done to heal Ephraim and Judah, the two Jewish nations, whose merits have proven fleeting? G-d sent prophets to correct them, but the people refused to listen. The people will perish for disobeying G-d's word. G-d wants real, substantive acts of kindness from people. He wants them to know Him. These things mean more to Him than sacrifices.

Like Adam, the people violated G-d's instructions. The northern kingdom of Israel is full of violent people. Even groups of priests gather together to commit premeditated acts of violence. There's also idolatry going on there. The kingdom of Judah also sinned and there is a time designated to punish them for turning their backs on G-d.

Chapter 7

A Confused Dove

When G-d wants to heal Israel, the sins of the northern kingdom are constantly rubbed in His face (metaphorically speaking). They lie, steal and spread evil. They don't act as if G-d will remember their deeds. Their king doesn't mind their lawlessness, since they pay him off with a "piece of the action." They are adulterers, whose lust burns within them as hot as an oven.

On the day of the king's coronation, his officers become sick from their drinking. The king withdraws from the proper path to join them. They prepare their hearts for their evil plans like a baker prepares his oven. They are "heated" until they consume the righteous judges who opposed them. The nation of the Ten Tribes will be mixed among others in exile. The nation's strength was destroyed by enemies and they were oblivious that their own sins caused this downfall. Even when they lost their honor and glory, they were too stubborn to reach out to G-d. They were like a confused dove, flying to Egypt and Assyria instead of to G-d. G-d will toss a net over them.

The nation will be invaded and looted because they rebelled against G-d. Normally, G-d would save them, but in this case He won't because they lied about Him. (Rashi gives an example from Jeremiah 43, in which the people denied that Jeremiah was, in fact, sent by G-d.) They didn't cry out to G-d, so they'll cry on their own. They had full stores of grain and wine, but they ignored G-d. When He punished them, they blamed Him. They'll finally call out to Him, but too late. Their officers will fall and they will be harassed by the Egyptians when the refugees are exiled there (after the assassination of Gedaliah).

Chapter 8

A Broken Utensil and a Wild Donkey

G-d told Hoshea to call out with a voice as loud and clear as a shofar. He is to swoop down on the people like an eagle, or perhaps to warn the people that the invaders are about to swoop down upon them like an eagle, because of their evil deeds. The people will turn to G-d in their hour of need, but He will not answer a "fair weather" nation such as this. The Ten Tribes made Yeravam (Jeroboam) their king without being instructed by G-d to do so. They deposed and installed other kings without His approval. They used their wealth to make idols. They worshipped two statues of calves. These were not "gods" - a craftsman made them! How long will the nation allow this behavior to go on?

Worshipping these idols is like trying to sow the wind or reap the storm - nothing will come of it. In the unlikely event that something does grow, strangers will come along and take it away from them. Israel is like a broken utensil among the other nations. They went to Assyria like a wild donkey, going their own way, rather than following their prophets. They even buttered up the king of Assyria in order to win his favor. Even though they have done this, G-d will redeem them in the proper time (though they will be humbled in exile).

The nation of the Ten Tribes built many altars to serve their many idols. G-d sent His prophets to remind them of His Torah, but the people acted as if they never heard of it before. As far as the sacrifices they offer to Him, they might as well just eat them, since He's not interested. He will repay them for their sins when the survivors are driven back to Egypt. Israel forgot G-d and relied on their idols, and on their own strength. G-d will destroy their cities and the temples they built for their "gods."

Chapter 9

Crazy Prophets

Israel is told not to rejoice like the other nations because they received the Torah and turned their backs on it. They prefer to be "promiscuous" with idols. Since they rebelled against G-d in times of plenty, He will take away that abundance of wine and grain. They will be exiled from their land, to Egypt and Assyria. No longer will they have the opportunity to offer sacrifices to G-d because their service is not pleasing to Him. Their sacrifices are like the bread of mourners - fit for food, but not for Divine service.

What will they do when the time of the enemy attack arrives? They will be driven away by the invaders, seeking refuge in Egypt (as we see happened in Jeremiah 43). Their storehouses of silver will be filled with thorns. It's payback time for their sins. Even some true prophets will become madmen because of the people's sin in following "prophets" they knew to be false. The nation of the Ten Tribes sends false prophets to speak in G-d's Name, predicting only peace, and they would try to "trip up" the real prophets, who predicted punishment.

The people are corrupt, like they were in Gibeah. (What happened in Gibeah? Rashi mentions two things. The concubine was assaulted and murdered by a mob in Judges 19, and the people rejected G-d by asking for a king in I Samuel 15). G-d will remember the people's sins and act upon them. G-d found the Jews like grapes in the desert (which are rare and precious there) or like a ripening fig on the tree. But even in their early days, the people strayed after the idol Baal Peor (Numbers 25).

The honor of the northern kingdom will fly away from them like a bird. They will be bereaved of their children; some will die at birth, others will miscarry, while others will not conceive at all. In any case, they will not reach adulthood. The nation enjoyed their wealth and tranquility, but what did they do with it? They offered their children to idols. Hoshea says that it is better to deprive them of children altogether.

The evil of the nation is in Gilgal. (This was the first site of the Mishkan - the Tabernacle - and it was deemed a prime location for idolatry.) G-d will drive them from the Temple, where they erected an idol. They are so

rebellious that G-d is giving up on them returning to Him. They will be struck by their enemies. They will not give birth and when they do, G-d will take the children away from them. G-d rejects them for rejecting Him, so let the nations have them!

Chapter 10

A Threshing Cow

Israel is like a vine that cannot stand good fruit. The more good things G-d gives them, the more they embrace idolatry. Their heart has separated from G-d, so He will demolish their altars. When this happens, the people will say that their king is useless to save them from their enemies; of course, had they recognized G-d as their King, He could have done so! The nation sinned with their mouths; they conspired to keep people from going to the Temple, they swore falsely and they forged a pact with idolatry. Their judgment will be bitter like hemlock.

The neighbors of Samaria, where a calf idol was, should be very afraid. (The prophet calls Beth-El "Beth-Aven," meaning house of sin, rather than house of G-d.) Off they go, to Assyria, to Sennacherib. The kingdom will be ashamed of their idolatry, which led to exile. The king of Israel will have no reply. The places of idolatry destroyed, thorns will grow over their altars. The people will beg the mountains to hide their shame from the nations. Since the days of Gibeah, Israel has been sinful. (See the comment on Gibeah in the previous chapter.) They have remained stubbornly sinful; they have not conquered that trait. G-d judged them and delivered them into their enemies' hands.

The nation of the Ten Tribes is like a cow wearing a yoke; they are beaten down, but they love to thresh grain (but not to plow - a threshing cow gets to eat, a plowing cow has to work). G-d will put them to work. They should sow righteousness and reap kindness, but instead they planted evil and harvested perversion. The fruit they eat is lies and they relied on the wrong people. A cry will go out as the cities are plundered and the women and children are abandoned and slaughtered. This is what they can thank the calf idols for bringing about. The king of Israel has no strength left to reply.

Chapter 11

Like a Lion

When Israel was young, G-d loved them and He called them from Egypt. But the more He called them, the more they went after idols. He sent Moshe (Moses) to train them in the proper way, but they refused to recognize G-d. He gently drew them close to Him and provided all their needs. They are going to be exiled to Assyria because they have refused to give up their evil ways.

The invading Assyrian army is coming to destroy them and the people still can't decide whether or not they should return to G-d. It pains G-d (metaphorically speaking) to do this to Israel, which is why they will not be completely destroyed like Sodom and Gemorrah, rather a remnant will remain from them. Because He is G-d, He will not go back on His word not to destroy them (see Leviticus 26:44, cited by Rashi).

G-d has caused His Presence to rest in Jerusalem and He will not relocate it to another city. Even though G-d has removed His Presence, the people will turn to Him in their exile. He will roar like a lion that it is time to return and they will follow Him. They will fly swiftly from their places of exile and G-d will place them securely in their land.

Chapter 12

All About Jacob

The northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes is full of the lies of their kings and their false prophets, but the kingdom of Judah is still faithful to G-d. The northern kingdom chases their idols, which are insubstantial. They occupy their time with evil and falsehood and they try to curry favor with Assyria and Egypt. G-d is warning Judah about His displeasure with the northern kingdom so that they should not follow in their ways.

Israel's forefather Jacob held onto his brother Esau's heel in the womb, and he struggled with an angel and won. The angel begged to be released; he said that G-d would be found in Beth-El and there He would speak with us. (Beth-El, of course, is the place where the idol of the calf was later erected by Yeravam.)

Hoshea tells the people that they will return to G-d by way of G-d, which Rashi explains to mean they can only do so with G-d's support. He adjures them to practice justice and kindness and to always put their faith in G-d. Right now, however, they are deceitful people with dishonest weights and measures, who live to oppress others. They refuse to recognize G-d because they are too comfortable and complacent from their wealth and power. All of their wealth, however, will not save them from retribution for all of their evil deeds. G-d will cut these evil people off from the rest of the nation, whom He will set up to dwell in tents. (Rashi explains this to be a good thing, referring to our forefather Jacob, who is described by the Torah as a "simple man dwelling in tents" - Genesis 25:27.)

G-d sent many prophets and He gave the prophets many messages and many parables in order to make the message clear to the people. When the coming disasters occur, they can't blame G-d for not having warned them. They can only blame themselves for their idolatry.

Getting back to the story of Jacob discussed earlier in this chapter, the prophet resumes that Jacob fled to Aram to escape the wrath of his brother Esau. In Aram, he became a goatherd in order to earn his wives. Later, G-d sent a prophet (Moses) to bring His people from Egypt. Moses guarded them like a shepherd, but the nation provoked G-d and is responsible for their own impending disaster. They have followed in the ways of Yeravam, the first king of the Ten Tribes, whose disgraceful behavior (and its emulation) will be revisited upon him (and them).

Chapter 13

Lions, Bears and Labor Pains

Yeravam (Jeroboam), the first king of northern nation of the Ten Tribes, criticized Shlomo (Solomon) sincerely, for the sake of G-d. He did this with great trepidation because Shlomo was a powerful king, but because he did so, he merited a kingdom of his own. However, he soon turned to idolatry and his dynasty was cut short. The dynasty of Yehu continues to sin, making idols of their own and encouraging the worst behavior, up to and including human sacrifices. Therefore, they will be swept away like a cloud that dissipates. (The chapter uses several other similes to describe the manner in which they will evaporate.)

G-d took the Jews out of Egypt. He is the only One they should know; no one can save them but Him. He took care of them in the wilderness and satisfied their needs when they entered the land. But when they became satisfied, they also became full of themselves and forgot G-d. Because they forgot Him, He will let them fall into their enemies' hands. G-d will meet the nation like a bear or a lion; they will be destroyed. The people rejected G-d and requested a human king; where is that king now? Let him save them from their enemies! G-d gave them the king in the first place (even though He was displeased with the request) and now, in His anger, He is taking away the king.

The sins of the nation are before G-d and He will punish them with troubles as sharp as labor pains. If they were wise, they would quickly return to G-d rather than remain in their sins. G-d is the only One Who could save them from death but now He is the One Who will bring these tragedies upon them. He will not regret His actions. The wind (referring to the invading army) will come up from the east; they will plunder the nation.

Chapter 14

“What Do I Need With These Idols?”

The northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes has been found guilty of rebelling against G-d and they will be punished very harshly. The invading armies will perpetrate the most heinous acts of cruelty against them. G-d implores the people to return to Him because these troubles have come upon them due to their sins. He's not asking them for gold or jewels; all He wants is sincere words of repentance. The people should ask Him to show them the proper way and the words of their lips will serve as sacrifices. The people cannot count on Assyria or Egypt to save them, nor can their idols accomplish anything. Only G-d can show mercy, as He did to their ancestors when they left Egypt.

G-d will correct them of their backsliding ways and He will love them unconditionally; His anger will have been turned away. His goodness will never be withheld from them (the chapter uses the simile of dew) and they will blossom like a rose. Their branches will spread out and they will be as beautiful as an olive tree (referring to the menorah of the Temple) and they'll be as fragrant as the Lebanon (referring to the incense of the Temple). The exiles will return to the land where they will be reinvigorated.

The people of the nation will say, "What do I need with these idols?" G-d will save them from their troubles and all goodness will come from Him. Who is wise enough to recognize this and return to G-d? His ways are straight (not crooked like those of man); the righteous will walk in them and those who reject G-d will stumble.

Joel

Chapter 1

A Plague of Locusts

Who was the prophet Joel (Yoel)? According to the Midrash, he was the son of the prophet Samuel. (Samuel did indeed have a son by this name; see I Samuel 8:2 and I Chronicles 6:18.) This would make Joel from the Tribe of Levi. There was also a prominent Levite by that name during the reign of King Chizkiyahu (see II Chronicles 29:12), a time when some place the prophet Joel. Others place him during the reign of Yehoram, son of Ahab, king of Israel. Joel was a student of the prophet Micah and a contemporary of Nachum and Chavakuk (Habakkuk).

