

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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**This haftara series is dedicated in memory  
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak  
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,  
by her family.**

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## **VAYIKRA**

**"I HAVE FORMED YOU; YOU ARE MY OWN SERVANT"**

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

The *haftara* for *Parashat Vayikra* (*Yeshayahu* 43:21-44:23) deals with a most fundamental issue, namely, man's relationship to his Creator. Within this framework, the *haftara* relates to various spiritual phenomena, including the sacrifices. Of course, the reference to the sacrifices explains why this passage was selected to serve as the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayikra*. But before we consider what the prophet *Yeshayahu* had to say concerning the sacrifices, let us first reflect upon a more basic question on which his attitude to sacrifices is based.

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SERVITUDE AND INTIMACY**

In general, it might be argued that Scripture puts forward two fundamental models concerning the relationship between the people of Israel and God. The first sees man as a created being who is subject to his Creator as is a servant to his master, whereas the second employs the metaphor of the relationship between man and wife to describe a relationship based on closeness and intimacy. These two models, which might be understood as reflecting the opposing qualities of fear and love, run through Scripture and the words of *Chazal* as the basis for the relationship between man and his Creator. They find many expressions in Scripture and in our religious world. Within the confines of this framework, we cannot encompass the issue in its entirety; we shall content ourselves with a single example, through which we will note the differences that follow from these two approaches.

## **THE MITZVOT AS AN EXAMPLE**

There are two components to our fulfillment of God's commandments: first, obedience to a Supreme being who imposes His authority upon us; and second, performance of actions that are meant to benefit us or avoidance of actions that are liable to cause us harm.

The first component marks a relationship between master and servant, between commander and the commanded. The source of the duty to fulfill the order lies not in the person's welfare, but in his obligation to him who issues the commands and in the obligation to obey whatever is cast upon him to do. Of course, unless the commander is arbitrary and capricious, he will not issue commands that are detrimental to the person fulfilling them, but this is due to his goodness and wisdom, and not because of the rights or standing of the one being commanded. Fundamentally, the relationship is defined by the absolute obligation and obedience demanded of him whose entire existence is conditional and dependent.

The second component, in contrast, assumes that the command was issued because of God's love for His creations and given in order to benefit them. In other words, the main thing is not the command, but rather the content of the

commandment. To illustrate this point, let us cite the passage in tractate *Rosh ha-Shana* (16a) regarding *shofar* blowing:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: Why do we blow [the *shofar*] on *Rosh ha-Shana*? – Why do we blow? The Torah said: Blow. – Rather, why do we sound a *teru'a*? – Sound a *teru'a*? The Torah said "a remembrance of *teru'a*."

As is evident, the Gemara recoils from the very presentation of the question, "why do we blow," for there is a simple but absolutely obligating reason, namely, the very commandment. This notwithstanding, we all know that Torah sages all across the generations, from Rabbenu Sa'adya Gaon to the most recent preacher in a contemporary synagogue, offered layers and layers of reasons for the *mitzva* of *shofar* blowing. This is because we are dealing here with two perspectives, as stated above. From the perspective of the quality of fear, whose motto is "He held the mountain over them like a vat," a person is obligated to fulfill the command, even in the absence of a rationale that is understandable to him. Thus, it suffices to note the fact that the Torah said to blow. However, from the perspective of the quality of love, we search for reasons, because the desired achievement is what gives meaning to the *mitzva*.

A practical expression of this duality can be found in the two statements that are customarily recited prior to the performance of a *mitzva*: "For the sake of the unity of the Holy One, and His *Shekhina*" ("*Le-shem yichud*") and "Surely I am ready and prepared" ("*Hineni mukhan u-mezuman*"). Those who are accustomed to recite the first formula give expression to the principle that the *mitzva* is performed for the purpose of achieving a spiritual goal, whereas the second formula reflects the idea found in the Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shana*, that we must fulfill the *mitzva* because the Torah says so, and that is it.

## **YOU ARE MY SERVANT, O ISRAEL**

As stated above, we can greatly expand on this idea, but we wish to return to the *haftara*, rather than write a treatise on the fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. These two

approaches are very familiar to Yeshayahu. In later chapters, he will give very strong expression to the principle of closeness and intimacy between God and His people, as we will see in the *haftarot* toward the end of the series of seven *haftarot* of consolation read during the summer. In our *haftara*, and in the adjacent chapters, fundamental and comprehensive expression is given to the principle of kingship and dominion. This is the idea with which the *haftara* opens – "This people have I formed for Myself; they shall relate My praise" (*Yeshayahu* 43:21); it appears again in the middle, both with respect to the structure and ordering of the verses, and as the substantive focus of the *haftara* – "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his redeemer, the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside Me there is no God" (44:6); and it appears a third time at the end – "Remember these, O Yaakov and Israel; you are My servant: I have formed you; you are My own servant: O Israel you shall not be forgotten by Me" (44:21).

