

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT MATOT-MAS'EI

COMPLEMENTARY REPROACHES

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YIRMIYAHU AND YESHAYAHU

Over the next two weeks, we will be reading two *haftarot* of doom that deal with Israel's abandonment of God, the first taken from the beginning of the book of *Yirmiyahu* and the second from the beginning of the book of *Yeshayahu*. Apart from the prophecies of consecration, these two *haftarot* constitute the opening prophecies of these books. We wish today to compare and contrast the two rebukes in the hope that this will shed light on these prophecies and allow us to better understand the causes of the destruction.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Let us begin with the similarities. Both prophets speak of Israel's abandonment of God, using the metaphor of harlotry to describe the phenomenon – "How is the faithful city become a harlot" (*Yeshayahu* 1:21); "when upon every hill and under every green tree you did sprawl, playing the harlot" ([Yirmiyahu 2:20](#)). Nevertheless, there seem to be significant differences between the two prophecies. First of all, Yeshayahu's rebuke is harsher and directed at the people as a whole, whereas Yirmiyahu speaks in a more moderate tone. Yeshayahu presents Israel's lack of gratitude reflected in their abandonment of the Creator as contrary to natural morality and as a perversion of basic religious intuition:

The ox knows its owner, and the ass his master's trough; but Israel does not know, My people does not consider. (v.3)

Even an animal instinctively recognizes who provides its basic necessities and therefore remains attached to its trough. It does not go out to graze in other fields, but rather remains faithful to its provider and does not become estranged from him. Man, however, abandons Him who provides him with all his needs and fails to recognize Him as such. This, of course, is presented as a severe religious failure and stated as a caustic rebuke. Thus, the next verse continues: "A sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that deal corruptly: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger, they are gone away backward" (v. 4).

Yirmiyahu, on the other hand, does not present the people's idol worship as corruption, but rather as the tragic mistake of a panic-stricken and erring people. Therefore, the prophet wonders how it can be that the people prefer idols that have no substance over the God of Israel.

What iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from Me, and have walked after vanity, and are become themselves worthless. Neither did they say, Where is the Lord who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, who led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt. (vv. 5-6)

It seems that this should be punctuated with a question mark, rather than with an exclamation point. This line of astonishment regarding Israel's actions continues:

For pass over the isles of Kitiyim, and see; and send to Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed their gods, even though they are not gods? But My people have changed its glory for that which does not profit. (vv. 10-11)

The metaphor that Yirmiyahu uses to describe Israel's conduct is also different in its very essence from that used by Yeshayahu. As we have already seen, Yeshayahu sharply contrasts Israel to animals who know their place, whereas Yirmiyahu simply asks in

wonderment: "Is Israel a servant? Is he a homeborn slave? Why is he become a prey?" (v. 14).

THE ADDRESS OF THE REBUKE

Another difference between the two prophecies is the address to which the arguments are directed. Yeshayahu accuses the people and asserts that they are "a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity," whereas Yirmiyahu aims his arrows at the people's leaders:

The priests said not, Where is the Lord? And they that handle the Torah knew Me not: the rulers also transgressed against Me, and the prophets prophesied by the Ba'al, and walked after things that do not profit. (v. 8)

Thus, Yirmiyahu continues the line taken by many prophets and often expressed in Scripture, according to which the criticism is directed not at the failed political leadership, but at the spiritual leadership, which is held responsible for the corrupt and irresponsible social and religious atmosphere. Many examples can be brought to illustrate that this is a general approach found throughout the later Prophets. Here we wish to show how this perspective fits in with Yirmiyahu's entire prophecy, as opposed to Yeshayahu's rebuke.

THE SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

We now come to the fundamental difference between the prophecy of *Chazon Yeshayahu* and our *haftara* in particular, and between the book of *Yeshayahu* and the book of *Yirmiyahu* in general. Yeshayahu's primary struggle is with a hedonistic society, built around pleasure, which tramples, exploits and oppresses the weak, and creates a deep social divide. Even though the geo-political situation is beginning to deteriorate with the rise of Ashur, and the political cracks that will ultimately lead to the great crisis are growing, the people do not feel that they are living under constant threat, nor do they plan their actions based on a sense of immediate physical danger. In such conditions, high society flourishes in its corruption, and Yeshayahu fights against it. However we understand the political reality of the time (this is not the forum for such a discussion, and the author lacks the qualifications to do it justice), what we can say with certainty based on a careful examination of the book, is that Yeshayahu identifies the serious spiritual failure of his generation on the interpersonal plain. This finds expression in the *haftara* of *Chazon* in the famous verses:

...Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings before My eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." (vv. 15-17).

