

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 BEHA'ALOTEKHA

ANTICIPATING TROUBLE WITH ITS REMEDY

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The *haftara* for *Parashat Beha'alotekha* (*Zekharya* 2:14-4:7) is one of two *haftarot* that are repeated during the year-long cycle of *haftarot*. We already encountered *Zekharya's* prophecy as the *haftara* read on *Shabbat Chanuka*.[\[1\]](#) Much of what we will say here is based, therefore, on what we wrote earlier in the year, though here we will integrate the *haftara* into the framework of this week's *parasha*.

IS THIS THE ENTIRE CONNECTION?

At first glance, the connection between the *haftara* and the *parasha* is the *menora* that appears prominently in the *haftara*, this being connected to the lighting of the lamps at the beginning of the *parasha*. It should be noted, however, that this is not such a simple choice, for the *menora* mentioned at the beginning of the *parasha* is only one of many topics discussed therein, each one important and meaningful in its own right. While it is true that the section dealing with the *menora* is located in a place of honor, it is still not the focus of the *parasha*, and to a great degree, *Chazal* viewed it as being connected to the previous *parasha*. The bottom line is that we can point to the connection between the two *menoras* and between the priests identified with each of them as the reason for reading this week's *haftara*. This means, however, that when we read the *haftara*, we are really relating to only a small part of the *haftara* and to an even smaller portion of the *parasha*. For this reason, we would like to point out a more systemic connection between *Parashat Beha'alotekha* and the prophecy of *Zekharya*. This connection takes into account not only the section of the lamps, but also the larger context in which it is found. As it has been our practice throughout this series, we will begin with an analysis of the *haftara*, and afterwards we will return to the *parasha*.

THE DANGERS OF EXILE

Zekharya prophesies during the period of the return to Zion, when part of the Jewish people returns from exile in Bavel to Eretz Israel, and it falls upon the prophet to deal with the challenges of the period. The destruction and the exile – besides the loss of the Temple and the tragic human cost at the time – presented the people with a very difficult challenge. On the spiritual and national level, an existential situation was created that was different, unfamiliar, and far more threatening than anything that had come before it, namely, the exile. Two spiritual dangers presented themselves to the people with respect to their reactions to the new situation:

The first was the feeling that they continued to be reprimanded in the wake of the destruction and the exile and that the quality of judgment was still stretched out over them in a way that did not allow for reconciliation. More difficult than this was the assumption that their sins had caused God to despise them and to cast them off, so that Israel was no longer connected to God. In a well-known midrash, *Chazal* make

use of the metaphor of a slave who was sold by his master^[2] in order to express this idea that with the destruction of the Temple, the relationship between the Jewish people and their Maker had been severed.

The common denominator here is the loss of all hope of repairing the situation and the spiritual and national paralysis that such feelings are liable to give rise to. This is the situation with which Zekharya struggles from the very beginning of the book, which opens with the simple description of the situation as "The Lord has been much displeased with your fathers" (*Zekharya* 1:2). His primary mission, then, is to raise the people's spirits so that they may engage in repentance and return to God, and not fall into the depths of despair.

This is accompanied by an additional problem, namely the state of the nations who continue to provoke Israel and God in the wake of the destruction, and the unbearable gap between the tranquility enjoyed by these nations and the distress suffered by Israel.^[3]

"AND I SHALL DWELL IN YOUR MIDST"

At this point in Zekharya's prophecy, we reach the section constituting our *haftara*, which opens with words of consolation. The initial verses are directed toward the nations and constitute a continuation of what had been stated previously regarding the feeling of the nations that God had abandoned and forsaken Israel:

Sing and rejoice, O Daughter of Zion; for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be My people: and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord shall inherit Yehuda as his portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again. Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord: for He has roused himself out of His holy habitation. (2:14-17)