As is clearly evident, man is subservient to God and is supposed to act for His sake. Man's mission is to relate God's praises, not only because of the role that was cast upon him, but also because he is subservient to his Creator. As Yeshayahu established already at the beginning of the chapter (as we read in the *haftara* for *Parashat Bereishit*): "Every one that is called by My name; for I have created him for My glory; I have formed him: yea, I have made him" (43:7). The purpose of creation is the glory of God and the singing of His praises; man's role is that of a servant who attends to his master. God stands at the center of the universe and it falls upon man to serve and recognize Him.[\[1\]](#)

## **THE RAMBAN'S VIEW**

From the opening point of man's obligation toward God, the *haftara* moves on to discuss three issues that stem from it: sacrifices, God's providence over Israel, and idolatry. The common denominator of the three is the relationship between man and God, and the examination of each issue from the perspective of this prophecy.

Following the assertion that God created Israel and desires their praises, the complaint is voiced that the people of Israel fail to bring Him the appropriate sacrifices. This argument is particularly interesting in its context, this in light of the

various possible understandings of the meaning of the sacrifices. In an important and famous passage at the beginning of his commentary to our *parasha*, the Ramban deals at length with the reason for the *mitzva* of sacrifices. Over the course of his explanation, he establishes that the word "*korban*" (sacrifice) bears the sense of "*kirva*" (closeness, intimacy), and "that all instances of the word *korban* allude to closeness and unity." So too he writes about the sacrifice offered by Bil'am (which he compares to the sacrifices brought by Adam and Noach), that "he acted in that manner in order to draw close to God, so that [Divine] speech would rest upon him," apparently understanding a sacrifice as a means of drawing close to God. On the other hand, he brings a reason on the aggadic level, which sees sacrifices as coming to atone for man:

And it is more befitting to hear the reason said about them, that since people's actions are executed through thought, speech and action, God commanded that when a person sins he should bring a sacrifice, place his hands upon [the animal] corresponding to the action, confess with his mouth corresponding to the speech, burn the innards and the kidneys which are the seat of thought and desire, and the legs corresponding to man's hands and feet which perform all his work, sprinkle the blood on the altar corresponding to his own blood – in order that he should think when doing all these things that he sinned against his God with his body and soul, and that it would be appropriate for him to shed his own blood and burn his own body, were it not for the lovingkindness of the Creator who accepted a substitute, this sacrifice atoning with its blood instead of his blood, its life instead of his life, its organs instead of his organs, and the portions [given] to sustain the teachers of Torah who will pray on his behalf. And the daily offering, because the community cannot escape constant sinning. These words draw the heart like words of Aggada. (Ramban, on verse 9)

## **A SACRIFICE AS A GIFT OR AS ATONEMENT**

In a later passage as well, which follows the "path of truth" (i.e., kabbala), the Ramban speaks of a sacrifice that is offered because of the quality of judgment. Without getting into a discussion of the Ramban's position in and of itself, it is important to emphasize the two main approaches to the world of sacrifices reflected in his words. The first approach sees a sacrifice as a present offered by man to God, the objective of which is to demonstrate intimacy and admiration. To use a metaphor taken from our own world, a sacrifice resembles a birthday present or flowers given to one's spouse on an anniversary, i.e., an article given to express love and intimacy. Just

as every parent emphasizes time after time, that what is important is not the gift but the thought, so too the prophets emphasized this point regarding the sacrifices, because of the inherent danger. Nevertheless, we do not make do with thought alone, but rather it is important that we be able to express our feelings in a tangible and concrete way. This is why sacrifices are so important, despite the fact that the animal being sacrificed is void of meaning.<sup>[2]</sup> If we look in Scripture for the idea of a sacrifice coming to express the quality of love, we find that this is the meaning of the idea of "an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor to the Lord." "Sweet savor" represents something that is given to find favor in the eyes of another.

