

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT VAYESHEV

"BECAUSE THEY SOLD THE RIGHTEOUS FOR SILVER"

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

MAN AND HIS SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS

As was the case these past three weeks, this week's *haftara* is also taken from *Trei Asar*, and once again from a new prophet – the prophet Amos – from whose prophecies we have not yet read as a *haftara*. Before we begin to deal with the *haftara* itself, let us open with an overview of man and his spiritual problems, as the Torah warns about them, as background for the rebuke delivered by Amos.

CHASING AFTER IDOLS

The Torah concerns itself with two main tracks that lead to man's abandonment of God. The first is the streaming after idols, which is rooted in man's failure to find satisfaction in his relationship with the true God, because of which he turns to other alternatives. The unrevealed abstraction of a transcendental God may set a person off and push him into the hands of a pagan god, who appears near, but is in fact distant.^{1[1]} God's involvement in the world may annoy a person, and send him off in search of a god who is cut off from this world. Or a person may become persuaded intellectually or emotionally by the arguments of members of other religions and then chose to accept their gods. Whatever the reason, at the root of the matter we are dealing with a person who is driven by religious motives and a feeling of faith, and wishes to be connected to a godly being conceived as existing beyond the human world. The relationship that he seeks is a relationship between man and the celestial worlds, and his search gives expression to spiritual yearning. Of course, the danger inherent in this track lies not in the desire for a spiritual life focused on connection with the Divine, but in the substance of the seeking, that is, the chase after lies and vanities instead of God. The Torah addresses this danger in its comprehensive warnings about idol worship. This issue is particularly pronounced in the book of *Devarim*. The approach described above finds expression already at the beginning of the book:

Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life: but teach them to your sons, and your sons' sons – the day that you stood before the Lord your God in Chorev, when the Lord said to me, Gather Me the people together, and I will make them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children. And you came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness. And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire: your heard the voice of the words, but saw no form; only a voice. And He declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, the ten Words; and He wrote them upon two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might do them in the land into which you go over to possess it. Take therefore good heed to yourselves; for you saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire: lest you become corrupt, and make a carved idol, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of any thing that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth: and lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, and the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you should be misled to worship them, and serve them, which the Lord your God has allotted to all the nations under the whole heaven. (*Devarim* 4:9-19)

^{1[1]} See *Yerushalmi, Berakhot* 9:1 which contrasts between idol worship which appears near but is indeed far, and God who appears far but is indeed near to all those who call out to Him.

SINKING INTO WORLDLY PLEASURES

In contrast, there is another track, where a person does not focus his life on spiritual experience but upon his own needs and desires. It is not his spiritual aspirations that separate him from God, but rather his sinking into the pleasures of the world. "But Yeshurun grew fat, and kicked: you are grown fat, you are become thick, your are covered with fatness; then he forsook God who made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (*Devarim* 32:15). The person does not abandon God because of spiritual dissatisfaction, but rather he forsakes the spiritual enterprise in favor of the material pleasures of the world.

The closing chapters of the book of *Devarim* are primarily dedicated to this danger. In addition to the aforementioned verse in the Song of *Haazinu*, the Torah relates to this danger when it describes (*Devarim* 29:17-18) "the root that bears gall and wormwood," who blesses himself in his heart, saying, "I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst." So too in the continuation where God informs Moshe of the state of the people facing spiritual crisis:

For when I shall have brought them into the land of which I swore to their fathers, one flowing with milk and honey; **and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and grown fat**, then they will turn to other gods, and serve them, and provoke Me, and break My covenant. (*Devarim* 31:20)

AMOS STRUGGLING WITH A HEDONISTIC SOCIETY

These two tracks have existed throughout the course of human history, and thus the confrontation with them is also found throughout Scripture. There are certain prophets whose primary struggle was with the first tendency, and whose chief efforts were dedicated to the struggle against idolatry and other manifestations of spiritual error. And there are other prophets who struggled with all their might against a hedonistic society that concerns itself with enjoyment of the belly even if the poor and indigent must be trampled upon in order to reach this objective. Amos falls into the second category, this finding expression in our *haftara* (*Amos* 2:6-3:8).

