

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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

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

PARASHAT KI TETZE

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The *haftara* for *Parashat Ki-Tetze* (*Yeshayahu* 54:1-10) is one of the shortest *haftarot*,^{1[1]} but nevertheless it constitutes a complete and meaningful unit of consolation in and of itself. It is, therefore, read as a separate *haftara* within the framework of the cycle of seven *haftarot* of consolation, and not joined to the *haftara* of *Aniya so'ara* which immediately follows it in Scripture. The Gemara in tractate *Megila* (23a) establishes that a *haftara* must be at least twenty-one verses long, but then states that if the story or issue under discussion is finished, this requirement is waived. What this means with regard to our *haftara* is that "*Roni*

^{1[1]} To the best of my knowledge, only "*Ha-lo ki-venai Kushiyyim atem li*" (the *haftara* of *Acharei Mot* and/or *Kedoshim*, depending on the custom) is shorter by one verse.

akara" is viewed as a clearly-defined unit that stands on its own, set apart from "*Aniya so'ara*," despite their proximity in the framework of the book of *Yeshayahu*.²[2]

In light of our reading of the *haftarot* over the course of the last few weeks, we can say that while certain basic motifs of consolation and redemption repeat themselves in all of these *haftarot*, each one revolves around a particular image (or images) or specific points that receive special emphasis, and it is upon these that we must focus our attention.

The Barren Woman's Despair

The main image in our *haftara* is that of the barren woman. The affliction resulting from exile is based on two different factors – the suffering in the present and the loss of hope regarding the future. It is important to emphasize that we are talking about two different things. There can be a situation of terrible affliction in the present, but nevertheless there is hope for the future, because improvement over the present situation has already been promised. The reverse is also possible, where the present situation in and of itself is tolerable, and neither individuals nor the nation as a whole suffer acute affliction, but the future appears hopeless with no light visible at the end of the tunnel. This can lead to severe despair.

Now, whereas most of the previous *haftarot* of consolation dealt in great measure with the suffering caused by the exile in the present, describing Israel as "afflicted, tossed with tempest," in constant fear of the wrath of the oppressor and subject to harsh exile, the prophecy of *Roni akara* comes primarily to deal with the feelings of despair and lack of hope regarding the future that are stirred up by exile.³[3] The tool used is the metaphor of barrenness. The root of the tragedy of childlessness lies in the lack of hope regarding the future. Surely, any couple that is forced to deal with fertility problems experience unbearable moments of suffering in the present; the essence of their difficulty, however, is that they have lost all hope for the future. Were they to know that in the future they would have offspring, these difficulties would disappear. In contrast, if a person suffers with severe emotional or physical pain in the present, his distress does not diminish because of a hopeful future. Knowing what the future has in store for him may strengthen him and give him greater endurance, but it

²[2] In contrast, the Ashkenazi custom joins the two prophecies in the *haftara* of *No'ach*, because our concern in that *haftara* is not the consolation in and of itself, but the connection between the prophecy and the *parasha*. Thus, there is no need to separate between the two *haftarot* that deal with consolation from different perspectives, but rather they can be read together.

³[3] In this respect, the *haftara* for *Parashat Re'e, Va-Tomer Tziyon*, is similar to our *haftara*. It, however, is primarily concerned with Israel's feelings about God in light of the exile that continues to grow longer and the lack of hope regarding the future, whereas our *haftara* focuses on the distress itself that is caused by the lengthy exile.

cannot conceal or alleviate his present pain. A childless person is regarded as if he were dead in the present because already now he lives with the feeling that he has no future. There will be nobody to take care of him when he grows old, there will be nobody to say *kaddish* after he is gone, and most of all, there will be nobody who will live on after him and continue his existential world and legacy. To take a biblical example, let us consider Avraham. When God emphasizes His protection and blessing in the present, which found expression in the war of the four kings, Avraham's response is: "What will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damesek" (*Bereishit* 15:2). In other words, Avraham answers God that his problem is not with the present but with the future. Needless to say, since what is important is the future, a childless man or woman is unable to enjoy the present as long as he or she has no future.

The Jewish people in exile are likened to a barren woman. During many periods of Jewish history across the generations the Jewish people in exile did not suffer afflictions or oppression, and the gentiles did not want to destroy them. Sometimes the Jewish people found themselves in a situation which today would be called "exile in countries of ease," both economic and political. However, the despair of the barren woman who sees a future for her neighbors, while she is in a state of "Give me children, or else I die" (*Bereishit* 30:1), gives expression to Jewish existence throughout the course of the exile. Even when living in comfort, Jews have felt that they have no future as a nation, and when they "saw every city built on its foundation, and the city of God cast down to She'ol," they felt as an abandoned woman who contemplates her neighbors' success and her lack of a future. It is not the difficulties of the present, but the knowledge that there is no future that hangs over the childless woman and over Israel in their exile.

