

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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

SHEMOT

IDOLATRY AND HEDONISM Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

TWO IDEAS – TWO HAFTAROT

The *haftara* of *Parashat Shemot* is not uniform; according to the Ashkanzi rite we read "In days to come Ya'akov shall take root" (*Yeshayahu* 27:6-28:13, and 29:22-23), whereas according to Sefardi custom we read "The words of Yirmiyahu" (*Yirmiyahu* 1). This divide is extreme, there being nothing like it regarding any other *haftara*. In this *shiur* we shall deal with the Ashkenazi *haftara*, since the Sefardi *haftara* is read according to all opinions and in all communities as the first *haftara* in the series of the three *haftarot* of calamities (usually for *Parashat Pinchas*, and occasionally for *Parashat Matot*), so that we will see it again later this year. Moreover, Yeshayahu's prophecy is difficult to understand and its connection to the *parasha* is not clear at first glance, which is not the case regarding the story of Yirmiyahu's consecration which is not particularly difficult and whose connection to the *parasha* is clear and evident.

TWO ISSUES IN THE PARASHA

In addition to the demand that this fact makes upon us to choose between the two *haftarot* as the subject of this *shiur*, it also brings us to wonder about the phenomenon and to try to understand the meaning of the split. It seems to be rooted in the fact that the Torah deals with two main issues in *Parashat Shemot*, both of which first appear on the Torah's stage in this *parasha*. The first is Israel's exile and subjugation to another nation, and the second is the prophecy of Moshe Rabbenu. The meeting point between the two is clear, namely, Moshe's appointment to serve as Israel's savior, but the result is that the *parasha* contains two very important processes that will accompany us in the future and appear here for the first time. The double issue is what stands behind the two customs. Each rite focused on one of these issues, and thus the split came into being. The Ashkenazi rite decided to dedicate the *haftara* to the reality of exile, on the assumption that this is the narrative focus of *Parashat Shemot*, and chose the *haftara* from the book of *Yeshayahu* as one of the many scriptural chapters dealing with this

issue. The Sefardi custom, on the other hand, relates to Moshe and his role as the prophet who was sent to redeem his people, this because of the centrality of the position and status of Moshe throughout the Torah. In connection with Moshe's prophecy, the account of Yirmiyahu's consecration is an appropriate choice, because Yirmiyahu was also sent to the people of Israel as a prophet who was meant to offer them spiritual-historical guidance.[\[1\]](#)

THE FLORID STYLE

Let us now try to understand the *haftara*. The prophecy of "In days to come Ya'akov shall take root" is taken from chapters 27-28 of the book of *Yeshaya*, and is written in Yeshayahu's florid style. The chapters among which the *haftarais* found are characterized by difficult language marked by word plays, repetition of words and sounds, succinct syntax that omits transitional words and extensive use of metaphors. The very use of such florid language is not just a matter of personal style through which the prophet expresses the messages that he had received, but also reflects a certain understanding of the nature and role of prophecy. In this framework, which is meant to deal with the *haftarot* and not with the interpretation of the book of *Yeshayahu* in general, we shall refrain from entering into a discussion of this issue, and simply bring the phenomenon to the reader's attention.

TWO PARTS

The *haftara* clearly divides into two sections:

- 1) From the beginning (27:6) until the promise concerning the ingathering of the exiles at the end of the chapter (27:13).
- 2) The oracle of rebuke that comes in its wake (28:1-13, and 29:22-23).

The first section deals primarily with consolation, whereas the second section deals with rebuke. Even the sins alluded to in each of the sections are utterly different from each other, as we shall see below; thus we are dealing with two different prophecies. Indeed, the second half opens with the introductory word, *hoi*, "woe," testifying to the fact that we have here a new prophecy.[\[2\]](#)

The *haftara's* point of departure is rooted in the fact that extended exile leads to difficult despair. The people go out into exile because a strong and mighty nation forces them out of their land, and plants them by force in another country. At the time, when the people are being forcibly exiled by a nation that has attacked their country, the difficulty and the tragedy stem from the suffering, killing and cruelty directed against the exiles in the course of the fighting and the expulsion. The sword, the hunger, and the captivity all strike a mortal and tragic blow against the individual and the community.

