

**The War of Gog and Magog:
The *Haftara* of *Shabbat Chol Ha-moed Sukkot***

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The *haftara* for *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed Sukkot* (*Yechezkel* 38:18-39:16), which deals with the war of Gog and Magog, is one of the most famous prophecies in Scripture. It has succeeded in taking hold of the human imagination and penetrating deeply into our cultural and religious consciousness. The destruction of the existing and imperfect world, the ultimate war against evil, the heavy price of blood, and God's victory over men of flesh and blood are powerful images that leave a profound impression on the human soul. Thus, this prophecy has become part of the inalienable property of the Jewish and general world.

It is quite understandable, then, that this prophecy was included in the *haftarot* cycle. However, its relationship to the festival of Sukkot is not at all clear, and is even surprising, for what is the connection between a blood-drenched world war and the festival of Sukkot? How does the *sukka* of peace connect to war, and what is the relationship between the refuge and shelter of the *sukka* and the destruction and desolation described in this prophecy?

The reading of the *haftara* of Gog and Magog on *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed Sukkot* is not merely a custom, but an obligation of Talmudic law. The *gemara* in *Megilla* (31a) mentions it along with the other *haftarot* read on the various holidays to this very day; we thus see that *Chazal* already saw an essential connection between the prophecy and the festival.

In answer to this question, Rashi (*Megilla* 31a, s.v. *be-yom*) identifies the war of Gog and Magog with the war fought in the end of days that is mentioned at the end of the book of *Zekharia* in the chapter that serves as the *haftara* on the first day of Sukkot. As Rashi puts it, "'On that day, when Gog shall come' is the war mentioned in *Zekharia* in 'Behold, the day of the Lord comes.'" Indeed, there is significant correspondence between these two prophecies. Both deal with a future war of defense fought against nations oppressing Israel in which God Himself rises to fight against the enemies of Israel, making use of very similar methods of fighting. Both campaigns are decided by way of supernatural means introduced by God, the focus of which is a great earthquake that utterly overturns the regular natural order, as a result of which pandemonium breaks out, causing "every man's sword to be against each other." From this perspective, we can certainly speak of very similar accounts issuing from the mouths of *Yechezkel* and *Zekharia*, and conclude from this that we are dealing with the same war, as is argued by Rashi.

Based on this, we can explain why we read the story of Gog and Magog on *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed* Sukkot, for the prophecy in *Zekharia* makes explicit mention of the festival of Sukkot. According to Rashi, the two *haftarot* read on the festival of Sukkot deal with the terrible war that will take place in the future, "on that day," for they are one and the same war. On the first day of Sukkot, we read the account of that war as it appears at the end of the book of *Zekharia*, mentioning the festival of Sukkot at the conclusion, and on *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed*, we read Yechezkel's account of the same war.

This, however, is not so simple, for a new question arises in the wake of Rashi's proposal - namely, why are there two prophecies for a single event? Wouldn't one account of this future war have sufficed? Similarly, it should be noted that the festival of Sukkot is not mentioned in *Zekharia* in connection to the war itself, but in connection to the reaction to that war. Thus, we must ask whether the reaction to the war is also common to both *Yechezkel* and to *Zekharia*. Perhaps they part company in their descriptions of what happens in the aftermath of the war, in which case *Zekharia*'s prophecy about the festival of Sukkot is not connected to the response appearing in *Yechezkel*.

There is a simple answer to the first question regarding the need to write two prophecies relating to the same event. *Chazal* provided us with an answer in the form of the well-known maxim that "two prophets do not prophesy in the same style." In its most comprehensive sense, this means not only that different prophets make use of different linguistic styles, but also that they present different perspectives on the same events. This is based on the assumption that multiple factors are always at play and that the same event can have various different ramifications.

In fact, *Zekharia* and *Yechezkel*'s accounts of the war to be fought at the end of days focus on different factors. *Zekharia* describes the war over Jerusalem as a war conducted against Israel by nations that oppose the Jewish People's national and religious aspirations. They do not want Israel to dwell securely in their land; rather, they covet it for themselves, and they therefore come to fight against Israel with imperialistic and aggressive geo-political objectives. Thus, his prophecy about their ultimate defeat fits in well with the overall aim of the book to prophesy about the process of Israel's redemption, starting with the redemption during the Second Temple period and the days of the Return to Zion and ending with the future redemption and the end of days. The emphasis that *Zekharia* gives to God's involvement in the nations' struggle against Israel is part of his overall approach and his focus on the topic of exile and redemption and its impact on Israel's circumstances during his own day and in the future.