The essential point here is that God has returned to dwell among Israel. This is presented not as a spiritual achievement in and of itself, but as a response to the ideas circulating among Israel and the nations regarding the meaning of the destruction. Therefore, emphasis is placed not only on the idea that "I will dwell in the midst of you" - familiar to us from the *Mishkan* in the wilderness and from the *mitzva* to construct the *Mikdash* based on the command of "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8) - but also on the significance of that idea for Israel's situation, namely, the conclusion that "you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you." The prophet promises not only "inheritance in the holy land," but a renewed and constant selection of Jerusalem.[\[4\]](#)

[Another interesting point that is made in these verses is the impact that Israel's return to Zion will have on the nations who will undergo an inner upheaval and join those who serve God and become part of His people. The expression, "And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day," is very reminiscent of the prophecy of Yeshayahu, who expands upon this idea: "Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one that keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and all that take hold of My covenant" (*Yeshayahu* 56:6).]

THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE *HAFTARAH*

This is the first part of the *haftarah*, which is directed toward the nations and their challenge to Israel in the aftermath of the destruction. The *haftarah's* primary interest, however, is not in the nations, but in Israel and their redemption because of their special relationship with God, and in the processes that are meant to lead to that redemption. The *haftarah* turns to this point in the next stage, after it finishes the prophecy regarding God's revelation to the nations of the world. As is plainly evident, the rest of Zekharya's prophecy is divided into two parts and directed at two individuals:

- 1) The prophecy to Yehoshua the High Priest.
- 2) The word of God to Zerubavel.

Thus, the *haftara* is divided into three sections, each section being separated from the next by means of a *parasha setuma*.

NO REDEMPTION WITHOUT REPENTANCE

The prophecy to Yehoshua comes to deal with the cardinal problem of the period. On the one hand, redemption is absolutely necessary, so that Israel not despair and see themselves as having been rejected by God in the aftermath of their exile. On the other hand, "Israel will be redeemed only through repentance." Zekharya himself emphasized this principle at the beginning of the book – "Turn to Me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts" (1:3) – but the Jewish people of that generation were not worthy. This is the essence of the Satan's argument against the redemption of Israel: "And He showed me Yehoshua the High Priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to thwart him" (3:1). The angel serves as the advocate who defends Israel (see 1:12-15), Yehoshua stands before him in order to actualize the promised consolations, and Satan argues that Israel cannot be redeemed without repentance.

At this point God is asked, as it were, to decide between Satan and the angel, and He accepts the argument that Yehoshua and the people he represents are unworthy of redemption. The verse itself describes Yehoshua as "clothed in filthy garments" (3:3), which is clearly a metaphor for sins^[5] (as it is explicitly stated later, that removal of the filthy garments is equivalent to removal of the sins) and his inability to stand before the king as a worthy servant. God, however, agrees to redeem Israel because they are "a brand plucked out of the fire" (3:2). Expression is thereby given to the principle that appears in several places in the books of the Prophets that Israel may be redeemed because of its suffering and troubles, even if their actions do not justify redemption. Already at the burning bush, Moshe was told that redemption became necessary because of the severity and depth of the bondage:

And the Lord, said, I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their masters; for I know their

sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egypt, and to bring them up out of that land. (*Shemot* 3:7-8)

So too Yirmiyahu prophesies about "the people who were left of the sword who found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest" (*Yirmiyahu* 31:1), whose redemption follows from the fact that they are "left of the sword."^[6] The rest itself has religious and moral value, and if God waits before redeeming them, who knows whether or not a remnant of the people will survive. The brands are, therefore, plucked from the fire as they are, without first examining the cleanliness of their spiritual clothing.

SETTING A SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE

Unlike that prophecy of Yirmiyahu, however, Zekharya is not satisfied with redemption that comes to Israel owing to its wretchedness, and the angel once again forewarns Yehoshua and sets before him a spiritual challenge:

And the angel of the Lord forewarned Yehoshua, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts; If you will walk in My ways, and if you will keep My charge, and you will also judge My house, and will also guard My courts, then I will give you access among those who stand by. Hear now, O Yehoshua the High Priest, you, and your fellows who sit before you: for they are men of good omen: for, behold, I will bring my servant Tzemach. (3:6-8)