Afterwards, however, despair takes hold. As opposed to wartime, which by its very definition constitutes an unstable situation and there exist the possibility and the hope for dramatic change and upheaval, exile to a mighty and faraway land do not allow for such expectations. A situation of permanent exile in the wake of war leads to despair owing to the

feeling that the current circumstances will not change. The ruling nation is strong and tyrannical, the people lack the strength to struggle against it, and to the degree that the regime is stable, it appears that its days will be long and that it cannot be changed. Even if changes take place that undermine the stability of the regime, they are not always evident to the eye, but rather they become known only retroactively and in hindsight, so that for the people living prior to the upheaval, their lives in exile appear as unalterable. Anyone who still remembers the feeling of the iron curtain that surrounded the Soviet Union until the end of the twentieth century, the consciousness that the communist regime will endure like iron, and the ramifications that this awareness had on Russian Jewry and those who fought for their welfare, will surely understand what I am referring to.^[3] It is also important to remember that a long-term perspective on historical processes are not always clear to the man on the street (nor to experts of various types) and doesn't necessarily interest him. From the perspective of his life, exile is an existential fact that gives no indication that it will ever be changed.

Israel in Egypt felt this way as well. The Egyptian regime was stable, powerful, tyrannical and centrist, as may be learned from the end of the book of *Bereishit* and from our *parasha*. The exile continued for tens of years, and its end did not appear on the horizon. The people of Israel's harsh responses to Moshe at the end of the *parasha*, and the swinging between hope and disappointment that finds expression therein, are indicative about the depths of Israel's despair.

"THAT DAY"

Yeshayahu's prophecy comes to confront these feelings that have accompanied the various exiles that have occurred over the generations. Besides the promise itself of an ingathering of the exiles, Yeshayahu emphasizes the concept of "that day." The prophet already made extensive use of this concept in the previous chapters that lead up to our *haftara*. The existence of "that day" and the prophetic promise of its existence come to inform the people about the possibility of an historic upheaval. Sometimes, history works in a gradual manner, and a person senses these changes and feels that the historical reality in which he is living is advancing. At other times, however, the change is not gradual, but rather sudden – in the sense of "He brings low the arrogant and helps the poor" – in the blink of an eye historical reality changes. Prior to that moment, a person feels no change whatsoever, and fails to identify historical processes, and then suddenly, everything changes. When a person is aware of the concept of "that day," then his hope for that day and his belief in the possibility of its arrival dispel his despair and raise his spirit at the most difficult moments.

In this context, it is worthwhile to examine the nature of redemption. The model presented by Yeshayahu in these verses is redemption by way of a heavenly power that interferes in history (*it'aruta dele'eila*). The sounding of the great *shofar* on that day, that calls upon the outcasts from all corners of the world to return to Jerusalem and the mountain of God, symbolizes a Divine act rather than human initiative. Its action in different places and in different historical realities (Ashur and Egypt) is possible because it comes from up above and not as a result of human activity, which is limited to a particular historical situation. This too is part of the nature of the redemption of "that day" as a sudden redemption that breaches historical boundaries and comes as a surprise to those in exile.

Thus the process described by Yeshayahu parallels Israel's redemption in Egypt. There too the people were not redeemed as a result of their own initiative and involvement, but rather the redemption was performed by the hands of heaven. To the statement, "I – and not an angel, I – and not a seraph, I – the Lord, and nobody else," we might add, "I – and not man," or using the wording of *Chazal*, "I – and not an agent." That is to say, Moshe acts by the power of heaven, and not as representative of Israel.

THE ESSENCE OF THEIR SIN

As stated above, the essence of this passage is consolation, but it also contains an allusion to the reason for Israel's remaining in exile, namely, the sin of idol worship:

By this therefore shall the iniquity of Ya'akov be atoned; and this is all the fruit to take away his sin; when he makes all the stones of the altar as chalkstones that are beaten in sunder, the *asherim* and sun images shall not remain standing. (*Yeshayahu 27:9*)

The erection of altars to idols and the establishment of *asherim* are the sins that Yeshayahu sets before the people as the cause of their long exile. Idolatry – and only idolatry – is the sin that has decided the matter. Israel did indeed commit other sins as well, but it is idol worship that has made them culpable. This was already noted by the Radak, who writes: "While they have other sins, this is their main sin, the *asherim* and sun images that they worship."