The *haftara* opens with a verse that constitutes the connecting link to our *parasha* by way of allusion: "Thus, says the Lord; For three transgressions of Israel, I will turn away his punishment,

but for the fourth I will not turn away his punishment; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes" (2:6). We will return to the meaning of the connection below. Now we will focus on the description of the spiritual situation that Amos is confronting. As can be seen, two connected matters stand at the heart of his rebuke. The first is the exploitation of the poor:

Thus says the Lord; For three transgressions of Israel, I will turn away his punishment, but for the fourth I will not turn away his punishment; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes;^{2[2]} that pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the humble: and a man and his father will go in to the same girl, to profane My holy name: and they lay themselves down beside every altar upon clothes taken in pledge, and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god. (2:6-8)

The attitude of those with power and means toward the poor is not only one of insensitivity and insistence on strict justice, but rather one of exploitation. Essentially, they see the poor (along with the rest of the population) not as people who are partners in their society, but as objects for exploitation and the advancement of the standing of the strong and mighty. It is not the human element of the poor that stands before their eyes, but a weak economic unit that may freely be exploited. They are inattentive to their cries, and do not hear the distress of the other, because the communication between them is utilitarian-judicial, and not that of two souls, one soul turning to the other based on their common existence as human beings. Using the terminology of recent generations, their relationship is one of subject-object (I-it), rather than one of subject-subject (I-thou). One who sells the poor for shoes and destroys his life for a small debt does not relate to the person behind the debt, but only to the financial dimension, and one who seizes shoes as a pledge rather than relating to the honor and health of the debtor reveals that he is deaf to the human element of the other.

THE CONNECTION TO THE *PARASHA*

^{2[2]} According to the plain meaning of the text, we are dealing here with the sale of poor people - whether their actual bodies or their belongings that are essential for life - for the purpose of debt collection. Seeing the verse as referring to the sale of Yosef is found on the level of Midrash, but as we shall see below, the Midrash profoundly reflects the same problem dealt with on the level of plain meaning, and therefore it is well connected to the verse itself.

Now we can return to the *parasha* and understand the connection between it and the *haftara*. As may be remembered, the brothers put forward two proposals for ridding themselves of Yosef. The proponents of the first proposal (Shimon and Levi, according to *Chazal*) want to kill Yosef, whereas Yehuda recoils from such a drastic step and suggests selling him. Obviously, for Yosef's personal well-being, Yehuda's plan is preferable, for it is surely better to be a slave in the house of Potifar than a corpse cast into a pit.

There is, however, an exceedingly deep and severe blemish in Yehuda's conduct, beyond the price that Yosef will be forced to pay as a slave, that is to say, seeing a brother as an object. If a person comes to kill his brother, as in the case of Kayin and Hevel or Esav and Yaakov, he views himself in competition with him. It is not a relationship of insensitivity or indifference. On the contrary, it is the very opposite. The hated brother is viewed as a person of stature, as one who disturbs the rest of the sibling who envies him because of his accomplishments and because of the human connection that binds them in a fraternal bond. Their brotherhood is caught in a thicket, and finds expression in a distorted manner, but the jealousy and the hatred results from their existential relationship, rather than from opacity that sees the other as an object. When a person is viewed as an object, there is no competition or envy, but only disregard. On the one hand, this situation stirs up the brother to rage and leads to terrible scheming, but on the other hand, there is a feeling of respect and recognition of the essence of the opponent. When one person kills another out of rivalry, he recognizes that his victim stands before him as an equal and as an independent person. It is his opponent's humanity that threatens the hater.

One who comes to sell his brother, on the other hand, does not see him as a person who endangers him, but rather he relates to him as an ox, an ass or any other object. Selling a person who was created in God's image means depriving him of what is unique in man, the Divine image within him, and turning him into an object. It is not by chance that the Torah imposes such a severe punishment upon a kidnapper, considering the transgression a capital offense. Moreover, the punishment is imposed for the kidnapping and sale (or for using him as a slave), because the liability is not for removing the person from his place, but for turning him into an object and diminishing the Divine image within him.

Therefore, from one perspective Yehuda benefits Yosef, saving him from death, but his basic attitude toward him is worse than that of his brothers who wish to kill him. Seeing another person as intended to serve you, and as a resource to be exploited, characterizes Yehuda's conduct throughout the *parasha*, until the fateful moment of encounter with Tamar and her demand of him, "Discern whose are these," though this is not the forum to discuss the matter at

length.^{3[3]} This attitude, which finds expression in Yehuda and in the conduct of the rich of Israel in the time of Amos, is what connects the *parasha* to the *haftara*. The *midrash* which interprets the opening verse regarding the sale of the righteous as referring to the sale of Yosef is not merely an attractive midrashic association cut off from the original context of the prophecy, but rather it is based on the moral problem common to the sale of Yosef and the period of Amos, namely, the exploitation of the other, seeing him as a resource available for my needs, and trampling over him as a result.

