

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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**This haftara series is dedicated in memory  
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak  
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,  
by her family.**

**This shiur is dedicated in memory of  
Dr. William Major z"l.**

## VAETCHANAN

## SHABBAT NACHAMU

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

The custom of reading *haftarot* of consolation after *Tisha Be-Av* is widely documented by the *Rishonim* and continues to our very day. As the *Tosafot* already noted (*Megila* 31b, s.v. *Rosh Chodesh*), we are dealing here with a very old custom, one that is rooted in the ancient rite observed in Eretz Israel and familiar to us through the *Pesikta*:

Because we are accustomed on the basis of the *Pesikta* to read three *haftarot* of doom before *Tisha Be-Av*, i.e., *Divrei Yirmiyahu*, *Shimu devar HaShem* and *Chazon Yeshayahu*, and after *Tisha Be-Av* seven *haftarot* of consolation and two *haftarot* of repentance, i.e., *Nachamu nachamu*, *Vatomer Tziyon*, *Aniya so'ara levada*, *Anokhi anokhi*, *Roni akara*, *Kumi ori*, *Sos asis*, *Dirshu* and *Shuva*.

Last week we dwelt on the idea that there are two responses to destruction: 1) mourning and 2) repentance. As we explained then, catastrophe leads to feelings and expressions of mourning over the loss of a world that once existed and is no more. The essence of such mourning lies in the struggle with the pain and shock over the loss and destruction of something whose stability and existence had once been taken for granted. The crisis arises when a person encounters a world in which central elements in his life

have died or been destroyed - elements that had been so fixed and stable that he cannot imagine his life going on without them, and that he had never really believed would disappear, even though rationally he knew that the loss was possible, and could even be expected. *Tisha Be-Av* is a day of mourning over the destruction of the Temple, as is already explained in various places in the Gemara,<sup>1[1]</sup> and therefore a response of consolation would be expected in its wake.

In addition, *Tisha Be-Av* also includes an element of repentance, for from the lessons of the past we can learn the price of sin and the need to repent so as to avoid its repetition. This idea rises from the Gemara in *Pesachim* (54b) which defines *Tisha Be-Av* as a public fast day belonging to the family of public fasts which are days of rebuke and repentance, and it was emphasized by the Rambam in his introduction to the historical fasts observed every year:

There are days on which the entire people of Israel fasts because of the tribulations which occurred thereon, in order to stir the hearts and clear the path to repentance. This serves as a reminder of our evil ways and of the behavior of our forefathers which was like our behavior now, such that it brought these tribulations upon them and us. Recalling these matters causes us to return to the path of good and to improve our ways. (*Hilkhot Ta'anuyot* 5:1)

In light of the two-fold character of *Tisha Be-Av*, a two-fold response is expected – both words of consolation to a grieving nation and a call to repentance in light of the lessons of the destruction. Accordingly, following *Tisha Be-Av*, the *haftarot* follow a two-fold course. At first, the *haftarot* focus on the message of consolation that comes to strengthen a mourning nation, and therefore immediately after *Tisha Be-Av*, we begin reading the cycle of seven *haftarot* of consolation. Afterwards, we move on to read chapters of repentance. These *haftarot* attach themselves to the days of repentance of Elul and Tishrei, but they also fit in with the *haftarot* of consolation read during the summer as part of our response to *Tisha Be-Av*.

[It should be added that the fact that we open with consolation and focus upon it with greater intensity indicates that the central element of *Tisha Be-Av* is mourning, and not repentance. In my opinion, this is correct for other reasons as well, but this is not the forum to enter into a wider discussion of the matter.]

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<sup>1[1][1]</sup> See *Ta'anit* 30a and *Yebamot* 43a.

Let us turn now to the contents of the *haftara* of "*Nachamu*."

We shall open our discussion with another comment found in the *Tosafot* to *Megila*. Addressing the order of the *haftarot*, the *Tosafot* note that the *haftarot* of consolation are arranged in ascending order, for "it is the way of consolations to be increasingly consoling." In other words, the *haftara* of "*Nachamu nachamu*" offers the least consolation, while "*Sos asis*" provides the most, there being a steady increase in consolation from *haftara* to *haftara* and from *Shabbat* to *Shabbat*, during the period between *Parashat Vaetchanan* and *Parashiyot Netzavim-Vayelevh* when we read the seven *haftarot* of consolation.