In an astonishingly strong passage, *Chazal* combine metaphor and reality, parable and lesson. In a discussion regarding the halakhic status of a non-Jew who might possibly descend from one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, the Gemara states (*Yebamot* 17a) that there is no concern about the validity of his betrothal (that is, there is no chance that he is a Jew), and no concern that he actually descends from the exiled tribes, for we have a tradition that the wombs of the women of the generation of the ten exiled tribes split open and they were barren.^{4[4]} In other words, the despair that took hold of them in the wake of their exile and the trauma suffered by the first generation of exiles made them barren, and thus the metaphor itself was actualized, turning into terrifying reality!

^{4[4]} This is the view of the first position cited in the Gemara. The Gemara there cites another position that follows another course regarding the entire halakhic issue.

The Consolation

The consolation that the prophet promises the people is meant to answer the problem that is troubling them. It should come as no surprise, then, that the verses of consolation in *Roni akara* speak about plans for the future. The prophetic message does not limit itself to the mere promise of children; rather it paints an entire picture of preparations for the future. "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of your habitations, spare not; lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes" (54:2) is not merely a picturesque description of the great numbers of children that may be expected in the future, but rather a consolation in the present. The present suffering of the childless woman results from the fact that she sees herself as having no future. Therefore, the moment that the future becomes tangible, even before it actually arrives, the present becomes pleasant and offers comfort. The prophet's telling the people to enlarge their tents and strengthen their stakes comforts the people now in exile, even before they return to their land. This may be likened to a couple with fertility problems whose doctor tells them to go out and buy nursery furniture because their problem has been solved. Already now, their world has changed beyond recognition, long before their child is born; the future has already made a turn for the better even if the swing in fortune has yet to be actualized.

And furthermore, not only does our *haftara* offer tidings about the plans for Israel's future, but it also heralds the possibility of radical and immediate change. Another message appearing in the *haftara* is that the basic situation regarding the future is the optimistic situation, whereas pessimism and despair are a deviation from the norm – "For a small moment have I forsaken you; but with great mercies will I gather you. In the overflowing of wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting faithful love will I have mercy on you, says your redeemer, the Lord" (54:7-8).

This, however, leads to new concern, for if radical upheavals are possible, there can be no assurances about the future, for even if the prophet's promises are fulfilled and all the good that he had predicted arrives, the situation can change again, the good turning once again into bad. The promise of future good as a result of a sudden upheaval is like a bill of debt with a receipt alongside it, for who can guarantee that the good will not be replaced by the bad. All hopes, therefore, are limited, nobody being able to guarantee that they will not become buried at any moment. The prophet, therefore, finds it necessary to establish that not only will the promised good arrive, but that there is no reason to fear the model of redemption based on a sharp and sudden upheaval, for God guarantees by way of a covenant that He will never again abandon them in such a manner. This is why the prophet refers to the covenant that had been made with No'ach:

For this is as the waters of No'ach to Me; and I have sworn that the waters of No'ach should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be furious with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My faithful love shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, says the Lord that has mercy on you. (54:9-10).

It is not by chance that the covenant made with No'ach was chosen to express this principle. No'ach too had reason to fear that God might once again destroy the new world that he had been privileged to see. Just as the flood had wiped out an existing world while he was in the ark, so too it was possible that the new world that was being rebuilt following No'ach's exit from the ark would also be wiped out, and he along with it. God, therefore, made the covenant of the rainbow with him and with his descendants, and this is what reminds Israel that the realization of the prophecy of redemption is not a temporary and passing event, but rather it is accompanied by a Divine covenant that will make sure that it continues. Even if there are extreme changes in the world, and the mountains depart and the hills are removed, the covenant and lovingkindness that God has promised us will remain in force. It should be noted that this assertion is important not only for our *haftara*, but rather it has broader significance, inasmuch as many of the scripts of redemption appearing all across the book of *Yeshayahu* prophesy about radical changes in the natural world (whether understood literally, or as a metaphor for spiritual redemption), so that the promise of "revolutionary redemption" requires the backing of a prophetic promise regarding its constancy and permanence.

Summary

As stated above, the metaphor of the barren woman is the primary image around which our *haftara* revolves, and the words of consolation regarding the large number of children and the expansion of domiciles relate to it. It is not, however, the only metaphor that the prophet uses; in the continuation of the prophecy there is a transition from the metaphor of the mother to the metaphor of the wife: "For the Lord has called you as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit; but a wife of youth, can she be cast off? says your God" (v. 6).

This transition is extremely significant, and it provides the tone not only for the end of the *haftara*, but also for the *haftarot* to be read on upcoming *Shabbatot*, especially the *haftara* that concludes the series, namely, the *haftara* of *Sos asis*. Proper treatment of this transition requires expanded discussion, which we will save for another two weeks when we deal with the *haftara* of *Sos asis*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