Similarly, the end of the book continues the thread that runs throughout the book of directing the spotlight toward Jerusalem. The prophecies focus on Jerusalem and what will happen therein, and the redemption under discussion is the redemption of Jerusalem. *Zekharia* prophesies about the redemption of the Second Temple period, which was primarily the redemption of the Temple and Jerusalem, the division of the

land into tribal territories having collapsed with the exile of the ten tribes. Therefore, the description of the end of days also revolves around the fate of Jerusalem (and the people of Yehuda connected to it), and it is Jerusalem that stands in the limelight. The war is a war over Jerusalem, the tumult occurs therein, and the repair undertaken by the nations will take place when they make pilgrimages to the city on the pilgrim festivals. Zekharia is Jerusalem's prophet, and this quality is well reflected in the *haftara* read on the first day of Sukkot, as in the rest of the book.

We see, then, that Zekharia's prophecy concerning the end of days reflects the perspective adopted throughout the book and grows directly out of it. One point regarding the *haftara* for the first day of Sukkot should, however, be emphasized - its universal component. Following the description of Israel's victory over the nations who had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed it while oppressing its inhabitants, the prophet shifts his focus to the nations' response to Israel's redemption. I will not go into the details of his prophecy, as I already discussed it in my *shiur* on the *haftara* for the first day of Sukkot (<http://vbm-torah.org/sukkot/suk69-rml.htm>). I will merely note that when discussing redemption from man's perspective, a prophet will focus on the connection between God and Israel and the help that He extends to them as His chosen people. But this perspective can also bring a prophet to discuss the relationship between God and the other nations; if Israel is God's people, and the nations fight against Israel, the relationship between God and the warring nations will become severed. This is the subject of Zekharia's prophecy - the universalistic perspective on the nations' war against Jerusalem and the relationship between them and God in the wake of the battle.

Yechezkel, on the other hand, presents a different approach. According to him, the dramatic focus of the end of days is neither man's place in history, nor the people of Israel's redemption in and of itself, but rather the sanctification of God's name in the world. This approach characterizes many prophecies in the book and is especially prominent in chapter 36, which serves as the *haftara* for *Parashat Para*. Israel is God's people and the fact that they are in exile is a desecration of God's great name:

And when they came to the nations into which they came, they profaned My holy name, in that men said of them, "These are the people of the Lord, and they are gone out of His land." But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations into which they came. Therefore, say to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God; I do not do this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will sanctify My great name, which was profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in the midst of them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. (*Yechezkel* 36:20-23)

In light of this perception, the war against Gog and Magog is also understood as a war fought for the sanctification of God's name, and the battle against the nations who have assembled together for war against Jerusalem is a battle for the sanctification of God's name. What drives God to intervene in what is happening in this world is neither

the redemption of man or the nation, nor Israel's deliverance from suffering and affliction, but rather the need to sanctify His name. This is not merely my interpretation; the prophet reports this explicitly from the mouth of God:

Thus I will magnify Myself and sanctify Myself, and I will make Myself known in the eyes of many nations; and they shall know that I am the Lord... And I will send a fire on Magog, and among them that dwell securely in the coastlands; and they shall know that I am the Lord. So will I make My holy name known in the midst of My people Israel; and I will not allow My holy name to be profaned any more; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, the Holy One in Israel.
(*Yechezkel* 38:23, 39:6-7)

The reason for the redemption is not compassion for the nation, but rather so that "they shall know that I am the Lord." Thus, *Yechezkel* continues the approach that runs throughout these chapters and presents a foundation for redemption different than the one found in the book of *Zekharia*.

In light of this, the warfare conducted by way of supernatural means becomes doubly significant. Since the focus of the struggle, according to this prophecy, is the sanctification of God's name, the use of supernatural forces is not only a powerful means to quickly subdue the nations. Rather, it has fundamental, theological significance in that it demonstrates the greatness of the Creator and His dominion over the world. If Israel's exile is regarded as a profanation of God's name, owing to the argument that the nations will say that God is unable to deliver His people, the proof of His mighty power and His control over nature comes to uproot this idea and establish God's greatness before Israel and the rest of the nations. The use of miracles and the ravishing of nature to defeat the nations is essential owing to the nature and objectives of this spiritual war.

The different ways in which *Zekharia* and *Yechezkel* present the war reflect two fundamental perspectives on the world that differ from each other in an essential way. On the one hand, the heavens belong to God, but the earth He gave to man; therefore, the created world and all that takes place therein should be seen as the place of man. The world was handed over to man, and what happens there reflects human enterprise for better or for worse. The development of the world, its physical and technological progress, the moral level of human society, and the historical process were given over to man as a mission and a challenge, and the world must be judged as expressing human achievement. Even the condition of the people of Israel and their place in history should be considered from this perspective. God, as ruler and overseer, worries about His people's needs and recompenses them in accordance with their deeds, but He does this as a father who worries about His children or as a king who is in charge of his subjects or as a master who takes care of his slaves. From this perspective, the world belongs to man.