Indeed, our *haftara* (*Yeshayahu* 40:1-26) opens with an exceedingly minor consolation; it does not begin with tidings of redemption and return to Zion, but simply asserts that Israel's troubles will cease, because the period of punishment has come to an end. There is no redemption or repentance; only an end to Israel's troubles and a return to routine. Already the Ibn Ezra points to a verse in *Eikha* (4:22) that expresses the same idea: "The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; He will no more carry you away into exile." It too is formulated in negative terms and fails to herald a positive change. This accounts for the doubling found in the opening verse of the *haftara*, "Comfort My people, comfort them," a formulation intended to broadcast rest and tranquility following a period of harsh exile. These words do not reflect a call to mobilize the people's inner strength in the face of impending redemption and change their mindset from passivity to readiness to forget the exile and leave it, but rather a desire for calm and tranquility. What underlies this promise is weariness and exhaustion, and the promise comes only to declare their termination. Thus, the prophet's use of a soft and doubled expression, for it is his intention to verbally caress his tired people.

The relationship between Israel and God is described as a relationship between a people and *Elokim*, which is fitting in the context of a declaration regarding the completion of Israel's term of punishment. Israel is defined as God's people, and therefore it was penalized with the punishment of exile; God is described as *Elokim*, the name that denotes God's serving as king and judge of the world. As judge of His world and His people, God decides that Jerusalem has been sufficiently punished. Fundamentally, the declaration about the pardoning of Israel's iniquity is presented as a legal announcement that relieves Israel of further punishment, and therefore the prophet chooses the Divine name that reflects God's judicial role.

As we shall see later in this series, this position is quite different from that which we find in the *haftarot* to be read in the coming weeks which speak of familial relationships, e.g., the relationship between parents and children or between husband and wife. It seems that the transition from the description of the relationship between Israel and God as a relationship between a people and *Elokim* to a relationship between a bride and a groom who rejoice in one another, is what underlies the assumption that the *haftarot* express increasingly greater consolation, and this is the key to understanding what the *Tosafot* are saying about the steady betterment of the consolations (which has been the subject of great discussion over the generations). Here, at the outset we are presented with a relationship between a people and *Elokim*, which is the most basic relationship between Israel and God, but also the one that emphasizes the distance between them.

The prophecy continues with the description of a state of redemption (and not only the cessation of punishment), but this is a redemption performed for the glory of heaven and not for man. The objective of this redemption is that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of God has spoken it" (v. 5). From this stem the two characteristics given by the prophet: 1) the ravaging of nature, and 2) the smallness of man. The first is described by Yeshayahu in the famous verses that prophesy about a transformation of the world's topography and a "repair" of nature through the leveling and "redemption" of its imperfections:

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. (v. 4)

This description of nature as undergoing a radical change in the future fits in with the description of the redemption as coming to exalt the glory of heaven and to point out God's ability to change the natural world as well as the smallness of the universe in relation to His greatness.

The *haftara* continues with the other side of the coin, namely, man's smallness in comparison to God:

All flesh is grass, and all its flower fades: when the breath of the Lord blows upon it: surely the people is like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. (vv. 6-8)

The prophet then moves on to tidings of redemption:

You that bring good tidings to Zion, get you up into the high mountain: You that bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Yehuda, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with might, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His hire before Him. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. (vv. 9-11)

The gap between these verses and the opening verses of the *haftara* is striking. Here we are dealing with uplifting tidings that must be spread in all directions as heralding a new future ("You that bring good tidings to Zion, get you up into the high mountain: You that bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength"), and the redemption that God will bring His people, and not only a cessation of troubles ("Behold, the Lord God will come with might, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His hire before Him"). Similarly, the connection between God and His people is presented in an entirely different light – God is not presented as *Elokim* who judges His people and brings an end to their troubles because they have been sufficiently punished and there is no justification for further punishment, but rather as a shepherd who worries about his flock. Just as a judge is stronger than the judged, so a shepherd is stronger than his sheep, but he uses his strength to worry about them and their needs out of mercy and compassion.

