

Lesson Plan Isaiah 10 verses 5-15 and 20-23.

Lesson Goals

- a. Students will practice dividing verses using טעמי המקרא and will begin to develop skills in identifying parallelism.
- b. Advanced students will learn to define Biblical phrases using inner-Biblical comparisons, *i.e.*, by finding passages elsewhere in the Bible where the same phrase is used and considering the context of the other passages.
- c. Students will consider the theological question of “measured punishment.” God sets limits on the punishment of Israel by other nations. What are those limits, and what does God do when other nations overstep these?
- d. Students will reflect on the concept of “arrogance” and “pride,” will understand why the prophet defines these as “refusal to accept God as Master,” and will consider the implications of this concept in their own lives.
- e. Students will reflect on the concept of “תשובה,” will understand why the prophet defines this as “returning to rely on God,” and will consider the implications of this concept in their own lives.

Activity:

A. Introducing the Questions of Measured Punishment and Assyrian Arrogance

The teacher will begin by reviewing the events of chapter 7, noting that they can be understood on two levels:

- On the political level, Ahaz was afraid of the attack of Israel and Aram, and so he paid tribute to Assyria. Judah became a tribute-paying state – this costs money and also makes Assyria more sensitive to any drop of disloyalty on the part of Judah. Moreover, Assyria attacked the kingdom of Israel and also conquered cities on the border of Judah, partly in order to terrify Judah and ensure that they continued to pay tribute.
- On the theological level, Yeshaya tells us that in submitting to Assyria, Ahaz disobeyed God. Ahaz thought that this would help Judah. But as punishment for disobeying, both Israel and Judah were hurt by Assyria.

Rather than frontally presenting these points, it is best to ask students to give an oral report, and elicit this information from the students. One group can be asked to report on the events from the point of view of a newspaper reporter, and another group can be asked to give the prophet’s response to the newspaper report.

In discussing the prophet’s response, the teacher can raise the following questions. Alternatively, the teacher can elicit these questions from students by asking: What concerns do you have about the fairness of God’s response?

In either case, it is critical that students understand these questions:

- If the punishment comes from God, is there a limit to how much or how long Judah will be punished by Assyria?
- Is the punishment comes from God, is Assyria right to punish Judah?

These are the two central questions of this chapter, and are highlighted in slide 2.

B. The Problem of Measured Punishment and Assyrian Arrogance – Reading Isaiah 10 verses 5-11

The teacher should begin by asking “What are the dangers of letting Assyria punish Judah?” and should then present slide 3 (assuming the students know the Harry Potter canon). Students should easily identify the conceptual problem (there are few limits to the punishment a human power can inflict). Students may draw parallels to Pharaoh, contrasting the prediction in Genesis 15 (Brit Ben HaBetarim) to the more extensive enslavement described in Exodus. These conceptual issues should be used to segue into Isaiah 10 verses 5-10. In these verses, the dangers of letting Assyria loose are broached. Students will first study these verses using the worksheet.

The teacher should draw the ta'am טפחה on the board before students start and explain the concept of higher level mafsikim and lower-level mafsikim in te'amim. (Briefly, etnachta and sof-pasuk are the highest level mafsikim, and divide each pasuk into halves, but other te'amim divide the pasuk into quarters, eighths, etc... The divisions are not done according to number of words. Instead, te'amim serve as punctuation. Among the lower-level mafsikim are the מונה רביעי and זקף קטן, introduced in earlier lessons, and the טפחה, to be introduced today (Slide 4).

The worksheet should take students 10-15 minutes. It walks students through these difficult verses, and includes an enrichment question, question 5, which only the strongest students should engage.

Review of Worksheet:

In reviewing the worksheet, the teacher should use the leading questions in items 1-4 to teach the concept of parallelism, introducing both this term, the Hebrew term תקבולת, and the medieval Hebrew שונות במילים שונות (Slide 5). The teacher may also wish to engage the question “Do the two halves mean exactly the same thing?” Without engaging the complex approach of the Malbim, the teacher can show how the second half of verse 5 goes beyond the first half, since the second half emphasizes that the staff in Assyria's hands, with which it smites Israel, is actually God's anger. Students should clearly understand the concept of Assyria as God's servant which is highlighted in verse 5.

They should then contrast this concept with Assyria's self-image as portrayed in verse 6. The only difficult part of verse 6 is the difference between what God allows Assyria to do (bring Israel low, cause Israel to submit to Assyria) and what God implicitly forbids Assyria from doing (destroying Israel). The art portrayal in question 6 ensures that

students accurately understand this difference. They may portray the difference schematically, noting that God expects Assyria to place itself above Israel, but Assyria tries to eliminate Israel. But students must also show in question 7 that they understand how the difference between God's expectations of Assyria vis-à-vis Israel and Assyria's treatment of Israel are linked to the difference between Assyria's sense of independence and God's understanding of Assyria (in v. 5) as God's servant.

Answer to question 8: If Assyria determines its own destiny, then it has every right to do as it likes to Israel. But if Assyria is God's servant, it must treat Israel as God commands.