How is the faithful city become a harlot? It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers. Your silver is become dross, your wine is mixed with water: your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loves bribes, and follows after rewards: they judge not the fatherless neither does the cause of the widow reach them. (vv. 21-23)

Yirmiyahu, in contrast, lives in a threatened and retreating society that is under constant security pressure. In such circumstances, people turn to other-worldly spiritual factors, both out of a sense and recognition of the nullity of pleasures and a change in priorities that follows from new situation, and out of the hope that the spiritual factor found outside the world of man will be able to overcome the earthly political reality and save them from their enemies. Seeing the spiritual state of the people \square rather than geo-political alliances - as the basis of political reality is what underlies the spiritual struggle in the book of Yirmiyahu. Whereas Yeshayahu preached about this and the people ignored his warnings, Yirmiyahu's generation adopted this outlook, but instead of turning to God, the King of kings, they went after vanity. Thus, their fundamental problem was not moral corruption, but substituting another god for the God of Israel.¹[1] The people recognize that a spiritual factor is responsible for their fate, but they err in their identification of this factor.

CORRUPT SOCIETY OR SPIRITUAL ERROR

It seems to me that the two previous differences referred to above follow directly from this distinction. Yeshayahu directs his prophecy at a corrupt society, in which the individual sets himself up in the center, while harming the weak and trampling over justice and morality. Their abandonment of God does not follow from their turning to some other entity, but from placing man in the center. Just as the weak are pushed aside, so too God is pushed out of the world of the greedy hedonist. Thus, the sharp contrast between ungrateful man and the beast with its natural intuition. This also seems to underlie Yeshayahu's viewing the entire society as sinful, because the hedonism and immorality are seen as having spread through the entire society. The urges are egotistical, and the individual is more to blame than are the leaders.²[2]

¹[1] To remove all doubts, let me say that it is not my claim that this is the only problem that Yirmiyahu deals with, but that this is the most fundamental and important issue with which he struggles. The same is true regarding Yeshayahu.

²[2] It is important to note that in many other places it is the leaders whom the prophets criticize regarding this matter. But in the framework of our comparison between the two

Yirmiyahu, in contrast, struggles with spiritual error stemming from a perverted view of metaphysical reality, and therefore his primary concern is to emphasize the mistake and express his astonishment about it. And since the error is primarily spiritual, his argument is with the priests, the prophets and the teachers of Torah. For it is upon them that the responsibility falls to provide the people with spiritual guidance. The fact that the world of the spirit is beyond the physical world and that God is transcendent creates a difficulty for the ordinary person and obligates the spiritual leadership to guide him. Let us not forget that "idols appear near, even though they are distant," whereas God appears distant, even though He is near.^{3[3]} Therefore the possibility of error exists and it falls upon the shoulders of the teachers and prophets who can see through the religious fog to teach the people.

INDIVIDUALS OR A PEOPLE

We can now add two more points that characterize our *haftara*. First of all, Yirmiyahu directs his words toward Israel as a people. Yeshayahu's rebuke is directed primarily at the conduct of individuals, and his assertion that the people are "laden with iniquity" follows from the fact that the nation has many individual sinners. Both the sins and the hypocrisy in the worship of God that Yeshayahu points to relate to the conduct of individuals, because that is the nature of such sins. Even when we talk about a rotten public climate, this is an expression of the community as a collection of individuals, and not an independent national entity.

In contrast, Yirmiyahu's words are directed primarily at Israel as a nation. Even the contrast that he draws between Israel and the nations speaks of the religious identity of the people as a people ("has a nation changed their gods") and what he says about Israel is said about Israel as a nation ("is Israel a servant", "but My people have changed its glory"). Thus, Yirmiyahu continues the line that he started with in the

haftarot, it may be argued that Yeshayahu's emphasis on pleasure is connected to the fact that his accusation is directed at the entire nation.

