

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

HAFTARAH BLESSINGS: WHAT'S THE REAL STORY?

Anyone who has attended traditional Shabbat or holiday services has probably noted that the blessings recited after the Haftarah seem rather extensive and, if it may be said, off the topic of the reading from the prophets. They cover (1 and 2) God's faithfulness to fulfill the prophets' words (3) mercy for Zion (4) Elijah's reestablishment of Davidic kingship and (5) Thanks for Torah, prayer and Shabbat.

The text of these blessings can be found in the minor tractate Sofrim 13:10-14:1 which testify to their rather early inclusion in Jewish worship. Why do we need so many blessings after the Haftarah reading? The Talmud answers:

And why did [the sages] enact all these [benedictions]? In order to establish a correspondence between the seven benedictions [said after the haftarah reading] and the seven readers [i.e., the seven people who bless the Torah on Shabbat]. (Sofrim 14:1)

Of course, the number seven looms large in the Shabbat liturgy. There are seven blessings in the Tefillah that day as opposed to the 19 recited on weekdays. And, of course, there are the seven wedding blessings and the seven hakafot with the Torah on Hoshanah Rabbah (a cosmic wedding ceremony between the community and the Torah).

By now you have certainly spotted our problem: Sofrim itself, and traditional prayerbooks to this day, do not have seven blessings after the Haftarah. So now, we have a mystery to solve.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you imagine the 2 missing blessings were? If you were composing them, what would you say?
2. Why do you think Sofrim wanted seven blessings at this point in the service?

Bonus for Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates: While Sofrim 14:1 states that a Haftarah must be at least 22 verses long, Sofrim 14:2 says that if the person reading from the Prophets translates or expounds upon these verses, then the reader need only recite 3, 5 or 6 verses from the Prophets.