Here we have come to the heart of the matter. Israel of that generation leaves Babylonia for Eretz Israel and enjoys redemption. It is up to them, however, to choose which redemption will be materialized. Will it be a narrow process of redemption in which the resting of God's *Shekhina* in the *Mikdash* will be minimal and the political reality will be limited to peace with the surrounding nations and rescue of the brands plucked out of the fire? Or perhaps it will be a full redemption that will realize Chaggai's prophecy that "the glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former" (*Chaggai* 2:9), and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in its full glory. The potential for this exists, but the key for actualization

rests in the hands of Israel. The degree to which the redemption will be narrow and minimal or grand and perfect – depends upon their actions. This is the essence of what the angel says to Yehoshua. That is to say, that it is not enough that Israel be redeemed as brands plucked out of the fire, for if so, it will be a narrow process that provides for their needs as survivors, but nothing more. The potential to be counted among the remarkable and to bring about the coming of the messianic king, "my servant Tzemach," does indeed exist, but this depends upon the degree of social justice and religious intensity that will be achieved by the members of that generation.

THE VARIOUS POSSIBLE TRACKS

The assumption that during the period of the return to Zion there stood before Israel various possibilities regarding the process of redemption, and that the script regarding the nature of the redemption of the second Temple depended upon Israel's actions, finds sharp expression in a famous Gemara in tractate *Yoma* (9b):

"If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver, and if she be a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:9). Had you made yourselves like a wall, all of you going up in the days of Ezra, you would have been likened to silver which is not subject to decay. But now that you went up like doors, you are likened to cedar which is subject to decay."

This appears to be the metaphoric meaning of the stone mentioned in the prophecy:

"For behold the stone that I have laid before Yehoshua: upon one stone are seven facets: behold, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts" (3:9).

The stone symbolizes the potential of the building; on the physical level, the stone is connected to the building of the Temple as a structure built of stones, but on the more symbolic level it marks the entirety of spiritual building. Yehoshua is told that the stone of the building has the potential to give rise to various decorations and

to express thereby various ideas, each facet representing a different direction and an additional potential, so that it is possible to base upon it seven different principles and processes. If they inscribe it properly, seven facets will blossom from it, but if they inscribe it only partly, it will have only two or three facets, and if they do not exploit its potential whatsoever, God forbid, then it will not give rise to even a single facet. It will give protection to the plucked brands by way of its very material nature, but the moral principles that are meant to come to expression through the artistic inscriptions will not come into the world at all.

MONARCHY AND PRIESTHOOD

At this point, the *haftara* moves on to discuss Zerubavel. The connection between Yehoshua and Zerubavel is clear, explicitly stated in the book of *Chaggai* (2:2). Yehoshua is the High Priest, whereas Zerubavel is the political leader ("the governor of Yehuda"). The message given to Zerubavel at the end of the *haftara* that the political leadership must subordinate itself to the spiritual leadership, and that the essence is not physical strength, but spirit, is a fundamental message of Judaism and the essence of the prophecy, so basic that there is no need to expand upon it.

The vision that Zekharya sees in this context is that of the *menora* with the seven lamps and two olive trees. The two olive trees serve as receptacles for oil that stand above the *menora* and drip oil into it. As the commentators explain in light of the verses in the continuation that are not included in the *haftara*, the two "*benei yitzhar*" (4:14), that is, the olive trees, refer to the monarchy and the priesthood, namely, Yehoshua and Zerubavel. Both the political leader and the High Priest are anointed with oil, and therefore the metaphor is aptly applied to them. The meaning of the vision is that they are meant to cooperate with each other in order to achieve a common goal. Just as the two olive trees stand on the two sides of the *menora* and together feed it with oil, so too the priesthood and the monarchy are supposed to work together in harmony and without tension. Not separate centers of power, but cooperation between two leaders. So too Chaggai in his prophecy (chap. 2) sees the two as working together and prophesies about them in the same prophecy.