On the other hand, the world can be seen as an expression of Divine will and wisdom. God created the world and continues to watch over it, and the world and its

development can be viewed as God's project. Appropriate governance, a well-established world, and providence that is executed in accordance with clear rules of reward and punishment sanctify the name of God and leave a powerful impression. An abandoned and forsaken world, and providence that allows the wicked and evil to flourish, cast doubt on the Creator's enterprise. The world is not man's handiwork, but rather that of God. To illustrate this point, it might be argued that just as the nature of a product and the support with which it is provided reflect the quality of the company that produced it, so too with respect to God who created the world, the quality of the product and the way that it is handled after it was handed over to man reflect God's wisdom and will.

One prophetic perspective presents what happens in the world from a human angle and examines the processes of redemption and exile, repentance and rebellion, according to their ramifications on the standing of the individual or the nation. A second prophetic perspective examines the same processes from a Divine perspective, and sees everything through the prism of the sanctification and profanation of God's name. These two perspectives sometimes present contradictory operative conclusions, and in such cases providence must decide how to act. This is the case, for example, regarding redemption without repentance (*Yechezkel* chapter 36), which is rooted in Moshe's prayer following the sin involving the Golden Calf. Moshe's argument in favor of Israel's pardon rests on the claim of profanation of God's name ("Why should Egypt say...") as the basis for forgiveness, even if by virtue of their deeds there is no justification for such a step. In other words, Moshe argues that Israel should be forgiven because the Divine perspective dictates their continued existence. He makes this argument despite the fact that the human perspective advocates punishment.

Regarding the destruction of the Temple, the Midrash presents a similar case with the opposite conclusion: God's decision to punish Israel overcomes the factor of the desecration of God's name, and the Temple is destroyed despite the profanation of God's name that this involves. The *Mekhilta's* comment, cited by the *gemara* (*Gittin* 56b), speaks of God acting as if He were "mute," because He allows His enemies to speak contemptuously about Him and does not answer. This points to the price exacted in terms of the desecration of God's name and to tension between the two perspectives. In this case, in order to realize His will regarding the world as man's place, God is ready to pay the price of impairing the world as His enterprise.

Most of the time, however, these two perspectives overlap and share the same interests. Therefore, the prophecies of Yechezkel and Zekharia with respect to the war to be fought at the end of days present a similar picture and foretell identical results, despite the fact that they approach the event from entirely different perspectives. Yechezkel presents God as examining the war from His own perspective and reaching the conclusion that a war must be fought against the nations, whereas Zekharia prophesies about the fall of the nations because of what they did to Israel and based on a calculation relating to human life. What is common to the two is the future war and the redemption that will arrive in its wake.

In light of this, let us go back and discuss the connection between the *haftara* and the festival of Sukkot. Just as the deliverance of Israel in the war to be fought in the end of days is presented in the two prophecies from two different perspectives, so too the *sukka* can be understood as protecting Israel from two different perspectives. On the one hand, the *sukka* provides an answer to the human problem of a person in need of protection and shelter from heat, cold, and rain. It provides shade and cover to one who needs them, and in this way it protects the person in need of protection. From the time of the exodus at the beginning of Jewish history and until the war to be fought in the end of days, God spreads His protection over His people and shields them by way of the *sukka*. "For in the day of evil He shall hide me in His *sukka*; in the covert of His tent He shall hide me" (*Tehillim* 27:5). Man is in need of protection and the *sukka* given to him by God provides him with the required shelter.

On the other hand, the *sukka* is the site of the *Shekhina's* presence in the world, whether as a place protected by God as His own space, like the clouds of Glory that shielded Israel by way of the *Shekhina's* presence within them, or by the very presence of God in this world, which finds expression in the *sukka*. "In Shalem also is His *sukka*, and His dwelling place is in Zion" (*Tehillim* 76:3). The Torah readings for *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed* focus on the idea of God's appearance to man, just as the essence of the festivals lies in the idea of standing before God. For this reason, the prophecy dealing with the war to be fought against Gog and Magog, in which God will reveal Himself as He fights against the wicked, fits in well with this system and reflects another dimension of the war to be fought in the end of days that is connected to the festival of Sukkot.[\[1\]](#)

Now let us move on to the beginning of the *haftara*, which deals with the sin of Gog. The sin seems to be clear – Gog's oppression of the people of Israel and the war that he conducts to capture *Eretz Yisrael*, as is stated in the first verse of the *haftara*: "And it shall come to pass on that day, when Gog shall come against the land of Israel, says the Lord God, that My fury shall glare out" (38:18). Just as Zekharia describes a nation that will come to Jerusalem and fight against the inhabitants of Zion, Yechezkel prophesies about a people that will come to attack the people of Israel in its land.