Moreover, the prophet does not only use the image of the faithful shepherd in order to present us with a strong and responsible figure, but rather he emphasizes the shepherd's concern for the weak and the vulnerable, and the depth of that worry. "Behold, the Lord God will come with might, and His arm shall rule for Him" – but His strength does not dwarf man or cause him harm, in the form of strong and irresponsible rule (as Iyyov argued during his most difficult moments), but rather he worries about Israel. God's strength is activated for the benefit of the weak and unfortunate in order to redeem them ("He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young").

To summarize, the first half of the *haftara* is comprised of three units: 1) consolation that Israel's troubles have come to an end; 2) redemption because of the glory of God; 3) Israel's redemption as God's people. A certain development is evident here. At first, God is described as strong, but there is no redemption, only consolation. This is followed by redemption, but for the sake of God's glory, and without connection to Israel who are not even mentioned. In the third section as well, God is described as being stronger

than man, with the gap between them likened to the gap between a shepherd and his flock, but Israel is redeemed because of God's concern for them as His people. We see then that the common thread running through the prophecy is the greatness and exaltedness of God, but there is development with respect to the course of the redemption and the way that it advances.

Here the first half of the *haftara* comes to an end. In the second half, the prophet continues to develop with great intensity and focus the idea of God's greatness and transcendence.

In this section the prophet emphasizes God's greatness and exaltedness with respect to the created world and the nullity of man before Him, and not only God's ability to redeem Israel. Thus the *haftara* takes a metaphysical turn, that is especially appropriate for those sections of *Parashat Vaetchanan* that deal with the giving of the Torah and the struggle against idol worship that is emphasized by the Torah in conjunction with its description of the Mount Sinai experience. Thus, the *haftara* fits in well with the *parasha*, but this section is not a continuation of the consolation, for the idea of redemption and consolation found at the beginning of the *haftara* does not repeat itself in the second half, and the *haftara* ends with God's exalted sanctity. Yeshayahu himself, however, will continue with the themes of redemption and consolation in the next chapter, which we read as the *haftara* of *Parashat Lekh Lekha*.

The prophet emphasizes the idea of man's nullity in relation to God on many levels, and we must examine their development.

First of all, on the plain of time: Man is tyrannically ruled by time and the process of destruction, whereas God is above all that ("Beauty and eternity appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

All flesh is grass, and all its grace is as the flower of the field: the grass withers, the flower fades: when the breath of the Lord blows upon it: surely the people is like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades: but the world of our God shall stand for ever. (vv. 6-8)

Second, from the perspective of Divine wisdom in contrast to human knowledge ("Knowledge and speech appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or being his counselor has taught Him? With whom took He counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of judgment, and taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding? (vv. 12-14)

Third, from the perspective of power and dominion ("Rule and dominion appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

That brings princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth as vanity. Scarcely are they planted; scarcely are they sown; scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth: He merely blows upon them and they wither; and the storm wind takes them away as stubble. (vv. 23-24)

And fourth, even from the perspective of the immensity of the Creator in contrast to the smallness of man ("Exaltedness and greatness appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

Behold, the nations are as the drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, He takes up the isles like fine dust. And Lebanon is not sufficient for fuel; nor are its beasts sufficient for a burnt-offering... It is He that sits upon the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are as grasshoppers; that stretches out the heavens as a curtain, and spreads them out as a tent to dwell in. (vv. 15-16, 22)

The conclusion that arises from all this is stated explicitly by the prophet ("Splendor and eminence appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?... To whom then will you liken Me, that I should be his equal, says the Holy One. (vv. 17-18, 25)

As stated above, these two themes, consolation and exaltedness, will continue in

the prophecies of Yeshayahu. The consolations and their development will occupy us in the *haftarot* to be read in the coming weeks, whereas the meaning of God's exaltedness with respect to the relationship between Israel and God will be dealt with in the coming chapters that will be read as the *haftarot* for *Parashot Bereishit* and *Lekh Lekha*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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