

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.**

Parashat Bemidbar

THE CRISIS AND THE CONSOLATION

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

THE CONNECTION TO THE *PARASHA*

The direct connection between *Parashat Bamidbar* and its *haftara* (*Hoshea* 2:1-22) is found in the opening verse which refers to the future number of the children of Israel and in the concluding verses which speak of the wilderness as a place of hope and the renewal of the connection between Israel and their Father in heaven.

In addition to the verses that are reminiscent of events taking place in the *parasha*, there is a deeper and more intrinsic connection between Hoshea's words of consolation to Israel in his day and the Israelite encampment in the wilderness. In

the coming pages, we shall try to examine this connection. To accomplish this end, we must first examine the words of Hoshea in their own context, for our *haftara* comprises chapter 2 of *Hoshea*, which comes in response to the prophecy of rebuke in *Hoshea* 1.

THE FIRST OF THE LATTER PROPHETS

The book of *Hoshea* opens with a prophecy of rebuke which is Hoshea's inaugural prophecy to Israel. Truth be said, this is not only Hoshea's first prophecy, but the first prophecy of the latter prophets. *Chazal* already pointed out, based on the lists of kings which open the various books, that "four prophets prophesied at the same time," and that Hoshea enjoyed seniority over the other three:

Was Hoshea first that it should be written: "When the Lord spoke first to Hoshea" (*Hoshea* 1:2)? Was it with Hoshea that [the Lord] spoke first? But surely between Moshe and Hoshea there were several prophets! – Rabbi Yochanan said: He was first among the four prophets who prophesied at that time – Hoshea, Yeshayahu, Amos and Mikha. (*Bava Batra* 14b)

For our purposes, what is important is not who preceded whom in that year or the next, but the very fact that Hoshea was a member of the group that opened the prophetic process that characterized the latter prophets. In this context, it is important to note one important point, namely, that the latter prophets related to the people in an entirely different manner than did the earlier prophets. If we take the book of *Shofetim* and examine its historiography, we will see that there is a direct connection between the people's actions and their commitment to God, and what happens to them. Already in chapter 2 we are informed of the policy of sin and punishment that determines their fate, and that policy is put into practice the entire length of the book. The cycle of sin, subjugation, crying out to God and salvation repeats itself over and over again, and constitutes one of the clear characteristics of the book.

CLEAR LIMITS

It is, however, important to pay attention to the fact that all the reversals that pass over Israel during those years take place in the framework of clear limits. The ascents do not bring Israel to spiritual or historical heights, but the descents also do not take deep root and become permanent. When the situation changes and Israel repents, everything is restored to its proper place and Israel enjoys deliverance. In other words, we are dealing with local pressure that does not threaten Israel's historical existence and political reality. Their hold on the land and their ability to recover and go back to the starting point remain in force at all times. Exile and leaving the land are not options that threaten Israel during this period, and the danger of "and He cast them into another land, as it is this day" (*Devarim 29:27*) does not reside in their consciousness as a realistic possibility. The prophets which appear from time to time do not wave the threat of exile in their faces. They know that the Torah speaks of exile and total destruction as punishment for the breaking of their covenant with God, but they do not perceive these outcomes as possibilities that relate to their own lives. The Torah's verses are absorbed as intellectual information, but they do not become part of their conscious reality having existential ramifications.

A THIRD EXILE?

In order to make the matter intelligible – and also to provoke thought – let us consider our own situation. It is clear to us as well that the Torah speaks of reward and punishment that includes the punishment of exile, and we all recite the second *parasha* of *Shema* with all its warnings regarding exile. Nevertheless, many, if not the vast majority of the religious Zionist world conduct their day-to-day lives with a consciousness that does not consider exile as a possible option available to Providence. Intellectually, we might agree that such a possibility cannot be negated, but it does not penetrate our existential consciousness. We are prepared to talk about ups and down in the historical process of our hold on the land, but nothing more. This was the situation of Israel during the time of the Judges and at the beginning of the first Temple period. They too did not see the sword of exile and destruction as being lifted over their heads.

BREAKING THE VESSELS?

It is precisely with regard to this point that the first chapter of *Hoshea* is revolutionary. Suddenly, the prophet gets up and does not content himself with a warning about the usual ups and downs, but rather he speaks about a breaking of the covenant that will end in an absolute rupture of the connection between God and Israel. The image of the harlot, the declaration "for the land has lewdly gone astray from the Lord" (*Hoshea* 1:3), and the prophecy "And I will bring the kingdom of the house of Israel to an end" (verse 4) create a new reality. The prophecy ends with the assertion, "for you are not My people, and I will not be your God" (verse 9). Nothing more and nothing less.

In order to clarify the shock that these words would have caused, let us return to the analogy to our period. Let us try to imagine the shock, anger, frustration and confusion in the religious-Zionist community if a well-known and widely respected spiritual leader would get up one morning and speak in the style of Hoshea, and instead of the basic optimism that accompanies the Zionist project, he would say, "And I will bring the kingdom of the house of Israel to an end."