G-d spoke to Joel with the following message: He told the leaders and the people to listen up, because something unprecedented was about to happen. It would be something talked about for generations to come. What is it? A plague of locusts. There would be four species in this plague; what one swarm leaves over, the next will devour.

So, let the drunks snap out of their stupors because their supply is being cut off. A "nation" of locusts is coming, with teeth like those of lions. They will strip the land bare. Cry like a young widow over this calamity. The kohanim (priests) and Levites will mourn because of the lack of wine and grain for the Temple service. Farmers will lament the loss of their crops.

Joel says that they should proclaim a fast on which to cry out to G-d. The day is very near and it will arrive suddenly, from G-d. The cattle will be surprised by the sudden lack of pastures in which to graze. Even the sheep, which go places inaccessible to cattle, will waste away. Joel cries out to G-d because of the destruction. The animals will also cry out because of drought and fire.

The obvious question raised by this chapter is how the locust swarm of Joel is unprecedented when Exodus 10 says that the locust plague in Egypt was the swarm supreme. There are in fact two significant differences, making them very different phenomena indeed. First, the locusts in Egypt were of one species; Joel's swarm was actually four species in waves. Additionally, the plague of locusts in Egypt lasted but a short, albeit unpleasant, period. The swarm in Joel's time lasted four years.

Chapter 2

Crisis Averted

Sound the shofar, Joel says, to warn the people of the impending catastrophe. Everyone will tremble because of the day that is coming. It will be a day of great darkness, both literally and figuratively, as the locusts cover the land. They will cover the mountains as widespread as the light of sunrise. Such a swarm of different species is unprecedented and will not be seen again. The locusts will destroy everything like a blazing fire. The land was as lush as the Garden of Eden before the locusts, but it will be a desert after them.

The locusts will run across the land like horses, driven onward by their riders. The sound will be comparable to chariots, or to fire consuming straw. The locusts are an invading force, from which people will flee. The locusts will travel in their paths, doing their job as agents of G-d. (There's no profit motivation when you're a locust.) The Heavens and Earth will tremble in the presence of this "army" because of what is to befall Israel. The sun, moon and stars will figuratively dim their lights. G-d sent warning through His prophets, so that the people should repent, because who can stand up before His punishment?

G-d still asks the people to repent and return to Him. He would rather they "tear their hearts" in repentance than be punished and tear their clothes in mourning. He is quite merciful, slow to anger and He would rather avoid having to punish people. If people recognize their shortcomings and resolve to improve, they can still walk away from the coming plague relatively unscathed.

Sound the shofar! Call a fast! Gather the people together and prepare them for this! Let the kohanim (priests) serving in the Temple beseech G-d for mercy. If the people do all this, G-d will agree to turn aside His punishment, instructing the locusts not to destroy the land. G-d replied that He would cause the plants to grow again, so the people would have produce and they would no longer be ashamed. G-d will drive the locusts from the land and the people will rejoice. The pastures of the animals will re-grow, just like the trees.

Everyone rejoice with G-d, for He sent His prophets to instruct the people how to return to Him. He brought the rains so that food would grow and the storehouses could be filled. When G-d has mercy on His people, He will repay them for the damages incurred by the locust swarms. The people will eat, be satisfied and thank G-d for the wonders He has worked for them. The people will recognize G-d and never be ashamed.

Chapter 3

Hey, Who Turned Out The Lights?

In the future, in Messianic times, G-d will pour His spirit out on the people, who will be so infused with an understanding of G-d that many will have dreams and visions. Even the members of other nations, who may choose to come to Israel to facilitate the service of G-d, will be on a high spiritual level.

Prior to that, at the war of Gog and Magog, G-d will send signs in the form of blood, fire and pillars of smoke.

(This verse may be familiar from the Passover Haggadah.) The sun will darken and the moon will go red, as an ill omen for idolators who worship Heavenly bodies. Whoever calls out to G-d will be saved; there will be sanctuary in Jerusalem and on the Temple mount. This was foretold in Deuteronomy 28:10, that everyone would see that this nation is called by G-d's Name.

Chapter 4

More About Gog and Magog

In the Messianic era, G-d will retrieve the exiles of Judah and Jerusalem, returning them to Israel. He will entice the other nations to join Gog, king of the nation of Magog, and He will judge them for how they treated Israel in exile. They divided the land and dispersed the inhabitants (referring to the Roman exile). They traded the people like chattel. Is this how supposed allies like Tzidon and Tzor (Sidon and Tyre) treat their friends? Are they trying to "get even" with G-d for their punishments? Don't try to escalate against G-d because He can outdo anything you can come up with!

Even before the exile, these so-called "allies" kidnapped the children of Judah and sold them as slaves to Greece. (They sold them to a distant land so that it would not become known.) G-d will restore the descendants of these captives along with all the other exiles and He will repay the nations who engaged in the practice. They will become prisoners of war to Judah and will themselves be sold as slaves.

The nations are called to prepare for war against Israel. They will beat their farm implements into weapons of war. (This is the exact opposite of the promise of peace found in Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3. Those verses speak of the Messianic era; here we are discussing the war of Gog and Magog that precedes it.) They will be so anxious to participate in this war that the weak will claim to be mighty. The nations will gather together and G-d will break their might.

The nations will gather and G-d will judge them in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. (This appears not to be a real place name, as the name "Jehoshaphat" means that G-d judges.) Draw your weapons because the time has come. (The chapter continues the agricultural metaphor, calling the weapons sickles and saying that it's harvest time.) The nations are full of their sins like ripe grapes are full of juice; it's time to squeeze them. Many will fall when G-d passes judgment. The Heavenly spheres will dim, as we have discussed. G-d will "roar" because of what was done to Jerusalem; the Heavens and Earth will tremble because of His "voice."

The shechina, G-d's "presence," is concentrated in Jerusalem, on the Temple mount. Jerusalem will be holy and hostile foreigners will no longer go there. The land will run with wine, milk and water; a spring will go forth from the Temple and will atone for the idolatry of Baal Peor (in Numbers 25). Egypt and Edom (Rome) will become ruins because of the violence they brought to the innocents of Judah. Judah and Jerusalem, though, will last forever. Even if G-d will forgive them for the offenses against Him, He will not forgive the violence perpetrated against the innocents. When G-d returns His presence to Jerusalem, it will remain there forever.

Amos

Chapter 1

Famous Amos

These are the words of Amos, who owned herds in a place called Tekoa and who was a prophet during the reign of Uzziyahu in Judah and Yeravam (Jeroboam II) in Israel. This occurred two years before an earthquake, which Amos predicted (see Zechariah 14:5 and elsewhere).

G-d will “roar” from the Holy of Holies in the Temple and send His voice from Jerusalem. Dwelling places will be ruined and fertile land will dry up.

The prophet starts with a message about the fate of Damascus. G-d had forgiven three sins of theirs, but he will not forgive the fourth. What was that sin? They thrashed the people of Gilead with iron instruments. G-d will send a fire to consume the land of Aram (the country of Damascus at the time). He will break down the doors that they will use to try to keep their enemies out; the people of Aram will be exiled.

Similarly, G-d has forgiven three sins of Gaza, a city of the Philistines, but He will not forgive the fourth. What was their “final straw?” They assisted Edom in exiling the Jews. (This appears to refer to the Roman exile in the time of the second Temple.) Fire from G-d will consume their palaces and the remnant of their exiles will be lost.

G-d will also forgive three sins for Tzor (Tyre), but not the fourth. Their final sin was that they were allies with Israel and they broke their pact by delivering the Jews into the hands of Edom. In payment for this, Tzor will be burned (either by Nebuchadnezzar or by Alexander - or, possibly, by both).

And what about Edom themselves? Their deal-breaking sin was that they mercilessly persecuted their brother. (Edom’s ancestor Esau was the brother of Israel’s ancestor, Jacob. The Radak tells us that the sin of Edom refers to the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans.) G-d will send the consuming fire throughout Edom.

The nation of Amon also committed one sin more than G-d was willing to forgive. When they invaded Gilead, they cut open the pregnant women so that there would be no heirs to try and reclaim the land at a later date. They will not only have fire, but also war like a whirlwind. Their royal family will be driven into exile.

Chapter 2

How Do You Oppress a Wagon?

We said in the previous chapter that G-d will forgive the nations three sins, but not four. The fourth, unforgivable sin of Moav was that they burned the bones of the king of Edom and treated them disrespectfully. (This

may refer to the incident between Moav and Edom in II Kings chapter 3.) G-d will send a fire to Moav and the people will die in battle. G-d will cut off their king and his officers.

And what about Judah? What's their fourth, intolerable sin? They rejected G-d's Torah and did not keep His laws. They follow the false prophets. G-d will send a fire into Judah to consume Jerusalem.

Israel, the northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes, also has an irredeemable fourth sin: their courts were not just. They accepted bribes to condemn the innocent. They spend their time conspiring to cheat the poor out of their possessions and to defile girls. They take the collateral of the poor who have borrowed from them and use it to make couches for their own comfort; they fine people and buy wine with the money - all in the service of their idols!

It was G-d who destroyed the mighty Amorites and brought the Jewish nation out of Egypt to inherit their land. He gave the Jews prophets to lead them on the proper path and teachers who devoted themselves exclusively to the study of Torah. (Here the prophet uses the word nazir, Nazirite, but not in its usual sense.) You gave these Nazirites wine to drink (forbidden to literal Nazirites) and stopped the prophets from relating their prophesies. G-d will oppress the people like a wagon full of sheaves is oppressed. (What does it mean to oppress a wagon full of sheaves? The wagon is figuratively oppressed by the heavy weight of the sheaves.) The fast will not escape by running, the strong will lose their strength, and the mighty will not even be able to save themselves. Archers, runners and the cavalry will all be useless. Brave warriors will run away empty-handed on that day, says G-d.

Chapter 3

Rhetorical Questions

The Jewish nation is told to listen to what G-d has to say about them. He brought them out of Egypt, saying that He loved them more than all the other nations, but they rebelled against Him and now He must pay them for their sins.

Amos now asks a series of rhetorical questions, leading up to a point:

- If two people are walking along together, wasn't it pre-arranged?
- Does a lion roar when there's no prey around?
- Does a young lion rejoice in its lair if it hasn't captured anything?
- Does a bird just fly into a net on the ground without some lure?
- Does the net jump up from the ground unless there's something caught in it?
- Can a shofar be blown in a city without alarming the people?

And now, the point:

- Can something "bad" happen unless G-d wills it?

The purpose of these rhetorical questions is to demonstrate cause-and-effect. If a lion is roaring, it has prey. If a net is jumping around, there must be a bird in it. And if the Jews are punished, it's because of their sins. These things don't "just happen."

G-d doesn't take these steps without first sending a warning through His prophets. Now that the lion (G-d) has roared (sent a prophecy), how can the recipient not be scared? Who could stop a prophet from delivering his message?

Announce to the Philistines and the Egyptians to gather on the mountains of Samaria so that they can observe the chaos in Israel. G-d says that they didn't know how to act properly - ever! They just stockpiled their ill-gotten gains. This is why G-d is bringing invaders to "cut them down to size."

When a sheep is mauled by a lion, sometimes the shepherd salvages two legs (a large portion), sometimes a single ear (a small piece). Similarly, the people of Israel will have some remnant survive. In this case, it will be those who are bedridden, either with illness or fear. They will not go to battle and the enemy won't care about them.

Chapter 4

Some People Can't Take a Hint

G-d now speaks to the women of Samaria, who are called "cows of Bashan" here. This is because cows graze and become fat and Bashan was known for its cows. The wealthy women of the northern kingdom likewise indulged themselves all day long. The women are accessories to their husbands' oppression of the poor. For example, they make demands of their husbands, knowing that they will have to oppress the needy in order to fulfill those desires. Days are coming, G-d says, when they and their daughters will be carried off by the enemy. They will try to escape through the holes in the walls and they won't be so high and mighty any more.

Go to Beth-El and Gilgal to worship those idols you love so much. G-d has taken away your bread and your meat, but you still haven't turned back to Him! He held back the rains, causing a drought. People from several cities would go to where it did rain, but there was nowhere near enough water to accommodate them - and they still didn't turn to G-d! Crops were destroyed by blight and locusts, but they don't return to G-d! A plague, like the pestilence in Egypt, killed man and beast, as did the sword of their enemies, but they didn't turn to G-d. Finally, G-d overthrew some of them like Sodom and Gemorrah, but they still don't return to Him! (The some who were overthrown may refer to the Tribe of Naftali, which was exiled before the rest of the nation, in II Kings 15.)

Because the people absolutely refuse to turn to G-d, He will do all these things, so get ready. G-d made the mountains and the wind (a steady, very visible object and a powerful, invisible force). G-d knows everything a person does and He will relate it all to them (Rashi says at the time of a person's death). He makes it dawn (for the righteous) and turns it dark (for the evil). G-d is the highest, above all.