It seems, however, that there is another important motif in the prophet's attitude toward Gog, namely, the injury and damage that he inflicts upon the world. The war causes damage to the world, both in the simple sense of physical destruction and in the ethical sense of the moral decline stemming from the very fact of war and going out to battle. Gog causes injury not only to the people of Israel and their hold on their land; he inflicts general damage on a quiet and peaceful world that did not know war. Gog's attack carried out against the land of Israel is described by the prophet in the verses that precede our *haftara* as a violation of the tranquility of a quiet and peaceful land:

In the latter years, you shall come against the land that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many peoples against the mountains of Israel, which have been a continual waste; but it is brought out of the nations, and they dwell safely all of them. You shall ascend and come like a storm, you shall be like a cloud to cover the land... And you shall say: I will go up to the land of un-walled

villages; I will go to them that are at quiet, that swell in safety, all of them dwelling without walls, and having neither bars nor gates, to take a spoil and to take a prey; to turn your hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and against a people that are gathered out of the nations, that have acquired cattle and goods, and that dwell at the center of the earth. (38:8-12)

Eretz Yisrael is described here as a demilitarized area, dwelling in safety and open to the many peoples moving about in its midst. We are presented with two situations – an open world, without walls or borders, in which nations freely come into contact with each other based on mutual trust, versus a world of conflict and conquest, full of suspicion, in which nations only come into contact with each other through the tips of their spears. In the world preceding the world war begun by Gog, the various nations live in peace and the land is settled and flourishing, whereas in the world in which Gog rules, ruin and destruction reign. Gog's arrival undermines the relaxed and optimistic world order that characterizes not only Israel, but all the other nations as well, and therefore it is the nations as a whole that react negatively to his arrival:

Sheva, and Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, with all its young lions, shall say to you: Are you come to take a spoil? Have you gathered your company to take a prey? To carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, to take a great spoil? (38:13)

The aforementioned verses precede the *haftara*, but they constitute a single continuity with it and shed light on the *haftara* itself. As we see, the focus of the *haftara* is not the people of Israel, but the land of Israel. God's response to the wicked is not redemption of the people or a war against the nations in and of themselves, but an earthquake that impacts upon the entire natural world:

For in My jealousy and in the fire of My anger have I spoken saying: Surely in that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel; so that the fishes of the sea, and the birds of the sky, and the beasts of the field, and all creeping things that creep upon the earth, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth, shall shake at My presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground. (38:19-20)

The prophecy focuses on the world and the land, and not on the people, because Gog's basic war and moral corruption is directed not against Israel itself, but rather against the natural harmony and world order. The tragedy of the war is based on the fact that this order is undermined and that even God's victory over Gog constitutes, to a certain degree, a victory for Gog. For even if he loses the battle for hegemony, the principles of ruin and destruction that he represents take control of the world. An earthquake is needed in order to erase the destroyed world, whose repair can only be effected after it is returned to its primordial chaotic state, its current civilization is totally destroyed, and it is replaced by a new world. To put it in modern terms, in the event of a nuclear war, even the winners will lose, and many years will pass before natural equilibrium and order are restored. This is why the *haftara* describes destruction of such

great magnitude that there is no alternative but to destroy whatever is left and rebuild it from scratch. This destruction is directed at the entire world – fish, birds, beasts, creeping things, and people, and so too the natural mountains, as well as the walls built by man - because the world itself will be damaged by the war.^[2]

It seems to me that this also explains why emphasis is placed on the burial. It is not because of his virtues that Gog merits burial, but because of the need to cleanse the land of all the signs of war and destruction and to restore the world to its earlier state. It is for this reason that Gog's weapons will be used for firewood, a fact that the prophet mentions not in order to emphasize the quantity of arms that Gog will possess, but rather as part of the process of purifying the land from the impurity of war that it had contracted. It is for this reason that emphasis is placed on the burial of the soldiers in order to purify the land and remove the reminders of war from its midst. Indeed, the *haftara* ends with the words, "thus shall they cleanse the land," which reflects the objective of the entire process which it describes.

