

HAFTARAH



The Route We Walk Matters

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Haftarah

Some of you may remember walking in specific manners such as not stepping on the lines of a sidewalk or skipping certain tiles. As adults this might seem silly, but in Tanakh how we walk matters.

The haftarah this week relates to the Torah maftir portion – Hachodesh which tells us about the beginning of our existence as a people by establishing a calendar and Pesach. The haftarah speaks about a future Temple the people will visit on the holidays. In that Temple, how you walk is significant:

And when the people of the land come before the Lord on the appointed feast days, whoever enters by way of the north gate to bow shall go out by way of the south gate; and whoever enters by way of the south gate shall go out by way of the north gate. He shall not return by way of the gate through which he came, rather straight ahead he shall go out. (Ezekiel 46:9)

People who would arrive on the holiday would be directed to walk across the entire courtyard area of the Temple (they were not allowed in the building itself.) R. Eliezer of Beaugency (12th century) offered a rationale for this pattern:

“For he (the pilgrim) will appear as if he is turning his back towards the Holy when he turns to go out. But if he goes out straight ahead of him (as Ezekiel instructs), he turns sideways and bows and turns sideways and goes out.”

In other words, when leaving a situation of high respect, we should be careful not to turn our bodies away. The impression made by such body language negates the respect that we showed a moment earlier. Walking across the full courtyard also affords people who made the special trip for the holiday a chance to take in the full impact of the awe the place inspired.

If we look more broadly in Tanakh, we will discover that in several places a person may not return the way they came. In one such case, in Deut.17:16, the king is forbidden to accumulate horses lest he sends the people back to Egypt (the horse marketplace) “and the LORD had said you shall not return by this path again”. Prof. Uriel Simon, in his book “Reading Prophetic Narratives” (Heb.) suggests that turning back the way we came has the effect of undoing the action in our minds. Returning to Egypt by the route that we left would undo the Exodus. Indeed, a king bent on accumulating power (horses were mainly for military use) may also subjugate people, undoing the message of the Exodus.

Both our Pesach route which Deuteronomy forbids us to undo, and Ezekiel's Temple route heading across the courtyard suggest that we are encouraged to walk forward, not to undo what has been achieved. Whether these accomplishments seem as simple as walking across a courtyard or as grand as redemption from servitude, the physical path we walk reflects an inner thought process. The route we walk matters.