Chapter 5

Bring It On!

Since the people refuse to listen to G-d, the words of warning are turning into a dirge. The northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes will fall and they will never have their own king again after that. The population will be devastated; only one person in ten will survive. G-d would prefer that people seek Him and live! If they continue to pursue their idols, the people will be exiled and destroyed. The kings have perverted their judgments; this angers G-d as much as the idolatry.

G-d made the constellations; He turns night into day and vice versa. He controls the water cycle. He will give the weak the power to overthrow the mighty. The people hated the prophets for rebuking them over their sins. Therefore, because they oppressed the needy, they will not be able to enjoy their ill-gotten wealth. The sins of the people are many, so the wise will not question G-d when payback comes.

Pursue good, not evil, so that you may live and that G-d will be with you. If not, there will be mourning throughout the land. Woe to those who say, "Bring it on!" because they don't really believe. Really, don't go looking for trouble, because it will find you soon enough. It's like a person who flees from a lion, only to run into a bear. He runs home, where he is bitten by a snake. (This either refers to running from trouble to trouble or the various beasts represent the different kingdoms that will conquer Israel: the Babylonians, the Persians and the Romans.)

G-d rejects the people's sacrifices; He won't accept them. Don't bother having the Levites sing in the Temple because He's not listening. If you want G-d back on your side, uncork all the justice and righteousness that you've bottled up for so long! Our relationship with G-d isn't about sacrifices. You'll go into exile carrying the idols you loved so much.

Chapter 6

Now You Know How It Feels

Amos says woe to those who are comfortable and complacent in the capital cities of Judah and Israel. They are unmoved by the plight of their brethren, but it will soon come for them. Go look at the other nations and see if they have things any better. They don't, so why do you leave G-d to follow their ways? Your evil ways are just bringing payback time closer. The people indulge in every luxury and physical pleasure. They listen to musicians, whom they liken to the instruments of David. But David's music was to serve G-d and they are only entertaining themselves! They are so comfortable with their riches that they feel nothing for those who have already fallen. They will be the first to go among the exiles.

G-d has sworn by Himself that He will deliver Jerusalem into enemy hands. If any group manages to escape the sword, they will fall to the plague. Those who come to remove the corpses for burial will find no survivors; this is because the victims failed to recognize G-d.

When G-d commands it, the enemy will shatter Israel into splinters. The kingdom of the Ten Tribes will be broken and scattered even worse than the smaller kingdom of Judah. It's not natural for a horse to run on rocks or for a person to plow them. Similarly, injustice is not natural and people pervert the world when they take bribes or favor the powerful in judgment. Those with wealth and means use them to oppress those without. G-d will send another nation to show them how it feels to be oppressed.

Chapter 7

What's a Plumb Line?

G-d showed Amos what He had in store; G-d was gathering locusts for a swarm. When the prophet saw the locusts devouring everything (in his vision), he prayed to G-d to forgive the people, since no one could save them from the devastation the locusts would cause. How could the tiny remainder of the nation survive? G-d accepted Amos' prayer and agreed not to send the swarm.

Next, G-d showed Amos a great, devouring conflagration. (This could literally be a fire or it could be a symbol for war and pestilence. The Radak says it's a heat wave, leading to a drought.) Again, Amos begged G-d not to send this punishment and, again, G-d agreed.

Then, G-d showed Amos a vision of His Glory, standing on a wall holding a plumb line. (A plumb line is a weighted string, used to test verticals, similar to the way a level is used to test horizontals.) G-d said He would use the plumb line to judge the people strictly and that He would not forgo any more punishments. The land would become desolate and ruined and the dynasty of Yeravam (Jeroboam II) will be cut off. (Oddly, here Amos refers to the nation as Yitzchak - Isaac - rather than Israel or Jacob. This may be a reference to the Akeidah - the binding of Isaac - or to Isaac's other son, Esau.)

Amatzya, the priest of the idol at Beth-El, got wind of the prophecies Amos was relating and he sent word to Yeravam, king of Israel. (Remember, this was the second king by that name, so don't be confused!) Amatzya accused Amos of treason for the things he was saying about the nation and the king. Amatzya even embellished Amos' words, saying things the prophet never said. (For example, Amatzya quoted Amos as saying that Yeravam would die by the sword. Amos never said that, nor is that how Yeravam died. Amatzya was trying to incite the king against the prophet.)

Amatzya warned Amos to get out of Beth-El and to go to Judah, where they might appreciate his brand of prophecy. Amos replied that he is not like one of Amatzya's false prophets, who prophesy for pay. He owns herds and groves. He has money, so he doesn't do this to make a living; he does it because G-d told him to! Amatzya can't bully Amos out of doing G-d's will!

Since Amatzya tried to silence G-d's prophet from rebuking His people, he would be punished. His wife would willingly cheat on him with enemy soldiers from the invading force and his children would be cut down by the enemy sword. Amatzya's land would be divvied up by the invaders and he would die in captivity.

Chapter 8

The End of The Word As We Know It

(No, the title of this chapter synopsis does not contain a typographical error. Keep reading.)

In a vision, G-d showed Amos a basket of late-ripening figs. Just as the figs ripen and are plucked, some to be eaten and some to be dried, the time has come for Israel to be “plucked.” The songs the people sing in their pagan temples will turn to crying. There will be corpses everywhere, requiring removal.

Listen up, those who oppress the poor! You calculate when prices will rise and take advantage of people. You have crooked weights and measures to cheat people. You make the less fortunate indebted to you, then seize their land or make them servants, all so that they can buy the worst part of the grain from you. Isn't this serious enough to warrant the impending destruction? G-d will bring this disaster upon them when they least expect it, like the sun setting in the middle of the afternoon. Holidays will turn to mourning, like for an only child.

A famine is coming, G-d says, but not for bread and water. The people will be hungry and thirsty for the word of G-d. (The Radak tells us that this refers to the end of prophecy, which occurred during the period of the second Temple. As much as people resent the intervention of the prophets, don't we miss it and wish we had it now?) People will run all over, from one end of the land to the other, but they won't find the Divine guidance they seek. Those who worship the idols of Samaria will fall and never rise again.

Chapter 9

Israel's Not So Special (Or Are They?)

Amos saw a vision of G-d's glory standing by the altar of the Temple. G-d told one of the cherubim to strike the lintel above the roof, making the supporting beams tremble. (A lintel is a horizontal beam in a building, such as over a doorway. For more about cherubim, see our synopsis on Ezekiel chapter 10.) The leaders of the nation will be destroyed first. The rest will be slain by the sword; none of those who have been marked for death will escape. If they try to hide deep down in pits or up high in mountain caves, G-d will enable the invaders to find them. Even if they run away to deserted islands, G-d will have them bitten by serpents there. (These serpents may be literal snakes or a metaphor for the enemy forces.) Even giving themselves into the hands of another nation in hopes of sanctuary will not save them.

G-d is the Ruler of Heaven and Earth. If He just touches the ground, it quakes and the people who live there are destroyed (that is, the decree for such things to occur comes from Him). G-d built the levels between the heavenly bodies (their orbits, perhaps?) and He established living things on Earth. He gathered the waters and placed them on the Earth. (Actually, He does this constantly, as water evaporates into clouds then falls back to Earth again as rain.)

G-d says that the Jews are no different from anyone else. He uses the example of the descendants of Cush; we are all descended from the sons of Noah. Sure, G-d took the Jews from Egypt, but He also took the Philistines

from Kaftor and the nation of Aram from Kir. We are all G-d's children and He does things for all of us! Don't think Israel is so special that their behavior gets a free pass. (Some read it differently, saying "G-d took you from Egypt. Did He do the same for the Philistines or Aram? No. Israel IS special, which is why they will never be completely destroyed, although they are still not exempt from punishment.)

G-d has His eye on the sinful dynasty of the northern kingdom of Israel; He will eradicate them (as opposed to the Davidic dynasty of Judah, which will endure). Even though they will lose their national identity, the Jews will remain a separate people while in exile, distinct from those among whom they dwell. They will be shaken up, scattered throughout all the nations. The people expect they will never have to pay for their sins, but they will.

In the Messianic era, G-d will raise up the fallen dynasty of King David and He will gather up His scattered people, restoring things to as they once were. Israel will inherit the remainder of Edom and the other nations. Days are coming, G-d says, when produce will grow in such abundance that harvest will begin before plowing has finished. Mountains will run with sweet wine and the hills will drip with milk. The restored exiles of Israel will rebuild the ruined cities and plant gardens and vineyards, whose fruits they will enjoy. The people will be firmly planted in their land, which G-d has given them.

Obadi'ah

Chapter 1

Ob-La-Di Obadiah

Ovadya (Obadiah) first appeared in I Kings 18. When Izevel (Queen Jezebel) was killing prophets, Obadiah hid 100 of them in caves at personal risk, for which he was rewarded with the gift of prophecy himself. Obadiah was also a convert from the nation of Edom, who were descendants of Jacob's brother Esau. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 39b) says that Obadiah is like an axe whose handle is carved from one of those trees. The forest is brought down by something that came from within it.

The Edom of Obadiah's prophecy can refer to the Biblical nation of Edom and the first Temple era, to Rome and the second Temple (which was destroyed by the Romans), or to the Christian world in general. (If Edom means that, then the book would be prophesying an event in our future, presumably the war of Gog and Magog.)

G-d has sent a message about Edom. The nations will go to war against her; they consider her insignificant. (Rashi quotes the Talmud in Avodah Zarah 10a that the other nations looked down on Edom because they didn't have their own script or language.) Edom let the evil in her heart seduce her into speaking out against Israel. They "live in the cracks of the rocks of (their) high dwelling," meaning that Edom relies on the merits of our common ancestors, Abraham and Isaac, though that won't be enough to save them.

Edom is full of herself, asking “Who could possibly bring me back down to earth?” G-d says that even if they put their “nest” between the stars, He will bring them down from there. If burglars came by night, they would only rob until they had enough. This will not be the case with Edom, who will be picked clean by their enemies. Their allies will betray them.

What did Edom do to deserve this punishment? They oppressed their brother Jacob (Israel), either actively in the destruction of the Second Temple, or tacitly in the destruction of the first. Assuming we are speaking of the first Temple, they stood far off, offering no help against the Babylonians. If anything, they rejoiced in Israel’s downfall and stretched out their hands to plunder their wealth. The day of G-d over all nations is close at hand; as Edom did to others will be done to them. Payback for their actions will be deposited on their heads.

On Mt. Zion there will be a refuge and it will be holy. (“It” could refer either to the mountain or to the group of people there.) Israel will inherit that which they inherited before, plus they will inherit from Edom, Moav and the Philistines. The house of Jacob will be fire, the house of Joseph will be flame and the house of Esau (Edom) will be like straw; they will be consumed. (Why is Joseph singled out? The Talmud in Baba Basra 123b says that only Joseph’s descendants will be able to defeat Esau’s descendants. If any other Tribe asked Edom, “Why did you persecute your brother?” they could reply “YOU persecuted YOUR brother!” Joseph, however, could say “I forgave my brothers for harming me, why don’t you forgive yours?”)

There will be no survivor from Edom, for G-d has spoken. The people Israel will inherit the mountain of Esau, the Philistines, and other lands. The masses of Jews exiled as far as France and Spain will inherit the cities of the south. Saviors – possibly referring to Moshiach (the Messiah) and other great leaders of Jewish history – will ascend Mt. Zion to judge Edom. At that time, the whole world will recognize the kingship of G-d.

Jonah

Chapter 1

Not Just a Fish Story

Jonah (Yonah), the son of Amitai, was first mentioned as a prophet in II Kings chapter 14, during the reign of Jeroboam II. There is an opinion that Jonah was the boy revived by the prophet Elijah in I Kings 17.

G-d told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which was a very large non-Jewish city. Yonah was to deliver a message that G-d has had it with their evil. Yonah did not want to deliver this prophecy, seeing it as a “lose-lose” situation. Either they wouldn’t listen to him or, worse, they would. If Nineveh heeded the words of G-d’s prophets, the Jews would look really bad for not doing so. So, Jonah got on a ship going to Tarshish, knowing that he could not receive any further prophecies outside of Israel. (He was so anxious to go that he paid his fare in advance, counter to the practice of the time.)

Even if G-d wouldn't send prophecies to Jonah at sea, Jonah was hardly out of His reach. G-d sent a storm to toss the ship around. The sailors were terrified. They prayed to their idols and threw the cargo overboard. Jonah, however, went below and took a nap. The captain woke him up and said, "What's the matter with you? Get up and pray to your G-d!" (He hadn't been praying because He knew that G-d sent the storm in His anger at Jonah.)