The second approach sees a sacrifice as an expression of the smallness of man vis-a-vis the high and lofty Master of the universe, the sacrifice coming to atone for man's actions and allow him to stand before the King, King of kings. In other words, sacrifices are founded on the quality of fear and their objective is to express man's submission before God. It is, of course, important to emphasize that these two approaches are not necessarily contradictory, and it is possible that the world of sacrifices itself distinguishes between different sacrifices and/or different fulfillments which allow a sacrifice to embrace more than one principle.

## **FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE QUALITY OF JUDGMENT**

We can now return to the *haftara* and examine its attitude toward the sacrifices. In light of what was stated above, it may be asserted without hesitation that our *haftara* approaches sacrifices from the perspective of the quality of judgment and sees them as following from God's exalted nature and man's status as a servant standing before Him. The argument made against Israel, "You have not brought Me the small cattle of your burnt offerings: nor have you honored Me with you sacrifices. I have not burdened you with a meal offering, nor wearied you with incense. You have bought Me no sweet cane with money, nor have you sated Me with the fat of your sacrifices" (23:23-24), is made in light of the assertion that Israel is obligated toward God because He created them. If "this people have I formed for Myself," and therefore "they shall relate My praise" (ibid. v. 21), this also obligates a sacrifice.

## **THE REDEMPTION OF ISRAEL**

The *haftara* continues with a discussion of the redemption of Israel that follows from the fact that they are God's servants. Our chapter is integrated within the chapters of consolation in the book of *Yeshayahu*, and it is one of the chapters that herald Israel's redemption on account of their being God's servants. We already encountered this idea in the *haftara* for *Parashat Bereishit*, and there we analyzed this point at length. Here we wish to discuss what this prophecy adds to this idea.

Yeshayahu opens with the declaration that God will act for the sake of His glory and because the people of Israel are his servants: "I, even I, am He that blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and will not remember your sins" (v. 25). It is not Israel's merits, their repentance or their regret for their transgressions, but rather God's needs that underlie His beneficence toward Israel. There is, however, a new and interesting point here, in contrast to what is stated in the *haftara* for *Bereishit*. There God redeems Israel because they are His people and His servants, either because of their wretchedness and misery ("Therefore this is a people robbed and spoiled; they are all of them snared in holes, and they are hid in prison houses; they are for a prey, and none delivers; for a spoil, and none says, Restore"; [42:22]), or because of the desecration of God's name that is caused by their exile. But there, however, we are dealing with redemption, and not with repentance.

In our chapter, Yeshayahu prophesies that God will erase the sins of Israel for the sake of His name. Thus, the focus is not only on redemption, but also on repentance. Owing to the relationship between God and His people and servants, he will pour a spirit upon them from up high and redeem them: "For I will pour water upon the thirsty land, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour My spirit upon your seed, and My blessing upon your offspring" (44:3). This will lead to the formation of a relationship of identification and dedication on the part of the people: "One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Yaakov; and another shall subscribe with his hand to the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel" (44:5).

This idea is summed up in the verse appearing at the end of the *haftara*: "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, as a cloud, your sin: return to Me, for I have redeemed you" (44:22). The call and the hope is for a redemption

accompanied by repentance that will come in the wake of God's blotting out of Israel's sins, and not for a redemption in which the Jewish people are redeemed despite the fact that they have not repented.

## **THE CONSIDERATE MASTER**

At the root of the matter, the model of lordship and servitude presented by Yeshayahu in this prophecy is not the model of a lord who condescends over his servants or a servant who serves out of coercion, but rather a lord who is considerate of and worries about his servants and sees them as his sheep:

Yet now hear, Yaakov My servant; and Israel whom I have chosen: thus says the Lord that made you, and formed you from the womb, who will help you; Fear not, O Yaakov, My servant; and you, Yeshurun, whom I have chosen. (42:1-2)

And therefore He pardons their sins and the sins of their fathers. And in the other direction, the servant sees himself as serving his master out of a sense of belonging and identification.

## **IDOLS MADE FROM WHAT IS LEFT FROM WOOD INTENDED FOR FUEL**

After establishing the relationship between Israel and God on the principle of servitude, with all that follows from that regarding sacrifices and the redemption, the last part of the *haftara* is a sharp polemic against idol worship. In strong and mocking language, Yeshayahu paints a satiric picture of the idol worshipper who builds his idol with care, out of what is left over from wood that he had intended to burn as fuel:



They that make a carved idol are all of them vanity; and the things they delight in, do not profit; and their witnesses see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed.

Who has fashioned a god, or cast an idol? It is profitable for nothing. Behold, all his fellows shall be ashamed: and the workmen, they are but men: let them all be gathered together, let them stand up; they shall fear, they shall be ashamed together.