The reason for this is clear. The other sins are forbidden and negative acts, but they are performed in the framework of a relationship between Israel and God. He is our God and we are His people; the sins do not cancel the connection between man and God, but rather they are committed within its framework. Idolatry, on the other hand, cancels the very connection, because it indicates preference for the idol over God as master, father and spouse. It is for this reason that Scripture is full of metaphors for fidelity, betrayal, and promiscuity regarding idol worship. This is because it is the question of basic and fundamental fidelity, and not the fulfillment of specific particulars, that stands at the heart of the matter. It is only with respect to idolatry that the Torah uses the term *kin'a*, "zealotry" (see Ramban, *Shemot* 20:3), because it has pretensions of substituting for God and creating an alternative relationship with Israel. In light of this, Yeshayahu focuses the exile on idol worship, for only that can lead to Israel's expulsion from its "house," i.e., Eretz Israel. It is because of idol worship that the people of Israel are regarded as renegades who are unfit to live in God's place.

In summary, the first half of the *haftara* is a prophecy of consolation that promises the people living in the depths of exile that the exile will eventually come to its end, and therefore it is appropriate for *Parashat Shemot*, when a person is supposed to feel the length of the exile and the accompanying despair. The mechanism of the redemption and the ingathering of the exiles will be performed at the hand of God, but is conditioned on Israel's relinquishing all connection to idol worship.

EGOCENTRIC HEDONISM

The second half of the *haftara* is Yeshayahu's sharp attack on the high society of his time because of its hedonism, egocentricity and lack of social responsibility. The entire purpose of their lives is pleasure: wine, drunkenness and sweet and perfumed oils are what give spice to life, and it is around these things that everything turns. The crown – the trademark of human achievement – by which they are identified is pride and drunkenness, and the flower that they wear as their glory is a fading flower, that is, momentary and transient pleasure. Succinctly put, we are dealing with a hedonistic society which is solely interested in maximizing the pleasures of this world, with all the accompanying moral and social corruption. Drunkenness, pride, wine, fragrant oil, and strong drink characterize their existential world and these are what they aspire to.^[4]

The prophets, including Yeshayahu, fought bitterly against these phenomena, regarding them as spiritual and moral poison. If pleasure rules man rather than man ruling pleasure, if Coca Cola is the taste of life, then man has fallen from his elevated spiritual position and corrupted his ways. In our chapter, as in other places, Yeshayahu emphasizes the temporariness and insignificance of momentary pleasure ("And the fading flower of the glorious beauty... shall be as the first ripe fig before the summer; which when one sees, while it is yet in his hand he swallows it up" [ibid. 28:4]), as well as its ugliness ("For all tables are full of vomit and filth, so that there is place clean" [ibid., v. 8]).

The prophet also places the blame for this corrupt state of affairs, first and foremost, upon the leadership ("The priest and the prophet reel through strong drink, they are confused by wine, they stagger through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment" [ibid. v. 7]). This is not the first time that Yeshayahu lays the blame at the door of the leadership and sees them as responsible for the people's situation, and it is possible to see this accusation all through the prophets' reprimands of Israel. It is the leadership, rather than the common man, which bears primary responsibility for the difficult spiritual situation.

In addition to their responsibility for the situation of the reveling drunkards, they allowed for the creation of a spiritual hole, for the leadership forsook its role and failed to provide the necessary spiritual guidance. There is nobody to teach, guide, and direct the people, and even the schoolchildren fail to receive the education that they rightly deserve:

Who shall teach knowledge, and who shall make to understand doctrine, to those that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts? (ibid. v. 9)^[5]

HEDONISM AS THE BASIS FOR ISRAEL'S DISTANCING THEMSELVES FROM GOD

What is the function of this prophecy as a *haftara*? The answer to this question is that the prophecy comes to point to the basic decay that brings the people to punishment and exile. We are not talking about an isolated act of sin, but rather the general spiritual foundation. The prophet identifies hedonism as the basis for Israel's distancing themselves from God in particular and from spiritual life in general. Whereas the first half of the *haftara* focuses on idol worship, the second half which complements it deals with hedonism, for both problems can bring the people to distance from God that necessitates an extreme punishment like exile.

The two, however, are very different in nature. The sin of idol worship is not necessarily committed out of the pursuit of pleasure and the setting of man in the center. On the contrary, it often appears in periods of spiritual tension and religious seeking. The sinner does not loath spiritual life and the desire to conjoin with a being that is beyond his world, but rather he errs in his choice. His sin is a sin of treachery.

