

The *Haftara* of Shabbat Chanuka

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Two Reasons for Reading Zekharya's Vision

Reading Zekharya's vision about the *menora* (*Zekharya* 2:14-4:7) as the *haftara* for Shabbat Chanuka is mandated by talmudic law (*Megilla* 31a). Establishing that vision as the *haftara* of Shabbat Chanuka even when it coincides with Rosh Chodesh is, however, not self-evident, for the *haftara* that is ordinarily read on Rosh Chodesh is also mandated by talmudic law. The Talmud (*Megilla* 29b) deals with the confluence of Chanuka and Rosh Chodesh with respect to the Torah reading, but it does not relate to the issue of the *haftara* that must be read on such a day. It was only in the post-talmudic period that the halakhic authorities were asked to address this question, the *Geonim* and the *Rishonim* issuing rulings on the matter. The *Geonim* ruled that we read the *haftara* from *Zekharya*, without explaining the grounds for the custom,¹ whereas the Ashkenazi *Rishonim* had doubts about the matter, and some even suggested that the *haftara* for Rosh Chodesh be read in its place.² In the end, the position of those who advocated reading the *haftara* for Chanuka was accepted, with two main arguments presented as justification:

- 1) The Torah reading concludes with the reading for Chanuka, and on *Shabbatot* when there are multiple Torah readings, the *haftara* is supposed to relate to the last reading.
- 2) The *haftara* for Chanuka constitutes a publicizing of the miracle ("*pirsumei nisa*"), and publicizing the miracle overrides all other possible considerations.

These two explanations give expression to the two approaches toward the *haftara* that we presented in our introduction to this series. As may be remembered, we noted there one position that sees the *haftara* as a continuation and expansion of the Torah reading, and another position (that we support) that sees the *haftara* as an independent unit that relates to the human condition and guides man in light of his existential and religious needs. The first argument proposed above, which prefers the *haftara* for Chanuka because of its connection to the Torah reading, sees the *haftara* as a continuation of the Torah reading, and therefore it must be connected to the last reading. In contrast, the argument that preference is given to Zekharya's vision because it constitutes *pirsumei nisa*, is not concerned with the connection between the *haftara* and the Torah reading, but with selecting the

¹ See *Otzar Ha-Geonim*, *Megilla* 29b, and sources cited in *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 10, s.v. *haftara*, note 305.

² See *Or Zaru'a*, II, no. 394, and *Shibbolei Ha-Leket*, no. 190.

more important existential message from among the alternatives, and fixing the *haftara* in light of that consideration.

It should also be noted that from the position of *Tosafot* (*Shabbat* 23b, s.v. *hadar*) that gives precedence to the Chanuka-related *haftara* because of the consideration of *pirsumei nisa*, we learn that reading the *haftara* involves a publicizing of the miracle. Nowhere in the Gemara is the *haftara* or the Torah reading defined as a fulfillment of *pirsumei nisa*.³ And logically speaking, this is certainly not self-evident, for neither reading relates to the miracle of Chanuka, but to other events, and so the position of *Tosafot* is novel.

Despair

Let us now examine the contents of the *haftara*. Zekharya prophesies during the period of the return to Zion, when the Jewish people returned to Eretz Israel from their exile in Babylonia, and he is required to struggle with the challenges of his time. 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, unknown and more threatening than anything that had preceded it. Two dangers presented themselves to the people with respect to their responses to the new situation. The first was the feeling of having been reprimanded in the wake of the destruction and the exile, and of being unable to achieve pardon for their sins. Worse than this, however, was the assumption that their sins had caused God to despise them and cast them away from Him. *Chazal* used the metaphor of a servant whose master had sold him to another person⁴ 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 between the two is the absence of hope of repairing the situation and the spiritual and national paralysis that such feelings can give rise to. This is the situation which Zekharya confronts 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" (1:2). Zekharya's mission 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.

Peace of the Nations and Distress of Israel

³ The laws of Chanuka that the Gemara associates with "publication of the miracle" are lighting the Chanuka candles (*Shabbat* 23b), reciting "*Al ha-Nissim*" (*Shabbat* 24b), and reciting *Hallel* (*Berakhot* 14a).

⁴ "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)

This is accompanied by another problem, namely, the state of the nations who continue to provoke Israel and God even after the destruction and the unbearable gap between the peace enjoyed by these nations and the distress suffered by Israel.⁵

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 main point is that God has returned to dwell among Israel. This is not presented 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 their 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.⁶

[Another interesting point that is included in these verses is the impression that Israel's return to Zion will have on the nations who will undergo an inner upheaval and join those who serve God and be 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).]

⁵ 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).

⁶ The word "*od*" in the promise, "And He shall choose Jerusalem *od*," bears the meaning of "again," and also the idea of constant choice that will continue forever.