Seeing that only they were affected by the storm, and that prayer wasn't cutting it, the sailors decided to cast lots to see who had brought this upon them. Sure enough, the lot fell on Jonah, so they asked him what he had done. He told them that he had run away from G-d's mission and he advised them that the only way to get the storm to subside would be to toss him into the sea. They first tried to steer the ship back to land, but they were unsuccessful. They reluctantly agreed to toss Jonah overboard, praying that G-d forgive them for doing so. As soon as Jonah was in the water, the sea calmed down. This so impressed the sailors that they became converts and offered sacrifices to G-d.

Chapter 2

Jonah's Prayer

So, there's Jonah, flopping around in the water, but G-d wasn't about to leave him like that. He sent a gigantic fish that swallowed Jonah whole. Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days. (The word for fish switches from "dag" to "dagah." Rashi cites a Midrash that there were two fish; a male fish expelled Jonah in favor of a female fish.) Jonah prayed to G-d, comparing the fish to the grave. Since G-d miraculously kept him alive inside the fish, Jonah knew that he would survive. He had sunk to the deepest depths, but G-d raised him up. Jonah recognized his own wrongdoing and thanked G-d for His kindness, so G-d ordered the fish to spit him out onto dry land.

Chapter 3

Crisis Averted

After he was expelled from the fish, G-d spoke to Jonah again. He told Jonah to go to Nineveh and this time to do what G-d says. Nineveh was a particularly large city for the time, a three-day walk around the perimeter. Jonah walked through the city and proclaimed that in forty days, the city would be overturned. (Rashi explains that it would be "overturned" rather than "destroyed" because overturned could also have a positive connotation, i.e. spiritually overturned through repentance.) The people heeded Jonah, donning sackcloth and fasting.

When the king of Nineveh heard about this, he got off his throne and joined his people sitting in ashes. He had it announced throughout his kingdom that everyone should fast and wear sackcloth, both man and beast. The people were to cry out to G-d and renounce their evil ways. G-d saw their sincerity and agreed not to demolish the city.

Chapter 4

Out of his Gourd

Jonah was grieved that the Assyrians responded so readily to G-d's warning, because the Jews were typically obstinate when it came to such things. (Also, the people of Nineveh gave up robbery and other unjust interpersonal behavior, but they still worshipped idols. G-d forgave them nonetheless, and even used them as His instrument to punish Israel, which seemed unfair to Jonah.) Jonah was so despondent that he prayed to G-d that he should die, rather than see the evil that would befall the Jews for not repenting. G-d said, "My, you are upset, aren't you? Come here, I want to show you something."

Jonah left the city and lived in a hut to see what would happen in the city. G-d made a plant called a kikayon grow and shelter Jonah from the hot sun. (The kikayon was possibly a gourd, but there are other translations.) Jonah rejoiced over the kikayon. Then, G-d had a worm eat into the kikayon, which withered, allowing the hot sun to beat down on Jonah. Again, Jonah said that he preferred to die.

G-d replied to Jonah, "You're so upset about a gourd that you didn't even grow yourself! You got it for nothing and it went away just as easily! Shouldn't I give at least as much consideration to a great city of people and animals?" As far as their continuing idolatry, G-d said that the people were childlike, not knowing their right from their left; since they couldn't tell the difference between the real G-d and false "gods," He was not going to punish them for that.

The Book of Jonah is read in its entirety on Yom Kippur afternoon.

Micah

Chapter 1

Jackals, Owls, Ostriches and Eagles

Micah the Morashti lived during the reigns of Yosam, Achaz and Chizkiyahu in Judah. (Micah is mentioned in Jeremiah chapter 26.) G-d spoke to him about the fate of Samaria and Israel, the northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes.

"Everybody listen up! G-d is warning you that He is going to come down here and walk all over you! Mountains and valleys will melt and split because of the sins of Israel. Who caused these sins? Samaria! And who caused the sins of Judah? Jerusalem!" (Samaria and Jerusalem were the capitals of the two Jewish nations. Micah was saying that the rulers were responsible for the behavior of their people.) Micah continues, "G-d will make Samaria into a mound; He will lay it bare. All of their idols will be destroyed and the wealth associated with them will be plundered by invaders." Israel is considered "married" to G-d and idolatry is compared to adultery. Accordingly, Micah compares the idols' gold and silver to a prostitute's wages.

Micah says that because of the dire fate, he will mourn, wailing like a jackal or an owl (or perhaps an ostrich). The punishment striking Israel will extend into Judah, reaching as far as Jerusalem. (We see this prophecy fulfilled in II Kings 18-19.) Don't tell them this in the city of Gath because the Philistines who live there will gloat over Israel's downfall. The houses of Afra will be demolished, the people of Shafir shuttled into captivity, and the people of Zaanan will not escape. The people did evil and hoped to go unpunished, but G-d brought punishment to their doorstep.

Micah tell the people of Lachish to hitch the horses and flee because idolatry in Judah started there. They taught others to worship idols, so they will have to turn to the Philistines for aid. Conquerors are coming; you'll pull your hair out until you're bald like an eagle because of the exile.

Chapter 2

You Don't Have Anything Better to Do?

Micah says woe to those who lie in bed, plotting all their evil, then perform it in the morning. They have to power to just take whatever they want, so their plans are effectively already a "done deal." G-d says that He'll plan evil for the nation who does this; they will not be able to get out of it.

When the evil G-d has planned comes to pass, there will be mourning in the form of a parable. (Radak says this refers to false prophets, who will intentionally obscure their meanings to conceal that their words do not come true.) The people will say, "We've been robbed! Our land has been given to the enemy! How can we get G-d to give us back our inheritance?" Therefore, don't let anyone divide hereditary property. (If false prophets are saying this, then the meaning is that they are hypocrites, mourning over a destruction that they caused. Their own lines will be cut off, so there will be no one to inherit from them.)

Micah tells the real prophets not to preach to the people, since all they do is mock G-d's words. (The Radak says that the people are telling the prophets not to bother preaching, since they don't intend to listen.) Is that a proper thing for them to say? Has G-d somehow lost the ability to do good for them? (Of course not!) G-d's not the one who mistreated the poor innocents! The actions of the people are what put Him on the opposite side! They're the ones who will make men's wives into widows and cause their children not to inherit what G-d gave them. Go into exile because G-d didn't give you the land in order to act this way! You contaminate the land with your evil!

The people would gladly accept the words of an obviously-false prophet who told them to party. G-d will exile the people, but He will ultimately gather them back like a shepherd gathers his sheep. Someone will go before them to break down the barriers and straighten the road before them. (The prophet Malachi says it will be Eliyahu - Elijah - see Malachi 3:23, "Behold, I send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of G-d arrives.") Their king will go before them, with G-d in the lead. (Alternatively, these last few verses refer to the exile and the king is Tzidkiyahu, who tried to escape through a breach in the walls and G-d preceded them into exile by withdrawing His presence, as we saw in the Book of Ezekiel.)

Chapter 3

Profits for Prophets

Micah told the leaders of the Jewish people to shape up and to fix things. They love corruption, not only for profit, but for its own sake. They metaphorically steal the very skin and flesh of the people. They're like cannibals, cooking the people in pots and feasting upon them. When these leaders cry out to G-d, He won't listen to them. He will allow the enemy to treat them as they treated others.

Next, Micah delivered G-d's word about the false prophets. They feed on the animals given them by their adherents while they foretell only good things. If someone doesn't feed them, then they predict doom. Things will go dark for these fakers; they will be ashamed when their predictions prove false. Micah, however, has no such fears as he really does speak G-d's word and he's "telling it like it is," whether or not it's what people want to hear.

So, listen up, you corrupt leaders of the people! You build your fortunes through violence and oppression. The judges take bribes and even the kohanim (priests) teach Torah for a price (meaning that they interpret it as the person paying would like). False prophets promise peace for profits (hence the title of this synopsis) and no one thinks that there will ever be any repercussions. Because of these crooked leaders, Jerusalem will be plowed like a field, the buildings will be razed and the site of the Temple will be overgrown.

Chapter 4

Ki MiTzion Teitzei Torah

In Messianic times, the Temple mount will be cleared of the growth of the previous chapter and once again firmly established. People of all nations will flock to it in order to serve G-d and learn His ways. The Torah will go out of Zion and the word of G-d from Jerusalem. (We say this verse when we remove the Torah from the ark.) G-d will judge disputes between the nations through His representative, the Moshiach (the Messiah). They will beat their weapons into farming implements and they will not make war any more.

Every person will dwell securely on their own land, without any invading force uprooting them. Idolatry will have been eradicated. G-d will heal the lame (perhaps referring to the nation of Israel, which has been hobbled by her exile), and He will gather the lost, whom He punished. He will restore them into a nation and He will reign over them from the Temple mount forevermore. The Davidic dynasty will be restored to Jerusalem.

But as for now, why are the Jews seeking alliances with Egypt and Assyria for protection, rather than turning to G-d? The nation will be in pains like a woman in labor when they are sent into exile and their city is destroyed. They will go to Babylonia, from where they will ultimately be redeemed. Many nations gather against Israel, hoping to see her punished for her sins. But these nations don't understand G-d's motives in allowing them to be His instrument of punishment. They are being gathered together to be punished for their own evil. The nations are like sheaves and Israel is the thresher. Israel will gore and trample their antagonists; any wealth that might be plundered will be donated to the service of G-d.

Chapter 5

The Seven Shepherds and Eight Princes

Now Micah addresses the city of Bethlehem, from which King David came. Bethlehem was fit to be among the least important cities in Judah, but instead it will be the birthplace of the Messiah. (This does NOT mean that the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem; it means that he will be descended from David, who was born in Bethlehem.) The Messiah's identity was determined from before Creation (see Rashi). G-d will allow Israel to fall into the hands of their enemies before the Messiah reveals himself and the kingdom of Judah will be reunited with the "lost" Tribes. The Messiah will return them from exile and be their king.

At that time, there will be permanent peace. If Assyria (or, presumably, some other hostile power) should invade, they would be rebuffed by the "seven shepherds and eight princes." (These are: Adam, Seth, Methuselah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Samuel, Saul, Jesse, Hezekiah - or Zedekiah - Elijah, Amos, Zephaniah and the Messiah himself. Whew! See Talmud Succah 52b.)

The evil people of Israel will be destroyed; the righteous who remain will be like dew from G-d and like rain on the crops. They will be to other nations like a lion is to a flock of sheep - they'll defer to them. Their enemies will be destroyed and Israel will have no further need of weapons. The peace will be so great that they won't even need walls around their cities. Sorcery and idolatry will be a thing of the past and G-d will spend His anger on those who refused to listen to Him.

Chapter 6

Ingrates!

Micah now tells the people to listen to what G-d has to say. He says that the Avos and Imahos (forefathers and foremothers - namely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah), whom He compares to moun-

tains and hills, should see the actions of their descendants; G-d has issues with them. What did He do to make them turn away from Him? (The Midrash points out that G-d made serving Him relatively easy. For example, the sacrifices are all from domesticated species; nobody had to go out and catch a deer or a gazelle.) If anyone has a problem with Him, they should speak up!

G-d took the nation out of Egypt and sent them leaders in the form of Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Then, King Balak of Moab plotted against the Jews and hired the pagan prophet Balaam to curse them. G-d repeatedly saved them, even when they sinned against Him. If someone would ask what to bring as a sacrifice to G-d - choice animals or perhaps their firstborn child - Micah would reply, "G-d has told you what He wants - simply do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with Him."

G-d calls out through His prophets, urging the people to repent. The rod of punishment is poised to strike and the rewards of evil don't last long. In the long run, you won't benefit by cheating people. The rich and powerful profit by oppressing others, which is why they will be struck by G-d. They will not be satisfied by what they eat - if anything, it will harm them! Attempts to rescue their children (or perhaps to have children) will prove futile. Those who are saved (or born) will fall to enemy invaders. They will plant, but not harvest. These people insist on behaving in evil ways, like the kings Omri and Ahab. They will be responsible for bringing punishment crashing down on the nation.

Chapter 7

Tashlich

Micah says that it's a poor time to be a prophet, since his generation is overwhelmingly evil. (He compares himself to the last figs of summer that remain after the gathering.) There's no righteous person (ripe figs) to be found. The people who are left are violent predators of their fellow men. In the long run, this will not benefit them - neither the crooked judge nor the official who seeks bribes. The best among them is like a hedge of thorns. Payback time is close at hand.

Don't trust a "friend." (The Talmud - Chagiga 16a - says the "friend" is the Yetzer Hara - our evil inclination - which entices us to sin on the basis that "G-d will forgive me.") The one in our own embrace (our own souls) will testify against us (ibid.). Micah's generation is all messed up; for example, children disrespectfully confront their parents and the members of one's own family are his enemies. (Sadly, this image may not be as shocking as it was when Micah first painted it.)

