

# 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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**This shiur is dedicated in memory of  
Dr. William Major z"l.**

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**RE'EH  
"O You Afflicted, Tossed with Tempest, and Not Comforted"  
Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The *haftara* for *Parashat Re'e* (*Yeshayahu* 54:11-55:5) is the third in the series of seven *haftarot* of consolation. It continues the confrontation with exile, delving deeper in its treatment of the issue and addressing its causes in a more fundamental manner. The *haftara* of *Nachamu*, the first in the series of *haftarot* of consolation, turns to the people of Israel with words of encouragement, on the assumption that this is what they need, but it does not relate to the actual mood of the people. In the *haftara* for *Parashat Ekev* that we read last week, the prophet relates to the people's feelings and addresses their claim that God had abandoned them; his encouraging words are meant to put them at ease and satisfy them. Our *haftara* opens with the assertion that the people have not been comforted – "O you afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted" – and therefore it is necessary to offer additional words of consolation, on top of all that was said in previous chapters.

## **OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE EXILE**

It should be emphasized, however, that the lack of comfort does not stem from a failure on the part of the prophetic words that were read last week to penetrate the hearts of the people. Rather, it follows from the fact that various different problems vex the exiled nation. On the one hand, the fact of exile in and of itself is constraining and painful; on the other hand, it also impairs the feeling of closeness and partnership between God and His people. Borrowing a metaphor that is commonly employed by *Chazal*, we can say that a son who was sent away from his father's table suffers from two difficulties: First of all, a lack of food and means of support. And second, the banishment attests to the anger and alienation that exists between him and his father. Similarly, a woman whose husband sent her away is forced to deal with the problems of support and personal security, and also remains alone and forsaken. The same is true about Israel in exile. There are the troubles of exile and the yoke of subjugation that distress them and weigh heavily upon them, and there is also the problem of the connection between them and their Creator that arises in the wake of their exile. The first problem is connected to historical-material reality, and it is "objective" with respect to the suffering and affliction. In contrast, the second problem is spiritual-existential and "subjective" in its character. Since we are dealing with two separate problems that are different in their very nature, it is certainly possible that one might become resolved, whereas the second might become aggravated, or the opposite. Thus, for example, exile in affluent countries, where Jews live free of persecution and are granted economic and legal rights, does not cause the individual to suffer (though of course, it constitutes a problem on the national level), but might attest to distance between God and Israel. On the other hand, return from the exile or talk about redemption testifies to a rehabilitation of the people's relationship with God, even if it will take time for the suffering to pass.<sup>1</sup>[1]

For our purposes, the *haftara* for *Parashat Ekev* dealt with the subjective feeling of "But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me" (49:14), and its primary concern was to prove to Israel that this is not true. Our *haftara*, on the other hand, (and so too the *haftara* that will be read next *Shabbat*, "*Anokhi Anokhi hu menemchem*"), treats the other problem, namely, the poverty and affliction suffered by Israel in the exile. Therefore, there is no contradiction between Yeshayahu's arguments in *Ekev's haftara* that God did not abandon Israel and the statement in this week's *haftara*, "O you afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted." This assertion does not follow from Yeshayahu's failure or from the people's impatience, but from the fact that the second *haftara* deals with an entirely different problem than the first.

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[1] See, for example, *Yirmiyahu* 31:8: "They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, in which they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Efrayim is My firstborn."

## FROM RAGS TO RICHES

It follows that if the suffering of the exile is what is causing the pain, and Israel is defined as poor and afflicted, then the resolution lies in their being taken out of poverty. Thus the prophetic promise relates to affluence and prosperity:

Behold, I will lay your stones with fair colors, and lay your foundations with sapphires. And I will make your windows of rubies, and your gates of beryl, and all your borders of the choicest stones. (54:11-12)

This is the first time in the Yeshayahu's prophecies of consolation that he focuses on the promise of material wealth as a goal in and of itself. Thus far, his prophecies of consolation focused on the glory of heaven, on the redemption of Israel as His people, and on the meaning of exile and redemption with respect to the relationship between God and Israel and/or the relationship between God and the nations. Our *haftara*, however, responds to Israel's very poverty, and its contents correspond accordingly.

If we ask what is the meaning of the ostentation in the prophetic vision, which speaks of windows and streets plated with precious stones - it seems that its role is not to set an aesthetic ideal or the boundary between modesty and magnificence, but to serve as a model of upheavals of fate from darkness to light. One of the most difficult aspects of poverty, aside from the actual suffering that it causes, is the despair and hopelessness to which it gives rise. A poor person bears the heavy burden of debts that mortgage even his future. He is unable to make long-term investments that would improve his situation, because the very factors that brought him to his present state will continue to press upon him and cause him to fall.<sup>2[2]</sup> Even if he sees the light at the end of the tunnel, it is the hope to break out of poverty and neediness and reach a state of median subsistence. The transition from poverty to a royal palace is not a realistic option but merely a fantasy and a pipe dream. The prophet uses this image to stir up the hope that radical change is possible, and that if God wills it, it is not a fairy tale. Therefore, even though the exile looks like immutable reality, and the transition from exile to redemption is likened to going from rags to riches, the message of these verses is that redemption will indeed come. Not only is it bright and shining, but it is also possible, despite the fact that it appears distant and unattainable.<sup>3[3]</sup>

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<sup>2[2]</sup> This is the reason that the Torah so heavily emphasizes helping a poor person to make a new start, rather than continuing to support him through *tzedaka*, as can be seen in the *mitzva* to lend money (which is one of the most fundamental principles of the *mitzva* of *tzedaka*), release of debts during the Sabbatical year, the prohibition of interest, and the like.