Israel and Its Redemption

This is the first half of the *haftara*, which is directed toward the nations and their challenge to Israel in the aftermath of the destruction. The *haftara'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 *haftara* 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, 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*.

The prophecy to Yehoshua deals with the cardinal problem of the period. On the one hand, redemption is the need of the hour, 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 Israel of that generation was not deserving. This is the essence of the argument put forward by Satan in opposition to 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.

And God is asked, as it were, to decide between Satan and the angel, and He accepts the argument that Yehoshua, and the people that he represents, are not worthy of redemption. The verse itself describes Yehoshua as "clothed in filthy garments" (3:3), which is clearly a metaphor for sins⁷ (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 has become necessary because of the severity and the depth of the bondage:

⁷ *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.

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." The rest itself has religious and moral value, and if God waits before redeeming them, who knows whether a remnant of the people will still survive then, or perhaps not, God forbid. Therefore, the brands are plucked from the fire as they are, without first examining the cleanliness of their spiritual clothing.

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 leave Babylonia for Eretz Israel and enjoy 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 is saying 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 is achieved by the members of that generation.

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 found 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 ascending in the days of Ezra, you would have been compared to silver which is not subject to decay. But now that you ascended like doors, you are compared 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.

Priesthood and monarchy

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, to 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 that stand on the two sides of the *menora* and together feed it with oil, so 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.

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 has 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.⁸ This is stated explicitly in the context of our period in the verses that immediately follow our *haftara*: "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).

The Essence of the Redemption – In the Temple

Attention should also be paid to the fact that it is only this objective that appears in connection with their work. 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. That is to say that 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, 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 do not leave Babylonia for Eretz Israel, so that there is not even an ingathering of the exiles, and the redemption of that time expresses 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.

The Beginning of the Redemption

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

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

⁸ See *Sanhedrin* 20b.

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)

We pointed out earlier 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 reach 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 the 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. It is against this idea that the prophet comes to protest in these verses 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 was 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 be satisfied with his partial accomplishment. This was Israel's situation during the second Temple period.

Thus, we have arrived at the connection between Chanuka and the *haftara*. In addition to the immediate connection of the *menora*, there are essential connections between the two periods. First, the *haftara* tells us of the people's need to choose the identity of closeness to God, to remove their filthy clothes (which *Chazal* understood as an allusion to assimilation) in favor of clean white garments, and this choice is placed in the hands of the High Priest as spiritual leader. The connection to Chanuka, the essence of which is the choice between Jewish identity and cultural assimilation, and the decision of "Matityahu son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons" in favor of Jewish identity is clear.⁹

Second, even in Chanuka there existed a great potential which could have been realized and risen to great heights. The challenge placed before Yehoshua and Zerubavel was also set before the generation of the Hasmoneans, and they too were given the opportunity to build an everlasting

⁹ It should be added that the Rambam in his remarks about Chanuka emphasizes the troubles that preceded the Hasmonean victory – "And Israel was exceedingly distressed by them and they greatly oppressed them, until the God of our forefathers had compassion upon them and saved them from them and rescued them" – and the redemption having the dimension of brands plucked out of the fire.

building out of the redemption that they brought about, had they and their generation merited.

Third, just as the returnees from Babylonia did not merit to realize this achievement, so too the Maccabees were forced to be satisfied with a partial achievement and see in the rededication of the Temple and its purification its primary achievement for later generations. However, just as the achievement of the returnees from Babylonia was significant despite its incompleteness, so too the achievement of the Maccabees has stood for all generations even though it too was incomplete and they did not merit remaining for long on the monarchical throne.

The Difference between the Ramban and the Rambam

One last point that should be discussed in the context of the *haftara* and Chanuka is the relationship between political leadership and the priesthood. The *haftara* depicts the model of two olive trees working together toward a joint goal. The Hasmonean monarchy created a situation in which the priesthood and the monarchy no longer constituted two olive trees feeding the same *menora*, but rather they blended into a single unit, and as a result, there arose contradictory appraisals among the sages of Israel regarding their monarchy. The Ramban (*Bereishit* 49:10) rejected their monarchy, sharply condemning them for not preserving the separation of powers ("the olive trees"), whereas the Rambam saw in their kingship one of their principal achievements, and as helping them achieve their objectives as priests, and thus was realized the vision of a kingdom that combines the two "*benei ha-yitzhar*."¹⁰

¹⁰ In truth, the Rambam's position requires more precise examination and additional distinctions between different models and objectives and also between the ideal situation and post facto recognition. All this, however, goes well beyond the framework of this series. I merely wish to present the Rambam as disagreeing with the Ramban, to stimulate thought on the matter, and to note that this matter constitutes another connection between the *haftara* and Chanuka. A careful analysis of the Rambam's positions on political issues may be found in Prof. Y. Blidstein's, *Ekronot Mediniyim be-Mishnat ha-Rambam*.