This was Israel's situation during the time of Hoshea. They were certainly aware of the fact that the kingdom of Israel was not being run in accordance with the Torah and *mitzvot*, and they also knew that there were many religious problems among the community at large, but they refused to believe that this would bring the country to total ruin. Let us not forget, they lived in a world that never knew exile or destruction, and they were not familiar with exile as a historical fact that had already taken place in the past. If we recall Yirmiyahu's later prophecies, which try to bring his contemporaries to the consciousness of destruction as a realistic possibility by citing the destruction of Shilo as a precedent,[\[1\]](#)[1] we might understand how difficult this must have been for Hoshea's generation that was not familiar with previous destruction.

CONSOLATION TO BALANCE

Israel had never before been tested with exile and with the feeling of such great severance from God, and in the wake of such a rebuke the people were liable to reach despair and the sense that there is no road back. Accordingly, the most important thing for Hoshea to do in the aftermath of the harsh message of chapter 1 is to balance it with a prophecy of consolation, which would clarify that the severance would not last forever and that God would not forsake His people for all time. Even if Israel is told in chapter 1 that they would be regarded as "not My people" and "unpitied," it is clarified to them in chapter 2 that their previous status would in the future be restored and that Israel would once again draw near to God:

And it shall come to pass, that instead of that which was said to then, You are not My people, it shall be said to them, You are the sons of the living God... Say to your brothers, Ammi (My people) and to our sisters Ruchama (Pitied). (2:1-3)

In this, the situation during the period of the prophets is similar to that which is described in the book of *Bamidbar*. Here too, we can see different stages in the relations between Israel and God. In *Parashat Bamidbar*, an ideal world is revealed before our eyes, in which the people camp around the *Mishkan*, the entire camp organized in the holiest manner. The *Mishkan* moves with them and rests in their midst. Next week, in *Parashat Nasa*, we will see the first fissures; the Torah already sees fit to warn about theft from a proselyte, a faithless wife, and a Nazirite. These testify to a society in which the strong exploits the weak, intimate relationships crumble, with cheating and betrayal replacing faithfulness and mutuality, and the sanctity of the camp is impaired.

THE SIN OF THE SPIES

All this is still fixable, and the relevant *mitzvot* are given to further this end. Yet to come, however, are the sins of Kivrot Ha-ta'ava and the spies, when the relations between Israel and their Father in heaven will fall apart completely. God will want to destroy the people, and even when He is appeased, the decree of destruction in the wilderness, and exile and destruction as a tragedy for future generations, will have entered the world.

Here too, there is an urgent need to console the people after the decree issued in the wake of the sin of the spies and to support them with the idea that they have a future and that God has not abandoned them forever. Therefore, in the aftermath of that decree, the Torah opens with a series of *mitzvot* that indicates that a future awaits them. First, it commands about the kid of a goat sin-offering, which comes to show that atonement is possible even for the most severe sins that strike at their religious foundations. Second, the Torah commands about the *mitzvot* of libations and *challa*, both of which are based on the assumption that Israel will enter the promised land:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, When you come to the land of your habitations, which I give to you.... (*Bamidbar* 15:2)

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, When you come into the land into which I bring you there. (*ibid.* v. 18)

The Ramban already noted:

After promising the sons that they will enter the land, He completed the laws of the sacrifices that they should offer libations when they arrive in the land. Perhaps this was meant to console them and offer them a promise, because they were despairing, saying, Who knows what will happen eventually at the end of the forty years; perhaps the sons will also sin. Accordingly, the Holy One, blessed be He, saw fit to console them, for when He commanded them about the *mitzvot* of the land, He promised them that it was clear to Him that they would come and inherit it.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *HOSHEA* AND THE BOOK OF *BAMIDBAR*

If we come to summarize what we have said thus far, we can say that Hoshea's inaugural prophecy was meant to shatter Israel's existential complacency with the disturbing and painful message of "you are not My people," in response to their sins. In the wake of this, a prophecy of consolation is necessary to testify to the eternal connection between Israel and their Father in heaven and to the first love that

will always serve as the foundations of their relationship ("And I will betroth you to Me for ever"; 2:21) In this, Hoshea's words are similar to the spiritual course that runs through the book of *Bamidbar* and the lives of Israel in the wilderness. It can therefore be argued that the *haftara* relates not only to the *parasha* of *Bamidbar*, but also to the developments that take place later in the book.