The hedonist, in contrast, does not leave God and opt for a connection with a different deity, but rather he develops spiritual dullness that interferes with his ability to break out of his material-corporeal world and blinds him into seeing mere pleasure as the essence of life. The absence of a connection with God stems not from his with an alien factor, but rather from his inability to breach the framework of his narrow world and the lack of desire for spiritual challenge. His sin is a sin of materiality.

Both of these sins lead to exile, and Yeshayahu fights against both of them. There is no doubt, however, that in our *haftara*, the war waged against hedonism is more sharp and bitter. Unlike the first half, which is formulated as a consolation which conditions redemption on the abandonment of idolatry, the second half engages in frontal battle and in the manner of harsh reprimand with hedonism. So too the redemption alluded to therein ("In that day, shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, **to the residue of His people**" [ibib., v. 5]) is limited in its scope, for it is promised only to the residue of His people.

THE CONNECTION TO OUR *PARASHA*

And now to our *parasha*. Nowhere does the Torah explain why Israel was liable for exile in Egypt. The fact of their slavery and the processes that led to it are spelled out in detail in Scripture, but the spiritual reason for their having been sent into exile is not explained at all. Was this a punishment for a specific sin, such as idolatry, assimilation, unwarranted hatred, or the like? Or perhaps the servitude was an instance of afflictions that come without sin in order to lead to further refinement? Scripture does not answer.

Reading the *haftara* of Yeshaya – which focuses the sin of the people during his period and emphasizes the spiritual danger of hedonistic pride for future generations – for a *parasha* that deals with exile comes to warn us of these dangers in the reality of our lives in the here and now, and not as an interpretation of what happened in Egypt. It is possible, however, that there is here a hint that in Egypt as well Israel deteriorated to hedonism and that this is what stood at the root of their problems.^[6] In any event, more than serving as an interpretation of a situation that existed in the past,^[7] the function of the *haftara* is to warn us of the dangers that lie in wait for us and to relate to our own situation. And it surely cannot be denied that this message is very relevant to the reality of our lives.

[1] The chapter in *Yirmiyahu* also has two focuses: 1) the consecration of *Yirmiyahu* and 2) the approaching destruction. Therefore, according to Sefardi rite, it is read twice over the course of the year; on *Parashat Shemot*, because of *Yirmiyahu*'s prophecy and parallel to Moshe's mission

as prophet, and as the first *haftara* in the series of three *haftarot* of calamity, because of its connection to the destruction of the Temple and the *Bein ha-Metzarim* period during which it is read.

[2] According to the *Da'at Mikra* commentary, the verse, "And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great *shofar* shall be blown" (27:12), is not only the end of the first half of the *haftara*, but the end of the book of *Yeshayahu!* Whether or not we agree – and this is not the place to discuss the issue – we can certainly learn from this that, at the very least, we are talking about the midpoint of the *haftara*.

[3] For illustrative purposes, allow me to note that at the end of the nineteen eighties, a year or two before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I read an article in *Newsweek*, written by a senior commentator, which spoke of underground processes that would eventually lead to a reunification of Germany. He quickly added, however, that this was a long-term process that could not be expected to work itself out before the year 2050! At the time, the article appeared to be serious and to have a long-term perspective. The magazine published it as an opinion column, rather than a news item, for at the time there were no overt signs of an impending change. Today, of course, even the fish wrapped in yesterday's newspaper would laugh when reading that article and smile at man's blindness to what is happening around him.

It goes without saying that at the beginning of the eighties, five years before the reunification of the two Germany's, even such an assessment would have been unimaginable.

[4] A future historian trying to understand our society by listening to the radio advertisements of the period will quickly reach similarly harsh conclusions about what is regarded as the taste of life, what is considered important for happiness, and toward what goals money and energy should be invested.

[5] I included the verse here on the assumption that the latter half of the verse refers to the party who is supposed to be taught. Even if we accept the alternative exegetical possibility that the end of the verse describes the teacher, it still points to the same abandonment of responsibility toward the people on the part of the leadership.

[6] Let us not forget that Israel arrived in Egypt as desired guests and that at first they enjoyed the good life, such that the seduction and danger of slipping into the abyss of hedonism certainly existed.

[7] On this point, see at length the introductory *shiur* to this series.