The ironsmith makes an axe, and works in the coals, and fashions it with hammers, works it with the strength of his arms: if he is hungry, his strength fails: if he drinks no water, he is faint. The carpenter stretches out his rule; he marks it out with a pencil; he fits it with chisels, and he marks it out with the compass, and makes it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house.

He hews him down cedars, and takes the pine and the oak, which he strengthens for himself among the trees of the forest: he plants a forest tree and the rain nourishes it. Then shall it be for a man for fuel; for he will take of it to warm himself: indeed, he kindles it, and bakes bread! Or else he makes a god, and prostrates himself to it; he makes of it a carved idol, and bows himself down before it.

Half of it he burns in the fire; with this half of it he eats meat; he roasts the roast, and is satisfied: indeed he warms himself, and says, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: and of the rest of it he makes a god, his carved idol: he falls down to it, and worships it, and prays to it, and says, Deliver me for you are my god.

They have not known nor understood: for He has shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts that they cannot understand. And none considers in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned half of it in the fire; I have even baked bread upon its embers; I have roasted meat, and eaten it: and shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down to worship the stock of a tree (44:9-19)

This is a vivid and powerful picture that requires no further explanation. One point, however, should be emphasized, and it follows from what was said above. We must ask ourselves, why does this description appear here in this prophecy of Yeshayahu – (and so too may it be asked about the shorter parallel found at the end of the prophesy of "Comfort my people, comfort them" (*Yeshayahu* 40) – and not in his earlier prophecies or in the other prophets? Surely the struggle against idol worship is a central motif in the words of the prophets, and many chapters are devoted to it. It is only here, however, that the prophet invokes mockery and sarcasm to describe the formation of an idol. This requires explanation.

## THE BASIS FOR OBLIGATION

The prophets often speak out against idols and their worshippers, but here Yeshayahu focuses on the construction of the idol, because his prophecy relates primarily to God as Creator. When the prophet turns to the people and speaks of "This people have I formed for Myself" as the basis for man's obligation to his Creator, then it follows to point out the absurdity of idol worship, in which man creates his idol. He asks a simple question: who created whom – did God create man or did man create God? If religious experience is based on "You are My servant; I have formed you; you are My own servant," there is no room whatsoever for idolatry as an option. The negation of idol worship in this prophecy comes in the context of creation, and not in the context of abandonment of God or straying after false gods. Therefore, the focus on the creation of the idol and the attack on idolatry is done in light of the question, "Who has fashioned a god, or cast an idol?," and its significance in light of man's relationship with God as Creator.[\[3\]](#)

## ENDING ON A HOPEFUL NOTE

Let us conclude with the hope for the realization of the blessing found in the last verse in the *haftara*:

Sing, O heavens; for the Lord has done it; shout, you lower parts of the earth; break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it; for the Lord has redeemed Yaakov, and glorified Himself in Israel. (44:23)

(Translated by David Strauss)

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[1] In our *shiurim* on the *haftarot* of *Bereishit* and *Lekh Lekha* we expanded on these points, and it is recommended that the reader review those *shiurim* in order to receive a fuller picture.

[2] It should be noted that "sweet savor" is one of the six things for the sake of which the sacrifice must be offered, as is explained in the last Mishna of the fourth chapter of *Zevachim*. The idea of "sweet savor" is also emphasized in the reproach found in the book of *Vayikra* (26:31).

[3] In light of this argument that the focus here is on creation, we can also ignore the question whether or not Yeshayahu is presenting a model of idolatry that does not reflect the understanding of its worshippers. Some have argued that even idol worshippers understand that the idol has no independent power, but rather is merely a symbolic means of connecting with the spiritual forces found outside our world. Besides our sense that there are idol worshippers of different types and colors, both those who indeed understand the idol as an intermediary, and those who attribute to it power of its own, and that Yeshayahu directs his words at this second group - in light of the context of the prophecy, his words are reasonable even against the first group. For the establishment of religious commitment on the basis of "I have formed you; you are My own servant," cannot be reconciled with a situation in which man creates god, even if we are merely talking about an intermediary. It is unimaginable that in the framework of an understanding that subjects man to God on the basis of his being a created being, the formation of an idol should be left in human hands. Thus, the mockery of Yeshayahu. There may in fact be no logical contradiction, but it is absurd that man should create the intermediary which he then serves, and for this reason Yeshayahu's attack focuses on the question of the creation.