COMMON GOAL

Now, if we examine the objective toward which the two leaders are working, both in the prophecy of Chaggai and in that of Zekharya, we will see that their joint objective is the construction of the Temple. This means that the political leader also plays an important role in the building of the Temple. Indeed, *Chazal* have already taught us that the appointment of a king is a *mitzva* that must precede the construction of the Temple, and they learned from David how the king must be involved in that project.^[7] This is stated explicitly in the context of our period in the verses that immediately follow our *haftar*: "Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, The hands of Zerubavel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it" (4:8-9).

A TEMPLE WITHOUT INDEPENDENCE

Attention should also be paid to the fact that this appears to have been their exclusive goal. Indeed, the construction of the second Temple differed in essence from the construction of the first Temple, in that the essence of the redemption was focused on the Temple. During the first Temple period, an independent political entity was established. Israel entered the land, settled it, and established a national homeland. Only after more than four hundred years had passed was the Temple erected. In other words, Israel's entry into the land, which *Chazal* referred to as "the first entry," was detached from the construction of the Temple and constituted an independent achievement. During the second Temple period, in contrast, there was no political independence, but only partial autonomy under the aegis of foreign kings, there was no Davidic dynasty, and all that was left was the construction of the Temple. During this period, the majority of the Jewish people did not leave Babylonia for Eretz Israel, so that there was not even an ingathering of the exiles. The redemption of that time expressed itself exclusively through the construction of the Temple. The opening words of the book of *Zekharya*, which appear to serve as an innocent dating of the prophecy and nothing more, also allude to this: "In the eighth month, in the second year of Daryavesh, the word of the Lord came to Zekharya, the son of Berakhya, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying" (*Zekharya* 1:1). The verse means to imply that all of Zekharya's work was in the political framework of Persian rule over the land.

DESPISE NOT THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS

Thus, we have reached the end of the *haftara*, but we must still take a quick look at the verses that immediately follow it:

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, The hands of Zerubavel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. For who has despised the day of small things? For those seven shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubavel; the eyes of the Lord, they rove to and fro through the whole earth. (4:8-10)

Earlier we pointed out that Zekharya sets before Yehoshua the challenge of realizing the full possible potential of the redemption of the second Temple, and encourages him to strive for the perfect redemption that will develop from the stones of the building. Israel, as we know, did not merit. The second Temple did not reach the level of the resting of the *Shekhina* that was reached by the first Temple, and the political achievement of the return to Zion was very limited. The reader could easily arrive at the conclusion that the entire business was a failure and that the achievements of rebuilding the Temple and the partial return of the people to Eretz Israel were meaningless. In other words, if it was merely the beginning of the redemption (*atchalta di-ge'ula*) and the potential was never exploited, it had no importance. In these verses, the prophet comes to protest against this idea and to establish that even a partial achievement is meaningful. One must not despise the day of little things, even if the desire and aspiration had been to achieve a day of great things. Even if there is only tin, and no gold or silver, there is still "the eyes of the Lord roving to and fro through the whole earth," that is, a sign of Divine providence over the people. The promise of "I will engrave its inscription" was not achieved in the tin, but it too reflects the eyes of God. In other words, if someone comes to build a ten-story building, but only succeeds in building two stories, he should, on the one hand, be disappointed, for his vision was not realized in its full glory, but on the other hand, he should take satisfaction in his partial accomplishment. This was Israel's situation during the second Temple period.

SEEDS OF EXILE

Let us now return to our *parasha*. It begins on a tranquil note with a continuation of the deployment and organization around the *Mishkan*. The lighting of the *menora*, the consecration of the Levites, the paschal offering, and the section dealing with the trumpets all give expression to a world that is in a state of repair where the people of Israel are close to their father in heaven and where the spiritual and holy rule the material. All seems to be proceeding in accordance with the Divine plan for Israel, and advancing toward the full realization of the redemption in Eretz Israel.