We have pointed to the general direction of the prophecy, but this does not suffice. We must further contemplate the words of Hoshea in order to understand the path that he proposes to repair the relationship. In this context, we must mention the prophet's extensive use of the imagery of the wilderness. The problem that he identifies in Israel is the fact that sin is deeply rooted in their very being. It is not a chance occurrence – for were this an accidental phenomenon, God would not respond with a severance of the relationship – but rather it is rooted in the depths of their souls. The *haftara* presents sin as a maternal legacy:

Contend with your mother, contend: for she is not My wife, nor am I her husband: let her therefore put away her harlotry out of her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts... For their mother has played the harlot: she who conceived them has acted shamefully: for she said, I will go after my lovers, who gives me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink. (*Hoshea* 2:4-7)

The idolatry and the hedonism that underlie Israel's sins are like a mother to them. There is no need to expand on the fact that a person's first relationship with the world and with life is with his mother, and that it is not by chance that we use the metaphor of "mother's milk" to refer to a person's earliest values. Regarding a person's fundamental traits we say that he acquires them with his mother's milk, because they are built in to the depths of his personality. Orderly intellectual study will come later, and this Halakha generally associates with the father, but a mother's teaching refers to a person's conduct and ways that are deeply rooted in his person. This is the situation of sin that Hoshea identifies in Israel, and therefore he sees no other solution but to return to the most basic starting point and begin everything anew – *tabula rasa*:

Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born, and make her as a wilderness, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst. (2:5)

THE WILDERNESS

In this context, it is important to pay attention to the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of new beginnings, where a person's past life in civilized society is no longer relevant, and he must begin everything from scratch. In a case of repentance where a person's past is basically in order, and only requires minor corrections, there is no need for a wilderness. But when a person's past is wholly corrupt and immersed in sin, the course that correction requires is leaving one's ordinary way of life and going out into the wilderness. This point repeats itself toward the end of the *haftara*, but on a more positive note, and in a way that is directly connected to our *parasha*:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Akhor (Troubling) for a Gate of Hope: and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. (2:16-17)

The significance of the wilderness as a place of repentance is also connected to another point raised by the prophet, namely, the foundation of the sin. Two main sins were committed by Israel in the wilderness, that of the golden calf and that of the spies. They are not the same. The sin involving the golden calf is a sin of idolatry that resulted from the need to feel the presence of a supernatural force in contact with them. The basis of the sin of the spies, on the other hand, is not erroneous and perverted spiritual service, but the satisfaction of base passions and lusts. Hedonism and the desire for life without effort stand at the root of that sin, and therefore the story of the spies takes place close to Kivrot Ha-ta'ava and is a direct continuation of what happened there. These two models of sin repeat themselves throughout Scripture. Many times the prophets rebuke Israel for the sin of idolatry, and in many other instances they complain about their unbridled hedonism. Hoshea's rebuke in our *haftara* belongs to the second group, for the idolatrous practices that he mentions are performed for the purpose of profit and pleasure, and not out of spiritual or religious conviction.

THE MESSAGE OF THE WILDERNESS

Going out into the wilderness is intended to confront this problem. On the one hand, the wilderness will reveal the nullity of the idols by whose charms Israel has been captivated, for in the dry wilderness only God can support them, and the idols will become revealed in their nakedness. Indeed, the Torah in *Parashat Ekev* and King David in the book of *Tehilim* emphasize the greatness of the Creator who is capable of "setting a table in the wilderness" and satisfying Israel's needs. It seems, however, that the return to the wilderness comes not only to allow God to emerge victorious in His competition with the idols and to demonstrate His greatness. Rather, it contains a fundamental message that struggles with the root of the sin, namely, turning one's back to the world of hedonism. In the world of the wilderness, a person is satisfied with the minimum, he exploits nature for his real and basic needs, and he is not carried away by the false charms of fashion and pleasure, but rather he worries about his survival in an appropriate manner.

We see then that the spiritual significance of the wilderness consists of the creation of a new beginning and a shedding of the past that cannot be repaired. It also ensures that this beginning will be focused on things that are necessary for human existence, and not on the pursuit of things that lead a person astray from a meaningful life. These problems disturbed the generation of Hoshea and the generation of the wilderness, and we too should give them thought.

"AND I WILL BETROTH YOU TO ME FOR EVER"

In conclusion, let us take note of Hoshea's closing words which speak of "betrothing you to Me for ever," that is, the eternal connection between Israel and God. Going out to the wilderness will not impair a relationship that is deeply implanted in the soul. The relationship between a couple whose love is based on mutual pleasure will not survive if that pleasure can no longer be provided. If the relationship is based on pleasure and profit, then each one will come to the conclusion that it is a good idea to leave his or her spouse because remaining together no longer

yields any profit, just as Israel had said in the previous verses, "I will go and return to my first husband; for then it was better with me than now" (3:9). This is clearly not the foundation of a lasting relationship.

In the case of true love, however, even if one spouse is in prison or in the wilderness, the existential and eternal connection between the two remains undisturbed. The end of the *haftara* promises that Israel will return to God in a way that will create a permanent bond that cannot be severed, and not for the sake of passing gain.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[\[1\]](#)[1] "But go now to My place which was in Shilo, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of My people Israel" (*Yirmiyahu* 7:12).