Micah prays to G-d and hopes for His salvation; he trusts that G-d will take care of him in exile. The invaders of Babylonia and, later, Rome should not rejoice over Israel's downfall, because Israel will rise again after each of these events. Israel can endure the wrath of G-d - which was earned - knowing full well that it is followed by redemption. When Israel's enemies see this, they will regret mocking Israel when they conquered them, saying, "Where's your G-d, huh?" Then Israel will be up and her enemies will be down.

The enemies think the day of Israel's redemption (and of their own downfalls) will never come, but it will. The Assyrian exiles will return and the land of the invaders will be desolate because of their evil actions. Micah

prays that G-d personally lead His people, like a shepherd leading a flock. At that time, there will be wonders comparable to those when the Jews left Egypt. The nations who attacked Israel will shut their mouths and will be unable to bear the news of Israel's successes. They will fear G-d and His nation, Israel.

Who is like G-d, forgiving sins against Him? He doesn't stay angry forever, preferring acts of kindness. He will cast our sins into the sea. (This is the Tashlich prayer, which is said on Rosh Hashana.) G-d will restore truth and kindness, the attributes of Jacob and Abraham, to their descendants.

Nachum

Chapter 1

What Do You Think About G-d?

Unlike most of the Twelve Prophets, little is known of Nahum (Nachum). We are not told his lineage, his background, or the kings during whose reigns he was active. Unlike Obadiah and Jonah, he does not appear elsewhere in Tanach (the Bible). We are told that he was from Elkosh, a city about which we know nothing else from Tanach. From context, we can see that Nahum was active subsequent to Jonah, as the city of Nineveh has reverted to their former evil ways. The Seder Olam places Nahum as a contemporary of the prophet Habakkuk, during the reign of Menashe, king of Judah.

G-d spoke to Nahum about Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which had repented and been spared during the time of the prophet Jonah. G-d avenges Himself against those who antagonize Him. He takes a long time to get angry, but when He's had enough, He's the wrong One to have against you. He strikes swiftly, like a storm. He dried up the sea and He will dry up the nations that do evil (compared here to rivers). Kings and rulers (compared to mountains and hills) tremble before G-d and fear his verdict. No one can stand before His fury.

Remember that G-d is good; even when He punishes some people, He simultaneously does kindness for others, specifically those who place their trust in Him. But His anger will put a swift end to His enemies.

Nahum asks the people of Nineveh, whose punishment he is foretelling, what they think of G-d. Do they think He's unable to pull off what He said He would do? He will put Nineveh down with one fell swoop; they will not get back up. They will be struck quickly, during their partying, and be consumed like dry straw. (The Radak explains that dry straw burns quickly and is wholly consumed.)

Nineveh is not a nice place. You know who came from Nineveh? Sennacherib, who plotted against G-d. G-d says that even if all the people of Nineveh agree, and even if they are many, they will no longer trouble Israel. G-d is breaking Assyria's hold over Israel and He will free the Jews from their control. G-d tells the king of Assyria that he is the last of his line; his sons will not succeed him. G-d will cut off the idols of Assyria and He has

prepared the grave for the king. (The Radak feels that this prophecy refers to Sennacherib, but Rashi feels that it refers to Eisar-Chadon, Sennacherib's successor. This makes sense, as Sennacherib appears to have been succeeded by his son, counter to this prophecy, although other sons assassinated him and fled to Ararat. Compare with II Kings 19:36-37.)

Chapter 2

Assyria's Not All That

Nahum says to behold a messenger carrying good news - that when the king of Assyria is punished (as described in the previous chapter), the Jews will be free to live in Judah and go to Jerusalem and the Temple. They should pay their debts, which they promised (e.g., "G-d, if you save us from Assyria, then I'll do X, Y and Z...") The Assyrians will no longer oppress them; they'll be too busy defending themselves from the Babylonians! G-d has restored the pride of the nation - Jerusalem - to its former status.

The Babylonians are poised to strike Assyria. Their chariots will zoom through the streets of Nineveh, creating chaos. The king of Assyria will dispatch his army, who will flee. The city gates are opened and the palace will be bombarded. The queen will be abducted and her ladies-in-waiting will mourn. Nineveh had previously been calm, like a pool of water, but now they must flee while their enemies pursue. The invaders will loot the treasures of Nineveh and the hearts of the Assyrians will melt.

What happened to Nineveh, which used to be the seat of a world power (symbolized by a lion's den)? G-d will set fire to their chariots and import the swords of the enemy. No longer will Assyria prey on other nations and the emissaries who used to threaten other countries (as in II Kings 18) will disappear.

Chapter 3

Unpopular Assyria

Nahum says woe to Nineveh, which he calls here the "city of blood," a term later used by Ezekiel to describe Jerusalem. (See Ezekiel chapter 22. The Book of Ezekiel appears earlier in the Bible, but Ezekiel lived about 200 years after Nahum.) Here come invading horses, chariots and armed soldiers! There will be no end to the casualties in Nineveh. Nineveh was very smooth - they could sweet talk other nations into a false sense of security before conquering them. G-d will expose them to the other nations. (The prophet compares Nineveh to a seductress and her punishment as one given a harlot.) G-d will make them disgusting, like dung. Anyone who sees Nineveh in this degraded state will comment how far they have fallen, but nobody will feel bad for them because they oppressed everyone else.

Nineveh is no better than Alexandria (here called No-Amon); they were a great and mighty city, but they were also conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. What happened to Alexandria will happen to Nineveh; Nineveh will dis-

appear as if they never existed. The fortresses of Nineveh will be easy to conquer, like shaking a fig tree and having the ripest figs just fall off, into Babylonia's mouth.

The army of Nineveh will be as easily overcome as the women of the city. The enemy will take the land and set fire to it. The people will stockpile water for the duration of the siege, they'll try to fortify their strongholds, but it will do no good. The fire and the sword will overpower them like locusts tear through a field of crops. (Nahum then expounds upon the locust metaphor for a few verses.)

The leaders and warriors of Assyria are fast asleep - that is, powerless in the face of the Babylonian onslaught. The people are disorganized with no one to rally them. No one mourns for Assyria - they didn't exactly make friends. They oppressed everyone else, so the other nations are glad to see them gone.

Habakkuk

Chapter 1

Yeah, But Who Wants Sandy Captives?

Like Nahum, the text doesn't tell us much about Habakkuk (Chavakuk in Hebrew - the double K in the translation is because of the dagesh in the letter kuf; it's a grammar thing.) The Seder Olam places him, along with Joel and Nahum, during the reign of King Menashe in Judah, whose name is omitted because of his evil. The tradition is that Habakkuk is the son of the Shunammite woman, revived by the prophet Elisha in II Kings 4. When he predicted the child's birth, Elisha said, "At this time next year, you will embrace a son." The word "embrace" (chovekes) is related to the name Chavakuk.

Habakkuk cries out to G-d, "How long must we put up with violence before You save us?" (Rashi says this refers to the then-future Babylonian invasion.) Why must Habakkuk be forced to see evil through his prophetic visions, but the ones who perpetrate that evil are not punished? When the Jews see the evil prosper, it discourages them from observing the Torah. The evil ones are influencing the righteous ones.

Look at the other nations and be amazed because G-d is performing a deed that they will see, but not believe. (The Radak says it refers to the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar, who was a contemporary of Habakkuk.) G-d is organizing the Kasdim (Chaldeans) against Israel. They will overrun the world with their horses, which are faster than leopards and their soldiers, who are more vicious than wolves. Their horsemen will fly like eagles to consume. They will eagerly plunder the land and scoop up captives like sand. The Jewish kings and officers will be a source of derision for the Chaldeans; they will laugh at Israel's so-called "defenses," easily capturing them with their siege engines.

When they see they are successful, the Chaldeans will attribute it to their idols. Habakkuk asks G-d why He should put up with that. Unlike their idols, G-d will never die. (The text euphemistically says that WE will not

die.) G-d may have set this siege against Israel as a punishment, but why should He watch the Jews be punished by invaders who are even worse?

G-d has made people like fish and Nebuchadnezzar like a fisherman, scooping them up at will. Nebuchadnezzar is pleased with his catch and he thanks his idols, not that they have anything to do with it. G-d shouldn't have to put up with that.

Chapter 2

Carrying a Beam Made of Mud

Habakkuk drew a circle on the ground and said to G-d, "I will not leave this place until you answer my question." (This behavior was later emulated by Choni HaM'agel - "the circle-drawer" - as described in Taanis 23a.) Habakkuk was asking why the evil ones go unpunished and he was being derided by non-believers who claimed that Divine justice was anything but just. G-d replied to him in a vision and told Habakkuk to write it down on a tablet. He told Habakkuk that in his future, another prophet would receive a prophecy about the downfall of Babylonia and Israel's salvation. Even though he may tarry, wait for him. (Sound familiar? It's quoted by the Rambam - Maimonides - in the 13 Principles of Faith and paraphrased by the Ani Maamin, referring to Moshiach - the Messiah.)

The evil person is full of himself; he is never satisfied, but a righteous person lives by his faith in G-d. The arrogant one will not remain; he can never have enough to make himself happy, even though he collected all the other nations. (Rashi says this refers to Belshazzar, whom we will meet in the Book of Daniel.) All the people who were subjugated by Belshazzar will speak against him, saying that his wealth isn't really his, since it will be carried off by conquering Medes. Gathering wealth is a futile activity, like carrying around a beam of mud - burdensome but ultimately useless. The fate is the grave. (The Hebrew word "avtit" could mean "a beam of mud" or simply "thick mud.")

Since the evil person drove people from their homes and plundered their lands, such will be done to him. Woe to the person who robs others to build himself a palace; his actions have sinned against his own life. (The Radak says this refers to Nebuchadnezzar.) The very stones and wood that Nebuchadnezzar plundered as building materials will metaphorically testify against him. (The Radak says this means that it was common knowledge that Babylonia was built up using materials stolen from conquered lands.)

Furthermore, woe to the person who builds their city on acts of violence. (This may refer to the Romans.) When all these evil nations meet their downfall, isn't that from G-d? All their labors will be consumed and their efforts will have been for nothing. Everyone will recognize that this came from G-d. Woe to one who betrays his allies in order to take advantage of them; such people have more shame than honor. They will have it turned back on them by G-d. The violence done against Israel and the Temple will be their undoing. Their idols are useless. Woe to those who put their trust in wood and stone to save them. Such idols, even when covered with gold and silver are not alive. G-d, however, takes action, so the whole world should be in awe of Him.

Chapter 3

Oops. Sorry.

Habakkuk had questioned G-d in the previous chapter, and G-d answered his questions. Now Habakkuk apologizes for daring to question Him.

The prophet says that he always heard that G-d punished the evil, but he saw that Nebuchadnezzar was being permitted to thrive. When he had a prophecy that Israel would be punished, Habakkuk feared that they might not be able to endure it. He asked that G-d punish Israel's enemies for the troubles inflicted upon them and have mercy on His people.

Habakkuk alludes to the incident in which G-d offered the Torah to the descendants of Esau and Ishmael (who refused it) before He gave it to the Jews at Mt. Sinai. At Sinai, G-d's glory filled the Heavens and the Earth and He revealed His normally-hidden might. The angel of death was diverted and other Heavenly beings stood at the ready for G-d's command.

G-d was the One Who punished the world through the flood and the dispersion (after the incident with the "Tower of Babel"). The mighty were humbled before Him and He controls everything in the world.

Because of their sins, Israel was made vulnerable to their enemies, but they turned to G-d and He saved them. When G-d split the Red Sea and the Jordan River (in the Book of Joshua), it wasn't because He was angry with the bodies of water; He did it to save His people. He reveals His might and the promise that He made to the Tribes of Israel lasts forever. He brought them water from rocks and saved them from the ambush at Arnon. The very Heavens thank G-d; He made them stand still for Joshua (see chapter 10 of that Book).

G-d drove the Canaanite nations out before Israel. Just as He saved them then, He will do so again. Similarly, He will crush Gog, king of the evil nation of Magog. G-d will defeat Gog's many invading forces, just as He defeated the "unbeatable" Egyptian and Assyrian armies. Babylonia trembles at the thought of what G-d did to Egypt that the same will happen to them. Babylonia is on the decline; their efforts will be fruitless. (Literally, as the prophet speaks of their crops failing.) Israel will rejoice in G-d, Who saves them. He gives them strength and guides them, so they will sing praises to Him!

Zephaniah

Chapter 1

Not Looking Forward to This

G-d spoke to Tzefanya (Zephaniah), a descendant of Chizkiyahu (the righteous King Hezekiah), during the reign of Yoshiyahu (Josiah, a king who repented and became righteous). G-d said that He would eradicate the

inhabitants of Israel, from man and beast to fish and fowl. (This is an overstatement for emphasis; they were not completely destroyed, but they were seriously reduced.) G-d will exile those people who are not killed. He will destroy the idols of the land and there will be no trace of Baal worship left in Judah or Jerusalem. G-d will do away with the idolatrous priests, those who worship both Him and others, and those who refuse to seek Him or follow His word. The day is near - it will be like a slaughter for a feast and the invading armies are like the invited guests.