3[3] "An idol appears near, but is distant. What is the reason? He carries it on his shoulder, bears it, and in the end his god is with him in his house; he cries out until he dies, but it does not hear nor does it save him from his troubles. The Holy One, blessed be He, on the other hand, appears far, but there is none closer than He, for Levi said: From the earth to the firmament is a walk of five hundred years, and from one firmament to the next is a walk of five hundred years, and the width of the firmament is [a walk of] five hundred years, and

so too regarding each of the firmaments. See how elevated He is above His world, yet a person enters a synagogue, stands behind a pillar, and prays in a whisper, and the Holy One, blessed be He, hears his prayer, as it is stated: 'Now Channa spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard' (I *Shemu'el* 1:13), and the Holy One, blessed be He, listened to her prayer. And so too regarding all of His creatures, as it is stated: 'A prayer of the afflicted, when he faints' ([Tehilim 102:1](#)) □ like a person who speaks in his friend's ear and he hears. Is there a God closer than this, close to His creatures like a mouth to the ear?" (*Yerushalmi*, [Berakhot 9:1](#))

previous prophecy (which we read at the end of last week's *haftara*), where he spoke about Israel and God playing the roles of bride and groom during Israel's trek through the wilderness.

FALSEHOOD AND BETRAYAL

Let us now move on to the second and more significant issue in the *haftara*, namely, Yirmiyahu's understanding of idol worship. Yirmiyahu relates to Israel's worship of idols as an abandonment of God. Of course, idolatry is folly and falsehood, or as Yirmiyahu puts it, "vanity" and "things that do not profit." Indeed, in many places, the prophets attack idolatry for the lie that it represents, as we shall see in the *haftara* for *Shabbat Nachamu*, where Yeshayahu scorns and derides idolatry as a metaphysical outlook. But the relationship that exists between God and Israel is based not only on intellectual recognition of the truth; it is a personal and existential relationship. This principle is heavily emphasized by the *Kuzari* as the basis for the service of God, and its application regarding the prohibition of idol worship finds explicit expression in the Ramban's commentary to the Torah:

In my opinion, the Torah mentions jealousy regarding idol worship exclusively with respect to Israel. The reason for the jealousy is that God set Israel apart for Himself as His unique people, as I explained above. If His own people turn to other gods, God will be jealous of them, just as a man is jealous when his wife goes off after other men, or when his servant takes himself another master. Scripture does not use the term with the other nations, to whom He gave the hosts of heaven. (Ramban, commentary to [Shemot 20:2](#))

The Ramban means to say that idolatry for Israel is not merely a metaphysical error and a failure to recognize the Creator of the universe and His kingship in this world, but also a betrayal of the relationship between lover and beloved. For him, as for the *Kuzari*, this relationship is unique to Israel, and this is what underlies the book of *Shir ha-Shirim*.

A key verse in this week's *haftara* points to the two-fold problem of Israel's turning to idols:

For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters, and have hewn them out cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. (v. 13)

As we see, the prophet complains about two evils. The one is going after broken cisterns that can hold no water, that is, turning to falsehood and vanity. This, however, is not the entirety of his complaint; he adds another argument, namely, the very abandonment. The problem is not the error, but Israel's betrayal of God. This point is emphasized by the contrast made to the other nations:

For pass over the isles of Kitiyim, and see; and send to Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed their gods, even though they are not gods? (vv. 10-11)

Yirmiyahu's rebuke can only be understood in the framework of the assumption that idolatry constitutes betrayal and not only error. If idolatry is merely an error, why bring support from the fact that other nations stubbornly cling to their mistakes? Are we supposed to learn something from that? If, however, we recognize that a "personal" relationship exists between Israel and God, we can then understand that the prophet contrasts the fidelity of the nations to their gods to Israel's treachery.

TWO REBUKES ☞ TWO REPAIRS

To summarize, two *haftarot* of rebuke are directed at us during the two remaining *Shabbatot* of the Three Weeks. The one focuses on the religious problem, on Israel's faithfulness to God, and the leadership's responsibility in that regard, whereas the other one emphasizes the problems of justice and righteousness and turns to the individual as well as to society that they should improve their moral ways. Israel's redemption will come through the repairs of these two problems, and Zion will be redeemed through judgment and return to God. We therefore read both *haftarot*, each one complementing the other, in order to reprimand Israel and bring them to repent.

(Translated by David Strauss)