<sup>3[3]</sup> See Radak, who brings a disagreement as to whether these images should be taken literally or metaphorically: "These things might perhaps be realized literally, or perhaps they are a metaphor for the enormity of Israel's greatness and the abundance of their good, to the point that if they wish they can erect buildings out of precious stones and jewels."

## REDEMPTION THROUGH REPENTANCE

From here we move on to a second characteristic of this prophecy, namely, the emphasis placed on repentance in the framework of redemption. In "*Aniya so'ara*" redemption is not a free gift to the people, but rather it demands action on their part – "In righteousness shall you be established: keep away from oppression, then you shall not fear" (v. 14) – and the promised good is conditioned on fulfillment of God's will:

Hearken diligently to Me, and eat that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come to Me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure loving promises of David. (55:2-3)

In the prophecies that we have encountered thus far, it was emphasized that redemption is based on the connection between God and Israel, and also on the glory of God. The redemption, however, was never conditioned on Israel's actions, but rather it was presented as the product of the historical and existential reality that came into being in the wake of the exile. Completing the punishment of exile, the glory of heaven, and the fact that Israel are God's children are the arguments that constitute the basis for the redemption in the *haftarot* and other prophecies that precede this chapter in the book of *Yeshayahu*. Our *haftara* introduces a new principle - redemption through repentance; when man mends his ways he will be redeemed.

To clarify the difference, let us recall the words of the *Yeshayahu* that we read in the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayikra*, several chapters earlier:

Remember you, O Ya'akov and Israel; you are My servant: I have formed you; you are My own servant: O Israel you shall not be forgotten by Me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, as a cloud, your sins: return to Me, for I have redeemed you. (44:21-22)

As can be seen, the verse means to say that the pardon of Israel's sins will precede their repentance, for the call to repent is based on the fact that redemption had already taken place, and that it did not come in the wake of repentance. The very fact that the people of Israel are God's servants and that they preserve this identity suffices to redeem them. In our *haftara*, however, we are dealing with a process in which the redemption comes through repentance, and Israel's actions establish Zion and usher in the good. When redemption arrives it is described as coming by virtue of Israel's actions and as their heritage, and not by virtue of a heavenly decision regarding which man is spiritually passive – "This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and the recompense of their righteousness appointed by Me, says the Lord" (v. 17). A person is granted his heritage by right and not as a gift, and the heritage of a servant is given to him on account of his actions and investment. The redemption in "*Aniya so'ara*" is Israel's heritage and its recompense for their righteousness.

In light of this, the confrontation with the nations takes place against the backdrop of Israel's self-confidence in their righteousness, and not only because of the protection that God grants His servants or children, and therefore what is demonstrated here is Israel's righteousness. Not only is it true that "no weapon that is formed against you shall prosper" (54:17), which refers to outright war fought with weapons, but even "every tongue that shall rise against you in judgment you shall condemn" (ibid.), which refers to a religious-cultural war that is decided on the scales of righteousness and evil, and not by might. In a prophecy in which Israel are "taught of the Lord," engage in righteous activity, and distance themselves from oppression, it can confidently be said that no tongue or culture will succeed in condemning them, as opposed to the previous prophecies in which the redemption did not arrive in the wake of their righteousness.

## SUMMARY

To summarize what we have said thus far, we can say that the prophet deals with two issues – solving the problem of poverty and deprivation and establishing repentance as the basis for redemption. These two things are not necessarily connected, for we can talk about redemption following from God's compassion for his poor people, even without repentance, and it is possible to base redemption on the demand to engage in charity and study, even not out of poverty. In our prophecy, however, they operate together, and therefore *Chazal* interpreted the poverty and the abundance in our *haftara* as referring to spiritual poverty and wealth. Regarding poverty, this is stated explicitly in *Yalkut Shimoni* (ad loc., 478):

I was already informed by the prophet Yeshayahu, who said: "O you afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted" – poor in righteous men, poor in Torah, and poor in *mitzvot* and good deeds.

As for the promised abundance, we are familiar with the well-known Gemara in *Ta'anit* (7a):

Rabbi Chanina bar Idi said: Why are the words of Torah likened to water, as it is said: "O, whoever is thirsty, go to the water" (*Yeshaya* 55:1)? To say to you: Just as water leaves a high place and goes to a low place, so too are the words of the Torah not retained except by someone whose mind is humble.

And Rabbi Oshaya said: Why are the words of the Torah likened to the following three liquids, to water, and to wine, and to milk, as it is written: "O, whoever is thirsty, go to the water," and it is written: "Go, buy, and eat; and go, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (ibid.)? To say to you: Just as these three liquids are not preserved except in the least of vessels, so too are the words of the Torah not preserved except in someone whose mind is humble.

In light of what we have seen, this is not merely a homiletical interpretation, but rather it is based on the prophet's combination of poverty and spiritual progress, and on the transitions in the verses that weave these two ideas together. The verse that precedes, "O, whoever is thirsty, go to the water," is "every tongue that shall rise against you in judgment you shall condemn; this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and the recompense of their righteousness appointed by Me, says the Lord." And the verse that follows soon thereafter is: "Incline your ear, and come to Me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure loving promises of David." It is no wonder then that the verses found in the middle which speak of "O, whoever is thirsty, go to the water," and "Hearken diligently to Me, and eat that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness" are interpreted as referring to spiritual food. In short, to the material consolation found in the plain meaning of the *haftara*, the Midrash adds spiritual consolation and combines them with Israel's repentance and the everlasting covenant between Israel and God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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