On the day when G-d punishes people for their actions, He will punish the officers of the land for oppressing the people and worshipping idols. They went so far as to jump over the threshold of the temple of Dagon where the idol was felled way back in I Samuel chapter 5. When G-d acts, there will be a cry from the gate of Jerusalem called the fish gate and mourning from the next gate (the fowl gate, Rashi says). Woe to Tiberias because the people who inhabit the land they inherited from the Canaanites have been cut off, because their deeds now resemble those of the Canaanites.

G-d will scrutinize the people's deeds, as if searching with candles and He will pay back those complacent people who claim that He neither rewards nor punishes deeds. Their wealth will be worthless and their houses will be empty. They won't get to enjoy their homes and crops. This day is rapidly approaching; mighty men will cry out in pain. It will be a day of darkness and gloom when the enemies press their attack. The people will have no idea how to end their troubles. Their lives will be worth nothing and easily cast aside; their corpses will be piled in heaps like dung. Their money and power won't save them from this onslaught. G-d's anger will make a sudden end of things.

Chapter 2

Operation Solomon?

Through Zephaniah, G-d tells the people to assess their deeds, calling them a people that has not heretofore been interested in doing His will. They should do this before His decree is fulfilled and they are swept away by G-d's anger like chaff or smoke. The humble and G-d-fearing are encouraged to seek Him; perhaps they can mitigate His judgment and merit exile for themselves, rather than destruction.

Various cities, including Gaza, Ashkelon and Ashdod will be desolate. The sea shore will become a passing place for shepherds and their flocks. The sheep will graze where people used to live. Ultimately, though, G-d will return the people from their exile.

G-d heard the people of Amon and Moav cheering as the Jews were led into captivity, so He will make their end like that of Sodom and Gemorrah. (Remember that the ancestors of Amon and Moav were born of Lot's daughters in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom - see Genesis chapter 19.) The survivors of Israel will inherit what is left from Amon and Moav as a punishment for the arrogance of those nations when Israel was down.

The awe of G-d will ultimately come over all nations and their idols will be destroyed. The Jews exiled to Cush (Ethiopia) will return. (Could this refer to the Ethiopian Jews who returned in recent years, in Operations

Moses, Joshua and Solomon?) Assyria, where the majority of the Tribes were exiled, will be dismantled; their land will be taken over by animals and birds. Pelicans and owls will perch in their decorative lumber. Nineveh, capital of Assyria, once so proud and complacent, is destroyed. This will amaze passersby.

Chapter 3

There's No Need to Fear!

Zephaniah says woe to Jerusalem, polluted by her sins. She is like a dove - a pretty bird, but perhaps not the smartest in the coop. She refused to obey G-d's Torah and did not heed the prophets who tried to steer her back onto the proper path. The leaders of the city are predators, the false prophets are treacherous, and the kohanim (priests) have undermined the Torah by perverting its teachings. But G-d's presence rests in the city and He has a "front-row seat." He won't tolerate this. He has punished nations for such things, emptying them out. If they would but listen to Him, Jerusalem could be spared this fate, but they continue in their evil ways. Since they will not relent, G-d says they should expect the day He is sending.

G-d is gathering nations against them and the land will feel the effects of His anger. Subsequent to this, the nations of the world will all recognize the One G-d, worshiping Him alone. The Jews will no longer be ashamed of their misdeeds, which will be forgiven and forgotten. The unrepentant will be removed, leaving those who submit to G-d. Those who remain will not commit acts of injustice or falsehood; they will get along peacefully. Everyone will sing and rejoice because G-d has removed the things that afflict the people. G-d Himself is King of Israel and He will allow no harm to come to His people.

The people of Jerusalem will have no fear. G-d is among them and He will rejoice over them. His love for them will cause Him to overlook their faults. He will remove those who desecrated His Sabbaths and holidays; such people were a shame on the nation. G-d will punish Israel's oppressors, rescue the helpless and gather the scattered ones. They will have praise in the land where they once had shame. The exiles of both Jewish nations, Judah and the "lost" ten Tribes of Israel, will all be gathered together in plain sight of all mankind.

Haggai

Chapter 1

Building Resumes

During the reign of King Darius of Persia, who was the son of Esther and Achashverosh, G-d spoke to Haggai and gave him a message for Zerubbabel, son of the governor of Judah and for Joshua, son of Yehotzadak, the high priest. G-d said that the people claimed that the time to rebuild the Temple had not yet arrived

and he told Chaggai to tell the people that it was inappropriate for them to sit in their houses of cedar while the Temple remained in ruins. G-d told the people to consider the fact that there was no blessing in their endeavors; they plant much but harvest little, they eat and drink but are not satisfied, and their clothes do not provide them with warmth. All of this is because the Temple has been destroyed. Therefore, G-d says that they should consider their ways in order to improve them. They should ascend the Temple Mount and bring building materials and G-d will accept them. G-d says, "I will be honored." (The word "I will be honored" in Hebrew, v'ekavda, is spelled missing the letter heh, whose numerical value is five. Rashi says that this alludes to the five items from the first Temple which were not present in the second Temple, namely the Ark, the Urim and Tumim, the fire from Heaven that consumes the sacrifices, G-d's Presence, and the prophetic spirit, as described in Talmud Yoma 21b.)

G-d told the people that they expected to yield much but they in fact received little and when they brought home what little they produced He caused it to be destroyed because the Temple was lying in ruins. This is why G-d has held the heavens back so that there is no rain and kept the earth from yielding produce. G-d has caused a drought of grain, wine and oil, on man and beast.

Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the people listened to the words of G-d which he had sent through Haggai and they feared G-d. Haggai related to the people that G-d said, "I am with you," meaning that they should not be afraid of their enemies because He will protect them from harm.

The building of the Second Temple had previously been started under the reign of King Cyrus, but it had been opposed by the enemies of the Jews and it remained incomplete for three years during the reign of Cyrus, the fourteen years which Achashverosh reigned and the first year of the reign of his son Darius. Now G-d inspired Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people to resume construction of the Second Temple, which began in the second year of the reign of Darius.

Chapter 2

G-d Puts His Ring Back On

G-d spoke again to Haggai telling him to speak with Zerubbabel, the grandson of the governor of Judah, to Joshua the son of Yehotzadak, the High Priest, and to the people. The first Temple had been destroyed only 70 years earlier and G-d said that there were many people still alive who remembered it. In many ways, the second Temple could not compare to the first. G-d tells Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people to be strong because He is with them. They should be careful to keep the Torah, which He gave the people when they left Egypt. So long as they do so, G-d's spirit of prophecy will continue to dwell among them. (Shortly thereafter, prophecy did depart, as described by Rashi in Talmud Yoma 21b.)

G-d says that another nation - namely Greece - will rise up and He will shake things up a bit. (Rashi says that this refers to the Hasmoneans, also known as the Maccabees.) G-d will shake up all the nations (referring to Alexander the Great) and they will march on Jerusalem in an attempt to conquer the second Temple. (The reason for his failure to do so is described in Talmud Yoma 69a.)

G-d says that silver and gold are His and it is up to Him to whom to give them. Even though the second Temple will not compare with the first, in some ways it will exceed the first (namely that it would stand longer and its dimensions would be larger). Though there will be wars, for the most part the second Temple era would have long periods of peace.

G-d spoke again to Haggai regarding the Kohanim (priests). Haggai asked them if a person carried impure flesh in the hem of his garment, which then touched various types of foodstuffs, whether they would be contaminated. The Kohanim replied no. (There is a discussion in the Talmud, Pesachim 17a, as to whether or not their answer was correct; it all depends on how you understand the question). Haggai then asked whether a dead body would contaminate these foodstuffs and they replied yes. Haggai replied that the Kohanim erred in many halachos (Jewish laws) and they must dedicate themselves to improving their learning. From the time they started rebuilding the Temple, they did not have blessing in their handiwork so that there would be less grain and produce than anticipated. Now the seeds have not yet been planted and the trees have not yet borne fruit; from this time going forward G-d will bless them.

G-d spoke to Haggai one more time telling him to speak to Zerubbabel. G-d would shake up the world, overthrowing kingdoms (referring to the Greek conquest of the Persians). When this happens, G-d will raise Zerubbabel up, making him like the signet of a ring. (This is in contrast to Zerubbabel's ancestor Yehoyachin, king of Judah, about whom it says in Jeremiah chapter 22 that G-d would remove him like a man removes a signet ring from his hand.)

Zechariah

Chapter 1

Four Horses, But Only One Horseman

The prophecy of Zechariah is, according to Rashi, a "closed book," whose visions are very difficult to understand. The prophet Zechariah was a descendant of Iddo the Seer, whom we see elsewhere in Tanach (the Bible). Zechariah was a contemporary of the prophet Haggai.

G-d spoke to Zechariah in the second year of the reign of Darius, prior to the Jews resuming work on the construction of the second Temple. G-d said that He had been angry with the generation of the first Temple and He encouraged the current generation to return to Him. They should not be like their ancestors, who refused to listen to the earlier prophets. Look how they suffered for their deeds with famine, plague and war. If the people would respond, "What about the prophets? They died too!" what do you want, that they should live forever? The reality is that the words of G-d's prophets did come true and the people were punished for their evil behavior.

G-d spoke to Zechariah a few months later and gave him a vision. He saw a man (an angel) riding a red horse, standing among myrtles in a pool of water. Following him were red, black and white horses. (These horses refer to the various empires who would conquer one another. The pool represents Babylonia and the myrtles represent the Jews in exile there.) Zechariah asks for the vision to be explained and an angel said, "I will show you." The angel who had been riding the red horse said, "These are the ones whom G-d sends back and forth on the Earth." (We see from the book of Job that the angels are the ones whom G-d sends back and forth to the Earth.)

The others replied that while walking back and forth on the Earth, they saw that the world was quiet and at rest, meaning that while Israel was in exile the nations of the world were at peace. The first angel replied by asking how long G-d will not have mercy on Jerusalem, with whom He has been angry for 70 years. G-d replied through an angel that He will exact payment from those who have unduly oppressed Jerusalem. G-d was a little angry with Israel and sought to exile them but the nations went above and beyond in their oppression of the Jewish people. Therefore, G-d will return to Jerusalem with mercy, not because the Jews have necessarily earned it. The city will be spread out in all directions because of the vast number of people who will return there. G-d will console the Jewish people and continue to choose Jerusalem as His holy city.

Chapter 2

Four Horns

Zechariah looked up and saw four horns (horns as in "ox horns" as opposed to, say, trumpets). Zechariah asked what these horns represented and he was told that these likewise represent the various conquering nations: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. Then Zechariah saw four carpenters coming to saw down these horns. (These carpenters refer to various messianic figures including Moshiach himself, the Moshiach ben Yosef, Elijah the prophet and the Kohen Gadol.) The carpenters cut down the horns and threw them away.

Zechariah looked up and saw a man (an angel) with a tape measure in his hand. He asked the angel where he was going and the angel replied, to measure Jerusalem. Another angel came and told the angel with the tape measure not to bother because Jerusalem would be like an unwalled city, expanding ever outward because of the masses of people who would live there. If Jerusalem will be unwalled, how will it be protected? Don't worry, says G-d; He will be the wall around Jerusalem.

G-d tells the people of Judah to return from Babylonia, wherever they were exiled, and the people of the ten Tribes to return from the lands where Assyria has scattered them. G-d says that anyone who has injured the Jewish people injures himself. (This is a euphemism for saying that anyone who attacks the Jewish people actually attacks G-d.) G-d raises his hands and the nations who now oppress Israel will find themselves serving them; the nations will know that this came from G-d.

The rest of this chapter refers to the Messianic era when Israel will rejoice and G-d will dwell among them. Many nations will join Israel in the worship of the One G-d, Who will dwell in their midst. G-d will again choose Israel and Jerusalem and the rest of the nations will be silent when G-d takes this action.

Chapter 3

Say Tin

G-d showed Zechariah a vision of Joshua the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) standing before an angel with prosecuting angel nearby to accuse him. G-d reprimanded the prosecuting angel saying that He chose Jerusalem and that Joshua the Kohein Gadol was pulled from the fire (referring to an incident related in Sanhedrin 93a). Joshua the Kohein Gadol was wearing filthy garments, representative of sins. (The Talmud says that his sons married non-Jewish women.) The angel instructed the dirty clothes to be removed from Joshua and be replaced with clean clothes and a pure cap placed on his head, saying to Joshua, "I have removed your sin from you."