In the second half of the *parasha*, however, there is a steep fall from the world of sanctity to a world of lust, and a flight from holiness, the process of which begins in our *parasha*. It continues with the sin of the spies and the company of Korach and the desire to return to Egypt. There is a straight line leading from the situation in which pleasure is set as a priority and the demand for cucumbers and melons is seen as encompassing the total picture, to the decree which was issued against Israel in the wake of the sin of the spies. We see then that the seeds of exile and fall from God's people to the dead of the wilderness, from the chosen people to a rebuked nation that is refused redemption, are found already in the second half of *Parashat Beha'alotekha*. A chain of sin and ruin runs through these chapters; from complaint to lust, from lust to the spies, from the spies to the *ma'apilim*, from the *ma'apilim* to those who burnt strange incense and demanded the priesthood, denying the leadership of God and Moshe His servant. The people lack the strength that is needed to struggle with and realize their destiny and they sink into sin and are punished with exile.

[The break is so significant that *Chazal* see it as a fissure that divides the book of *Bamidbar* into units. The courses of the book are so different that *Chazal* counted the beginning of the book and its continuation as three separate books.^[8] The first book, from the beginning of chapter 1 until "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward" (10:34) deals with the Israelite camp in the wilderness, in which the vision and reality go hand in hand; the second book dealing with the journey to Eretz Israel on the wings of the *Shekhina* is made up of the eighty-five letters of the two verses beginning with "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward" (10:35-36); and the third book (11:1-36:13), which opens with the story of the complainers and continues

until the end of *Bamidbar*, describes the sins that lead to the non-fulfillment of the vision in that generation's lifetime.]

ANTICIPATING TROUBLE

What emerges from all this is that deeper contemplation of *Parashat Beha'alotekha* teaches us about the need to anticipate trouble, for the danger of exile lies not only in the exile in itself, but in the despair that is liable to accompany it. Israel was redeemed from Egypt and carried on the wings of eagles, and suddenly the decree of exile awaits them. The world of sin and exile that followed the revelation at Mount Sinai and the expectation to enter the land of Israel, imperils the people with a danger similar to that which will fall upon them following the destruction of the Temple. The Torah does not deal with this problem explicitly, but the midrashim allude to it, and it is certainly possible to read it between the lines. The reading of the *haftara* from *Zekharya*, with its message about rebuilding in the aftermath of severe fall, and the rehabilitation of the people through the spiritual leadership of a priest and a political leader, fill the needs bubbling beneath the surface of our *parasha*. Thus, in addition to the *menora* and the status of the High Priest as leader, there is also a connection between the rest of the *haftara* and the reality that first appears in *Parashat Beha'alotekha* and continues through the entire length of the book of *Bamidbar*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] The second instance is the *haftara* shared by *Noach* and *Ki Tetze*.

[2] "As Israel said to Yechezkel, as it is stated: 'Certain of the elders of Israel came out to me, and sat before me' (*Yechezkel* 20:1). They said to him: 'Yechezkel, a slave who was sold by his master, does he not leave his possession?' He said to them: 'Yes.' They said to him: 'Since God has sold us to the nations of the world, we have left his possession.' He said to them: 'Surely a slave who was sold by his master on condition that he return - does he leave his possession?'" (*Sifrei, Bamidbar* 14:41).

[3] These issues are discussed in the first two chapters of the book, which precede the *haftara*. The most striking verses in this context are: "And they said, We have walked to and fro in the earth, and, behold, all the earth sits still, and is at rest. Then the angel of the Lord answered and said, O Lord of hosts, how long will you not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Yehuda, against which you have had indignation these seventy years?" (1:11-12); "For thus says the Lord of hosts – (because of His honor He sent me to the nations which spoiled you: for he that touches you touches the apple of His eye) – For behold, I will shake My hand over them, and they shall be a spoil to those who served them. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me" (2:12-13).

[4] The word "*od*" in the promise, "And He shall choose Jerusalem *od*," bears the meaning of "again," and also the idea of constant choosing that will continue forever.

[5] *Chazal* even assert that the filthy garments are a metaphor for Yehoshua's children who married non-Jewish women. See *Sanhedrin* 93a, and Radak on our verse.

[6] *Beli neder*, we will deal with this idea at greater length when we discuss the prophecy of Yirmiyahu which serves as the *haftara* for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shana.

[7] See *Sanhedrin* 20b.

[8] See *Shabbat* 116a, and Rashi (s.v. *shiv'a sifrei Torah*).