In this context, it is important to note the meaning of "purification." Purity (*tahara*), as opposed to sanctity (*kedusha*), does not come to add anything new, but to restore an impaired situation to its earlier state. The world, in its original state, was pure. Impurity constitutes a ruination of and deviation from the original order of the world, a corruption and failure of the natural order, and the objective of purification is to restore matters to their original state. If there is no impurity, there is no need for purification, for the entire goal of purification is to restore things to the state that preceded their ruination. Yechezkel, therefore, prophesies about the purification of the land, because Gog destroyed the existing situation of peace and calm and contaminated the land with the impurity of war. Israel's mission in the wake of Gog's actions is to purify the land and undo the destruction that was caused to the world and to the land.

Here too there seems to be a connection to the festival of Sukkot. A *sukka* stands in contrast to a house, both in Scripture and according to the Halakha. Scripture presents these two concepts as different from and opposed to each other ("And he built himself a house (*bayit*), and made booths (*sukkot*) for his cattle"^[3] [*Bereishit* 33:17]). Halakha established that a *sukka* must be a temporary dwelling, and therefore even if it is made of valid materials, if it has the qualities of a house, it is regarded as a house, rather than as a *sukka*, and is disqualified.^[4] This means that a *sukka* belongs to the world of nature that was not yet touched by the hand of man, who alters and improves nature in accordance with his desires. It is supposed to be part of the natural scenery and to blend into it, "like a shelter [*sukka*] in a vineyard, like a lodge in a garden of cucumbers." Leaving one's house and permanent dwelling in order to enter the *sukka* means leaving a world that had been changed by man and going back to dwell in nature in its pure and original state. A *sukka* is not a process of building walls and creating sanctity, but rather a return to nature as it is, and therefore it corresponds to a *haftara* that speaks of the purification of the land and the restoration of the original natural state.

The *haftara* emphasizes this process of purification and return to nature in the wake of the destruction of the world by man. We, however, engage in this process once a year – not because of destruction, but as part of creating of a proper balance between a natural and an artificial world, and as an expression of the importance of nature in the framework of the world and religious life. Serving God in the framework of nature is, of course, most striking in the *mitzva* of taking the four species on Sukkot, but the same principle of serving God in the field is also expressed in the *mitzva* of *sukka*.

[1] Another possibility exists - to assume that there is no connection between Sukkot and the war of Gog and Magog, but because we read from the prophecy of Zekharia as the *haftara* of the first day of Sukkot, we want to fill in the picture by reading as *haftara* another prophecy dealing with the same war from another perspective on *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed* Sukkot. This is based on the assumption that the *haftara* is an autonomous enactment meant to address man's existential state, and its choice is not necessarily dependent on the Torah reading or on the date. After dealing with the war of Gog and Magog from the human perspective and reading a passage that mentions the festival of Sukkot, we fill in the metaphysical perspective and read another *haftara* that deals with this war in close proximity to the *haftara* taken from *Zekharia*. This is done out of a desire to deal with the war and set it as the focus of the *haftara*, and not as an expression of the special sanctity of the day.

This point, however, requires clarification. I believe the above perspective is correct regarding the *haftarot* in general, but not of those read on the festivals. They should be closely connected to the festival inasmuch as they constitute a fulfillment of *mikra kodesh*, and therefore they are the only *haftarot* ordained by Talmudic law. This appears in the framework of a passage dealing with the laws of the festivals.

There is room, however, to question this assertion with respect to *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed*, for the status of *Chol ha-Mo'ed* with respect to this issue is somewhat unclear. For our purposes, mention should be made of the disagreement between the *Magen Avraham* and the Vilna Gaon whether to recite the blessing "who sanctifies Israel and the festivals" over the *haftara* reading on *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed Sukkot*. The Vilna Gaon's opinion that the sanctity of the day is not mentioned assumes that the *haftara* of *Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed* is not a fulfillment of *mikra kodesh*, whereas the *Magen Avraham's* position that the sanctity of the festival is mentioned in the blessing recited over the *haftara* can be understood as assuming that it does constitute a fulfillment of *mikra kodesh*.

[2] The fall of Gog is described in the *haftara* in two consecutive closed *parshiyot*. There is room to suggest that the first focuses more on the destruction of the land and the world, whereas the second deals with a war against Gog because of what he did to Israel as a nation (this apparently is the way it was understood by those who divided the book into chapters, putting the first *parasha* into chapter 38 and the second into chapter 39). The validity of this distinction is, however, open to discussion.

[3] See also II *Shemuel* 11:11 and *Yona* 4:5.

[4] See Rashi, *Sukka* 14a, s.v. *R. Meir*: "What is the difference between using these as *sekhakh* and sitting under the rafters of my house... and that is certainly disqualified, for the Torah speaks of a '*sukka*,' and not a person's house used all year long."