The angel instructed Joshua saying, "Thus says G-d: If you walk My ways and follow My instructions, then you will judge over My Temple and guard My courtyards." Joshua was told that he and his companions (Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the Book of Daniel) are holy men, worthy of having miracles performed for them. G-d will send His servant, the "sprout" or "shoot" of David (Moshiach, the Messiah). G-d has placed before Joshua the cornerstone of the second Temple, whose foundation had already begun to be laid. People will look at it and open their eyes seven times as wide when they see it. G-d will thwart the plans of those who are trying to stop the construction of the second Temple and He will remove the sin of the land in one day. (Rashi says he does not know what day that is.) When the Temple is completed, the people will live in peace under their vines and trees.

The accusing angel in this chapter is called the Satan (pronounced sah-tahn, not say-tin). It is the Satan's first appearance in the Bible, preceding his better known role in Iyov (the Book of Job). The Satan is not a "devil" in Jewish thought, nor does he rule over Hell; he is merely an angel whose job is to serve as a prosecutor.

Chapter 4

Happy Chanukah?

The angel who spoke with Zechariah returned and woke him up. He asked Zechariah what he had seen in his vision. Zechariah responded that he saw a golden menorah with its bowl of oil on top and seven lamps (in which the oil and wicks were placed). There were seven tubes going to the lamps. (Rashi says seven tubes to each lamp; the Radak says seven altogether, one going to each lamp.) There were two olive trees next to the menorah, one on either side. Zechariah asked the angel what these represent. (Rashi, based on materials that we will see shortly, explains that the menorah ran on "automatic." The trees would beat themselves into the vats and the oil would flow into the lamps by itself.) The angel answered Zechariah that this is the word of G-d to Zerubbabel saying, "The Temple will be built not by military force or physical might but by the spirit of G-d, which He will place upon Darius." Who do the officers of the other nations think they are to stop G-d's Temple from being built? They will have no more power before Zerubbabel. When he brings out the cornerstone everyone will cheer how beautiful the Temple will be.

G-d spoke again to Zechariah saying that Zerubbabel started laying the foundation of the Temple in the days of Cyrus and he is the one who will complete its construction. When this happens, everyone will know that Zechariah's prophecy was sent by G-d. Those who considered it a small thing when the Temple foundation was laid will rejoice when they see Zerubbabel coming to lay the cornerstone. G-d's "eyes" are looking throughout the world to guard the Jews from those who would seek to prevent the Temple from being rebuilt.

Zechariah asked what the two olive trees on either side of the menorah are meant to represent. He was told that they represent the kingship and the priesthood, namely Zerubbabel (the governor of Judah) and Joshua (the High Priest). They are called the anointed ones of G-d even though they were not anointed with the special oil that was used from the time of Moses until it was hidden away by King Josiah. (The Radak says that Zerubbabel and Joshua were in fact anointed with this oil, but this opinion is hard to understand as it contradicts the statement throughout the Talmud that this oil did not exist in the time of the second Temple.)

There are those who interpret the prophecy of this chapter as referring to the Chanukah story, using the menorah as its central theme and stressing as it does that victory will not come through military might. (Remember, the Maccabees were greatly outnumbered by the Syrian-Greeks.) As we will soon see, Zechariah also addresses the threat of assimilation, which was the main conflict in the Chanukah story. There are other aspects of the prophecy that can easily apply to Chanukah as well. (And don't we mention Zerubbabel in the song Maoz Tzur? Coincidence? I think not!)

Chapter 5

Flying Scrolls, Weights, Measures and Storks' Wings

Zechariah looked up and he saw a flying scroll (or perhaps a folded scroll). The angel asked what he saw and Zechariah replied a flying (folded) scroll twenty cubits by ten cubits. (If the word "afah" means folded, then unfolded it would measure twenty cubits by twenty cubits) The angel told him that this represents the curse that would come upon those who steal and those who swear falsely. Those who did so prior to this time have already paid for their sins through the destruction and exile. This curse will be the punishment of thieves and those who swear falsely from this point forward. It will come into their homes and destroy not only them but their very houses.

The angel told Zechariah to look and see what was coming. Zechariah saw an ephah (a type of measure) coming forward. The angel told him that this represents the punishments of those who look over the land to see what they could obtain through robbery and oppression. Next, Zechariah saw a weight of lead being lifted. There was a woman sitting in the ephah and the angel told him that this woman represents the personification Risha, Evil. The angel put her in the ephah and put the lead weight in her mouth. Next, Zechariah saw two women (angels?) coming forward with wings like those of a stork. (The Radak says these women represent the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in exile.) The women took the ephah and flew with it to the land of Shinar where they were to place it on a base. (Shinar is Babylonia and Rashi says that the base is the population of Jews that were exiled there. After the destruction of the second Temple, it was the scholars of the exile who would write the more authoritative Babylonian Talmud.) In any event, this prophecy is very difficult to decipher.

Chapter 6

More Horses

Zechariah looked up and he saw four chariots coming from between two mountains of copper, which represent strong kingdoms. The first chariot was driven by red horses, the second by black horses, the third by white horses and the fourth by spotted and gray horses. (According to Rashi, the red horses represent Babylonia, the black horses are Media, the white are Persia and the spotted are Greece. The Radak says that the black horses are both Persia and Media, the white horses are Greece, the spotted horses are the Arab empires and the gray horses are Rome.) Zechariah asked the angel what these chariots and horses represent; the angel replied that these are the “guardian angels” of the nations that rule over the world. The drivers of the chariots went to G-d, Who gave them permission to rule.

The chariot driven by black horses went to the north, followed by the chariot driven by white horses. The spotted horses went to the south and the gray horses got permission to go out in all different directions. The angel said to Zechariah that the chariots heading north have relieved G-d of his metaphorical pain by destroying Babylonia, who angered Him through their treatment of the Jews. (Why doesn't it say where the chariot driven by red horses went? Because the red horses represented Babylonia, whose rule was already finished.)

G-d spoke again to Zechariah, saying that he should take people from among the exiles with him to the house of Josiah the son of Zephaniah, who was already living in Jerusalem. They should bring silver and gold with which to make crowns to be placed on the head of Joshua the High Priest. They should tell Joshua that Zerubbabel, the “shoot,” will spring up and build the Temple of G-d. (Rashi mentions that there are those who interpret this section as referring to Moshiach, the Messiah, but that in fact it deals with the second Temple period.) Zerubbabel will rule on his throne and the High Priest (Joshua) will be on his throne. The exiles will come from far away to build the Temple and when these things come to pass, everyone will know that it was G-d who told this to Zechariah. And what does it take to make these things come to pass? All you have to do is listen to the word of G-d.

Chapter 7

To Be Continued

It happened during the fourth year of King Darius, while the Temple was already being rebuilt, that G-d spoke again to Zechariah. Emissaries sent people to pray to G-d and to inquire of the kohanim (priests) and the prophets as to whether they should still observe the fast of Tisha B'Av as they did while the first Temple was in ruins. (This question will not be answered until the next chapter, so please be patient!) G-d spoke to Zechariah and told him the following: Tell the people of the land and the kohanim, when you fasted on Tisha B'Av and Tzom Gedaliah (and other fasts) for the past seventy years, was it for G-d's sake or for their own? And when they eat and drink, does that benefit G-d? They fast on these days because of their sins. Whether the people eat or fast does not affect G-d Himself. It is the words of rebuke for their sins, which G-d sent through His prophets, which caused the people to fast.

G-d spoke again to Zechariah and told him to say: G-d told you through the earlier prophets to judge truly and to perform acts of kindness and mercy, not to oppress those less fortunate or to plot any evil against one another. But the people refused to listen and they turned their backs on G-d, hardening their hearts to His Torah and the words of His prophets. This angered G-d, so he scattered the people among the other nations. The land was made desolate with no one in it.

This chapter ends rather abruptly and the narrative continues immediately in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

The Answer

Having described Israel's rebellion and punishment in the previous chapter, G-d continues: I will avenge myself on the nations who unduly oppress Israel. I will return to Jerusalem, which will continue to be known as the city of truth and the Temple mount will again be known as the holy mountain. Old men and women will occupy the streets (meaning that the people will live to a ripe old age) and the streets will be filled with children playing (because of the great prosperity). "It will be wonderful in the eyes of the people and in My eyes," says G-d, "how the righteous will resist temptation. I will save My people from their exiles, both east and west, and return them to Jerusalem where they will be My people. I will be their G-d in truth and in righteousness."

G-d says: Let your hands be strong to rebuild the Temple do not fear those who wish to prevent it. You will hear words of consolation from the mouths of the prophets. It used to be that there was no source of livelihood for a person and no peace from their enemies, and everyone would fight with their neighbors. But now, their planting is successful and their crops are a source of peace. The vine and ground give forth plentiful produce and Heaven gives forth its dew. G-d will cause the people who return to Jerusalem to enjoy these benefits.

It will be that just as the Jews were blamed by the other nations for the bad times, they will be credited by them for the good time and the nations will bless them for it. Be encouraged by the consolation because G-d has said that just as He punished their ancestors who rebelled against Him and did not repent, so will He reward this generation in Jerusalem. All they have to do is speak sincerely and in truth, seek compromises in arguments, and plan no evil for one another. (In this verse, G-d warns the Jews about *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred, which was ultimately the reason the second Temple was destroyed.)

Now G-d answers the question which was posed in the previous chapter, regarding whether fasts should continue to be observed after the second Temple is built. G-d says that the fasts of 17 Tamuz, 9 Av, Tzom Gedaliah, and 10 Teves will be a source of rejoicing in the time of the second Temple so long as the people love truth and peace. In the Messianic era, the people of many nations will come to Jerusalem to seek G-d and to pray to Him. When this happens, the Jews will be surrounded by throngs of people who wish to learn about G-d from them.

Chapter 9

Somebody Came to Town, Riding on a Donkey...

G-d spoke to Zechariah regarding the lands of Chadrach, Damascus, Chamas, Tzor (Tyre) and Tzidon. (It would seem that in the future, these places would be within the borders of Israel, or perhaps suburbs of Jerusalem.) Tzor (Tyre) had previously built fortresses and gathered gold and silver but it didn't help. G-d caused them to lose their wealth and He punished them with the sea. In future times, the inhabitants of this land will remember how G-d punished the previous residents. Ashkelon will see the downfall of Tzor and be afraid, as will Gaza and Ekron, because they relied on Tzor. The king was lost from Gaza (formerly the capital of the northern kingdom of the ten Tribes) and Ashkelon (which also relied on Tzor) will not be inhabited. Strangers will live in Ashdod. (The meaning of the Hebrew word mamzer in this verse is obscure.) G-d will cut off the pride of the Philistines. He will remove blood from the mouth of Edom (referring either to idolatrous sacrifices or bloodshed) and He will remove the disgusting things from between Edom's teeth (again referring to sacrifices). The theaters of Edom will become synagogues and study halls for the Jews.

G-d will "camp" next to the Temple to protect it; no one will be allowed to antagonize the Jews, as G-d has now seen the distress of His people. He tells the Jews to be happy and rejoice because their king is coming to them; he is humble and riding on a donkey. (This is generally seen as a Messianic prophecy although Rashi has problems with that explanation, saying that this prophecy refers to the second Temple period. Ibn Ezra applies it to Judah Maccabee.) Ephraim (meaning the northern kingdom) and Jerusalem (meaning the kingdom of Judah) will not need their chariots and horses because it will be an era of peace. He (Moshiach?) will speak to the nations and he will rule from one end of the earth to the other. The Jews will be saved because of the blood of their covenant with G-d. (It seems obvious that this refers to the covenant of circumcision, although Rashi says that it refers to the blood sprinkled by Moses in Exodus 24:8. Others explain it to refer to Jewish martyrs who sacrificed themselves for G-d over the centuries.) G-d will save the Jews from an exile in an era without prophecy, which Zechariah compares to a pit with no water in it.

People who hoped for G-d are told to return to their previous strength. G-d makes them a double promise. Eventually Judah will wage war on behalf of G-d against the Greeks (in the days of the Maccabees). He will strengthen the people of the northern kingdom and he will make Jerusalem like the sword of a mighty soldier. G-d will appear over them and His arrows will go forth like lightning. He will protect His people and they will reap the spoils of war. They will rejoice and they will be full of all good things. G-d will save them on that day like He did the Jews who left Egypt. How great will be the goodness given to the Jews at that time! Grain and wine will cause the people to have strength and to rejoice.

Chapter 10

Let It Rain, Let It Rain, Let It Rain!

Zechariah says that if we ask G-d for rain, even at the end of the season, He will grant it. Furthermore, each person will receive the kind of rain he personally requires for his crops. The false prophets and astrologers

spoke falsely and misled the people, who were led into exile like a flock without a shepherd. G-d will punish the leaders (Rashi says of Greece) who will oppress the Jews, because He has remembered His people. The Jews will not need to rely on another nation to save them; from them will come warriors and kings. They will easily defeat their enemies because G-d is with them. They will be resettled as before and it will be as if they never left.

Ephraim (the Ten Tribes) will be like a mighty warrior, their hearts joyful as if from wine. G-d will call them back and they will multiply. He will make them foremost among the nations. They will remember G-d and will return to the land with their children. They will be so numerous that the land will not be large enough to contain them all. G-d will strike the sea and dry the river, punishing nations that oppressed Israel. G-d will strengthen the Jews, who will walk in His Name.