These verses also contain a subtle polemic against Assyrian religion. The teacher may wish to engage this polemic with advanced classes, and it is presented in slide 6. One of the centerpieces of Assyrian religion is the coronation of the king. The king is seen as a representative of the chief god of the Assyrian pantheon, who is named Assur (pronounced Ashur). At the ceremony of coronation, the priest of Assur places the scepter of the god Assur into the king's hands and commands him to enlarge the land of Assyria, and to conquer more territories, thus showing the world that Assur rules over more territory. The transfer of the scepter from god to king is symbolic of the king assuming authority. Isaiah implicitly attacks this idea and claims that it is not Assur who orders conquest, but rather the God of Israel, and He also limits Assyria's conquests.¹

Assyria's self-image is developed further in verses 8,9,10,11. the teacher should frontally teach some of these verses. I recommend skipping 8 and teaching 9-11. The teacher should emphasize that these verses portray history, not imagination, and they correspond to what Assyrian official propaganda actually said about the Assyrian empire. In particular, they address the actual Assyrian conquests of Arpad, Damascus, and Samaria in the 720 BCE campaign of Sargon II. The campaign is described as follows by Sargon II:

Yaubidi of Hamath, a low-class person, with no right to the throne, an evil sea-coast dweller, schemed to become king of Hamath. He caused Arpad, Simirra, Damascus, and Samaria to rebel against me, and he came to an agreement with them and prepared for battle. I mobilized the numerous troops of Assyria. At Qarqar, his beloved city, I besieged him and his troops, and I captured him. I set fire to Qarqar. I flayed him. I killed the rebels of those cities and established order.²

¹ For more on Assyrian religion, see the first four pages of Alasdair Livingstone's article "New Dimensions in the Study of Assyrian Religion," in *Assyria 1995*, ed. R. M. Whiting and S. Parpola (Helsinki 1995), pp. 165-169. For more on this polemic, see Michael Chan, "Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009): 717-733, and my critique of Chan in my forthcoming book *The Unbeatable Light*, section 5.1.2.

² Translation based on that in M. Cogan, *The Raging Torrent*, Inscription 18, p. 82. For further discussion of this campaign, see K. Lawson Younger, "The Fall of Samaria in Light of Recent Research," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 61 (1999): 461-482.

Sargon sees the campaign as motivated by right: the gods have appointed him to rule, and he has every right to conquer these cities. He denies the existence of any gods in the conquered cities.

The teacher should use slide 7, in which the above-quote is featured, to highlight the clash between Assyria's concept of its right to rule and God's view of Assyria as a tool in God's hands.

Furthermore, in a further demonstration of Sargon's lack of limits, Isaiah portrays Sargon as threatening Jerusalem in v. 11 (Slide 8). While there is no historical evidence that Sargon actually intended to attack Jerusalem, the presence of the Assyrian army in the city of Samaria certainly threatened the people of Jerusalem. For a discussion of this threat, see my article "מחקרי יהודה ושומרון יז (תשסח) 25-35 in 'הרקע ההיסטורי של הנבואה המתארת את המסע נגד ירושלים בישיבה י: כח-לב".

D. Frontal Teaching of Isaiah 10:12 – Divine Reaction to Assyrian arrogance

The teacher should frontally teach this verse. First, focus on the second half of v. 12, and on the terms רום עין and גדל לב (slide 9)

- a. How do these terms express how Assyria (Sargon) sees itself?
- b. Is Assyria really being arrogant, or is it just acting in accordance with its own self-image?

The students must clearly understand that the prophet sees *any* action of *any* individual as arrogant as long as that individual does not think about his own position vis-à-vis God.

The teacher should then return to the first half of verse 12 and show how God will punish Assyria for its arrogance with specific reference to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is set up here as a sort of limit on Assyrian arrogance, and a test-case of God's control.

Verses 13-14 continue Assyria's self-portrayal. Slide 10 compares the imagery in these verses with Assyria's own imagery and shows how Isaiah uses Assyrian material to heighten the sense of Assyria as arrogant. In my view, these verses are best engaged only with very strong classes.

The teacher should assign questions 9-10 on the worksheet, dealing with verse 15, as homework or classwork.

This verse should serve as a summary of the theme of arrogance in this chapter, and as a means of introducing the concept of arrogance in one's personal life. Students should reflect on what it means to be a "tool" in God's hands.

Questions include:

- How does the idea that each person has a commission (שליחות) from God limit personal choice?
- Does refusing to accept the commission imply "arrogance"?
- What is the boundary between liberty and arrogance?

E. Contrast to Arrogance: The Return of Israel in 10:20-21

Students may well ask: “Is Isaiah really trying to convince the Assyrians to behave differently?” The teacher should note that Isaiah’s complaints against Assyria are consistently coupled with lessons to Israel. We find such a lesson in 10:20-21, and again later in the chapter.

The teacher should first ask what **ביום ההוא** in verse 20 refers to. Where have the students seen a specific day indicated earlier in this chapter? (Verse 12, which speaks of God defeating Assyria).

The teacher should explain the concept of **להשען**, “to rely” (to expect help) and ask why Israel would rely on its smiter. Israel pays tribute to Assyria and relies on these payments to mitigate Assyria’s smiting because Israel sees Assyria as omnipotent and fears the consequences of not paying tribute. Israel is caught in a bind, in which it has to pay its enemy. Students should explore the idea of resenting a human power, yet feeling it necessary to rely on that power.

The teacher should ask what Isaiah taught about the reality of Assyrian power in chapter 6. Students should remember the lesson that Assyrian temporal power is not nearly as powerful as others think. People are deceived by their senses – if they use their minds, they will realize that Assyria is not omnipotent.

The defeat of Assyria, described in v. 12, will help Israel liberate itself from the false sense that Assyria is omnipotent.

The rejection of Assyria as omnipotent will let Israel “return to God” as described in v. 21.

Here **תשובה**, return, means:

- Ceasing to rely on Assyria
- Liberating oneself from an exaggerated fear of **בשר ודם**
- Relying on God, and regarding Him as the highest authority – as **אל גיבור**.

תשובה is not simply a change of specific actions, but first and foremost a change in attitude.

This point is nicely developed in The Rav’s **על התשובה** in Chapter 2, in the discussion of **אחרי כל חוטא רודפת אביגיל**.