Some interpret this prophecy as referring to the Messianic era, while others apply it to the second Temple period, specifically the time of the Hasmoneans and Chanukah.

Chapter 11

Thirty Pieces of Silver

Zechariah tells the nations to open their gates and fire will consume their kings. (Lebanon is used as the example of these nations and the kings are compared to Lebanon's renowned cedar trees.) The cypress (the officers) and the oak (the servants) will cry that the cedar (their king) has fallen. Listen to the mourning of shepherds (kings) and young lions (princes) upon their loss. (Rashi cites the Talmud in Yoma 39b that this refers to the destruction of the second Temple, as "Lebanon" was also used as a name for the Temple.)

G-d says to prepare shepherds (leaders) for the flock (Israel), whose earlier leaders misled them to destruction. The nations of exile bought, sold and slaughtered them with impunity, praising G-d for delivering the Jews into their hands. G-d will not take it easy on them unless they improve their ways. He will let them destroy one another and He will not intervene.

G-d told Zechariah that He personally tended the flock of Israel, back in the day. He used two staffs to guide them, one of pleasantness and one of destruction. He cut off three rulers in one month because He could not tolerate their ways. (The referent is difficult. Rashi applies it to the slaughter in II Kings 10-11. The Radak suggests Yehoachaz, Yehoyakim and Tzidkiyahu in II Kings 24-25.) At that time, G-d refused to tend to the people. He got rid of the staff of pleasantness, saying that whatever happens, happens. The righteous understood that the bad times that followed came from G-d. He gave the last kings of Judah one final chance to return to Him. There were thirty righteous people, compared to pieces of silver, and G-d said He would put them "in the treasury," i.e., He would preserve them throughout the seventy years of exile until the Temple is rebuilt. (These righteous people included the likes of Daniel, Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about whom we will read more in the Book of Daniel.) G-d said that He broke the second staff, that of destruction, when He exiled King Tzidkiyahu of Judah, because that nation followed the example of the northern kingdom when it came to idolatry.

G-d told Zechariah to tend to this flock, which would ultimately fall into the hands of Edom (Rome). The shepherd (possibly Herod) will not go after stray sheep and he won't care for the weak and sick of his flock. He will just devour the resources of the wealthy until they are depleted. It is a poor example of a shepherd, who watches his flock merely to see what he can exploit from them! G-d will remove his ability to harm the people.

It should be mentioned, as we said at the beginning of the book, that the prophecies of Zechariah are some of the hardest chapters in the entire Bible.

Chapter 12

Moshiach ben Yosef's Mechitza

G-d finished His words to Zechariah about the fate of Israel. Thus says G-d (Who created the universe and mankind): I am mixing for Jerusalem a cup that will weaken those who attack them. Jerusalem will become a burden - it's simply too much trouble to attack them, so they'll be left alone. Those who attack, both horse and rider, will be confounded. Jerusalem will be like a fiery oven and they will consume their attackers. Rebuilt Jerusalem will be on the site of the original.

G-d will save the cities of Judah before He does Jerusalem, so that Jerusalem won't think that salvation is solely in their merit. On that day (presumably the war of Gog and Magog), G-d will protect Jerusalem. The weakest among them will be like David, a mighty warrior in battle. The house of David, including Moshiach (the Messiah) will be like angels of G-d. G-d will pour a spirit of grace over Jerusalem. They will turn to G-d because of those who were slain in battle and they will mourn as one would over a firstborn son. Everyone will mourn, the men and women in separate groups.

The Talmud in Succah (52a) applies this prophecy to the Moshiach ben Yosef, the Josephic (rather than Davidic) messiah. The fact that the men and women mourn separately is a source of the practice of separating the genders socially or in various religious contexts. If they separated for propriety's sake in a context that would not encourage frivolity (while mourning), how much more so should we take appropriate precautions in situations that would lend themselves to lightheadedness (ibid, 51b)!

Chapter 13

The Conversion Movement

In the future, a spring will flow in Jerusalem, so that the residents will not have to leave the city to immerse for matters of ritual purity. When that happens, G-d will have eradicated idolatry so thoroughly that people will not even speak the names of false "gods." G-d will remove false prophets and even the evil inclination. If a person prophecies falsely, everyone will know it intuitively. They will be so close to G-d that even the false prophet's own parents will say that he deserves to die for such an affront. The false prophets will be so ashamed that they will discard the identifiable clothing of their profession and deny their occupation altogether.

G-d calls His sword against the emperor of Rome. When He strikes him down, his subordinate rulers will scatter and their officers will fall. One-third of the non-Jews in the land (Israel? The world?) will be part of a mass conversion movement. G-d will test the sincerity of these converts. Those who pass, He will call His people and they will call Him their G-d.

Chapter 14

Aleinu

A day beloved to G-d is coming and the people will all share the wealth they acquired from their conquered attackers. G-d will inspire the nations to attack Jerusalem. The city will be captured and half the people will be forced to evacuate. Then G-d will go to war against the invaders like He did against Egypt at the Red Sea. He will "stand" on the Mount of Olives, which will split in half. People will run away as they did during the big earthquake (see Amos chapter 1). G-d will come to Jerusalem, escorted by an entourage of angels, to protect His people.

That day will have neither the light of glory nor the darkness of disaster. Before the time is up, the light of all good things will shine for Israel and the spring discussed in the previous chapter will flow from Jerusalem.

G-d will be recognized as King over the whole world. On that day, His Name will be called by all mankind. (These are the closing verses to the prayer "Aleinu.") The world will be leveled, like one great plain, and Jerusalem will be its highest point. Jerusalem will be rebuilt and secure.

The nations that tried to invade will be stricken with a degenerative disease that will eat away at their flesh. They will turn against one another, possibly because of misunderstandings. Even the cities of Judah will have been forced by Gog and Magog to attack Jerusalem. The wealth of the defeated invaders will lie before them. The survivors of the attackers (the one-third who defected and turned to G-d, as described in the previous chapter) will go to celebrate the holiday of Succos, as detailed in Talmud Avodah Zara 3a. Whoever does not go will not have rain. (From here is derived the concept that the world's water is Divinely-decreed each year on Succos - see Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:2). Egypt might think they're exempt from this, since they rely on the Nile rather than on the rains, but the same holds true: if they don't show up, they will have famine.

At this future time, people will recognize that even the bells on the horses taking them to Jerusalem are consecrated to G-d. Every pot and bowl in Jerusalem will be dedicated to the service of G-d because of the vast number of sacrifices being brought. The Temple coffers will be so full, they won't need to engage in trade for sacrificial needs.

Malachi

Chapter 1

R-E-S-P-E-C-T (Find Out What It Means to Me)

This is the “burden” (i.e., the difficult prophecy) that G-d gave to Israel through the prophet Malachi. (Some say Malachi was in fact Ezra. The name Malachi means “my messenger.” Malachi and Ezra lived at the same time and addressed many of the same issues.) G-d says that He loves Israel. If they should question this, they need only compare their lot with Edom’s. (Israel and Edom are descended from brothers, Jacob and Esau.) Edom has been demolished and G-d will not allow them to rebuild. But they will see that Israel will be rebuilt!

A son respects his father and a servant respects his master, so why don’t the Jews give G-d proper respect? The kohanim (priests) are negligent when it comes to their responsibility to educate the people. And how have they disrespected G-d? They offered sacrifices that were sick and blind. They would never give a human ruler such an animal as a gift, so why do they disrespect G-d with such offerings? Do they think He’ll heed their prayers when they treat Him so lightly? If only there were one person who would take a stand! G-d doesn’t want their half-hearted service.

Even the other nations recognize that there is a Creator over their idols, but the Jews disgrace Him by saying that the sacrifices of His altar are insignificant. G-d curses those who would justify and make excuses, offering a lesser animal as a sacrifice rather than the best of his flocks. G-d is the Great King; if the other nations recognize this, how much more should the Jews!

Chapter 2

Bigamy and Getting on G-d’s Nerves

Through Malachi, G-d charges the kohanim (priests) with accepting unfit sacrifices. If they do not listen, He will curse what otherwise would be blessed. In fact, He has already begun to do so! G-d will stop the grain from growing and G-d will toss the manure of their sacrifices in their faces. G-d reminds the kohanim how He forged a covenant specifically with the Tribe of Levi, to administer to Him in the Temple. Pinchas, who was zealous for G-d, earned this covenant, which is called one of peace, for himself and his descendants. The kohanim should be pure, and they should be like representatives of G-d on Earth. The kohanim of Malachi’s day, however, have been negligent of their duty and corrupted G-d’s word; they have caused people to stumble in Torah. As they have failed to bring people closer to G-d, He has made them insignificant in the view of the nation.

Now Malachi criticizes the people for the rampant intermarriage of the day, specifically, the men took Babylonian “trophy wives,” leaving the Jewish women without mates. In response to this, G-d will prevent the offenders from having sons who are scholars or, if they are kohanim, sons who can perform the Temple service. The next complaint Malachi delivered was that already-married men took non-Jewish wives in addition to their Jewish wives. This caused them to neglect their Jewish wives in favor of the other women. This will cause G-d to refuse their sacrifices. G-d created a single couple: Adam and Eve, from whom we are all descended. Monogamy is the preferred and natural order of things. The fact that Abraham married Hagar in addition to Sarah is not a justification, as Abraham had different motivations than these people. (If anything, he did not do so until he was prodded to by Sarah, quite the opposite of what was going on in Malachi’s day!) The people must not mistreat their wives this way. If a man has a real complaint, then he should divorce her so she can marry someone else, rather than ignore and neglect her in favor of another woman.

The people have “tired” G-d by saying that G-d is okay with sin, since we’ve seen evil people prosper and good people suffer. Either G-d is okay with sinning, they figure, or there just must not be any judgment at all. This kind of talk is wrong and it really “grates on G-d’s nerves;” metaphorically speaking.

Chapter 3

The Last Prophecy

G-d says that He sends His messenger (an angel? Malachi himself?) to clear the way before Him. G-d will come to the Temple and the angel to punish the wicked will arrive. Who will be able to stand before this angel, who will be like a fire that refines silver by removing the defects? The kohanim (priests) will be refined and purified until they are like gold and silver, serving G-d with righteousness. When this happens, the sacrifices of the nation will be as pleasing to G-d as they were in the “good old days.” (This is the closing sentiment of the Amidah prayer.)

G-d will make quick work of sorcerers, adulterers, people who swear falsely, those who don’t pay their workers promptly, and those who oppress widows, orphans and converts. These people act this way because they have no fear of G-d. G-d has not changed His mind; he still loves righteousness and hates injustice. The people have not reached the end of their journey; they still have judgment in the Next World. The people have neglected G-d’s Torah for a long time. Now He says, “Return to Me and I will return to you.” The people ask how they can return to Him. Would a person rob his god? Obviously not, but they have “robbed” G-d via improper use of tithes and other sacred gifts. G-d sends a curse that affects prosperity because of this. If the people will be diligent with their tithes, G-d will bless their handiwork - He even invites the people to test Him when it comes to this, something we are not permitted to do with other mitzvos. When this abundance is seen, Israel will be praised by the other nations.

Getting back to the people’s indiscretions, they said that there was no reward for serving G-d, since man is beneath His notice, so why bother? The people saw crime pay to such a degree that the criminals became heroes to them. The G-d-fearing people strengthened themselves not to be swayed by these arguments. G-d heard

these people and metaphorically “inscribed” the names of those who defended His honor. They are the ones who will ultimately be resurrected. People will be able to tell the difference between the righteous and the evil then! The sun will be like an oven and the wicked will be consumed like straw, leaving no trace. But the same sun will be a source of healing for the righteous, who will walk over the wicked as if they were ash.

The Jews are reminded to keep the Torah, which G-d sent through Moses. G-d will send the people Elijah the prophet (who ascended to Heaven alive back in II Kings chapter 2) prior to the day of judgment. Elijah will turn the hearts of parents and children to one another, causing both to turn to G-d. If they won't return to G-d, then He will strike the world with great destruction. (In order to avoid ending the book on a bad note, the practice is to repeat the previous verse about Elijah turning the hearts of parents and children.)

The verse about Elijah may be familiar as it is sung as a song (“hinei Anochi sholeiach lachem...”). However, the actual verse does not say “Eliyahu,” as people are accustomed to sing. The verse uses the less familiar version “Eliya.” This is similar to other such variations, such as Yeshaya/Yeshayahu. (You'll note that the English equivalents - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hezekiah, etc. - typically do not reflect the “hu” suffix.)

This prophecy is the last one in the Bible. With the end of Malachi, we conclude the Books of the Prophets. The Bible continues with Psalms and the other Writings. These works were written with Divine inspiration rather than through out-and-out prophecy.