BETWEEN MAN AND HIS FELLOW – BETWEEN MAN AND GOD

This, however, is not the end of the matter, and Amos's prophecy does not conclude on this point. Amos does not see the issue of the relations between man and those around him merely as a moral and social problem, on the level of interpersonal relations, but rather he demonstrates that it also involves the relations between man and God. It is not surprising that their attitude to God is characterized by that same approach. They are not interested in an existential connection to God, but in the pleasures of this world, and therefore they disregard Him in a consistent manner, without expressing gratitude or coming into contact with Him. Here we must pay attention to the fact that Amos comes to the people of Israel with a double argument. First, like many other prophets, he complains about the ingratitude of Israel:

Yet I destroyed the Emori before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit from above, and his roots from beneath. Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years through the wilderness, to possess the land of the Emori. (2:9-10)

There is, however, an additional point. Besides being concerned about their welfare and providing their needs, God also wants an existential bond with them, and for that purpose He creates conduits that allow for such a connection between Him and man:

And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not even thus, O you children of Israel? says the Lord. (2:11)

^{3[3]} Several years ago, I dealt with this issue at length in a *shiur* on *Parashat Vayeshev*, given in the framework of a series of *shiurim* in English on *Parashat Ha-shavua* for the VBM.

The primary importance of the matter lies in the very connection and in the feeling of closeness and intimacy between Creator and creature, and not necessarily in the messages or contents that they will attain through prophecy or the personal spiritual achievement of the Nazirite. It is not the substance of the Naziritic vow that is essential, but life before God (like a High Priest). The critical point is not the prophetic messages but rather man's very ability to conduct a dialogue with God. The Rambam's assertion that "it is one of the basic principles of religion that God inspires men with the prophetic gift"⁴[4] is based on this principle. The principle of faith is not the specific prophetic guidance, but rather God's involvement in our world and His relationship with us.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONTENT AND CONNECTION

In order to clarify this matter, let us consider the parallel mechanism of prayer. Two things are achieved through prayer:

- 1) Standing before God. The petitioner stands before God and conducts himself as one who is standing before the king.
- 2) The content of the praise, supplication and thanksgiving that are uttered by the petitioner before God and express his feelings.

It is self-evident that prayer must include both of these elements, but if alien thoughts intrude upon a person while he is praying and divert his attention from the content of his prayers, he still achieves the first objective of standing before God.⁵[5] Like a child who calls home, the establishment of the connection in and of itself and the desire to do so have independent significance, and are more important than the actual content of the conversation.

⁴[4] *Hilkhos Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:1.

⁵[5] There are many halakhic expressions of this duality. For one of the most famous ones, see *Chiddushei R. Chayyim Ha-Levi, Hilkhos Tefila* 4:1.

Prophecy is the flip side of prayer, and there too the double principle of encounter and content is true. The reprimands of the prophets have significance, but more than that is the very revelation and the very connection that is established between man and God. This point of seeing prophecy and prayer as instruments of contact and covenant between God and man was emphasized to a great degree by R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *ztz"l*, in his "Lonely Man of Faith"^{6[6]}: "In short, prayer and prophecy are two synonymous designations of the covenantal God-man colloquy." Just as the connection between human beings is supposed to be existential, giving expression to a mutual relationship of partnership, so too our relationship with God is supposed to reflect the existential contact with Him and the covenant between Him and man. In both cases, the very connection is exceedingly important, clouding over the utilitarian objective of the dialogue.

THE SECOND SIN

We now come to the second sin of the people. Not only did they conduct themselves in a corrupt manner, failing to follow in God's path and refusing to obey His commandments, but they even denied the very relationship between them and God. The people showed no interest in prophecy or Naziriteship, but rather objected to them: "But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not" (2:12). Their unwillingness to obey God reflects not only ingratitude toward Him who took them out of Egypt, but also a lack of understanding regarding the meaning of the exodus from Egypt, at the base of which stood the process of "And I shall take you for Me as a people," which was meant to be translated into a unique relationship. The insistence that the prophets not prophesy and the attempt to prevent the Nazirite from achieving sanctity in his personal conduct, follow from the spiritual significance of these things for the community. Just as their conduct with human society denies the existential relationship of "I-thou," so their standing before God does not recognize the intimate and experiential connection between God and man. On the two plains, they are ready to recognize a utilitarian relationship but not a personal, existential connection.

THE PUNISHMENT

^{6[6]} P. 35. The issue is dealt with there at length on pages 33-36. This, however, is not the place for a longer citation.

The prophet cries out against these two sins and warns of the punishment that God will impose because of them. Since there are two failures, there are two different prophecies, each one warning about a punishment to be meted out for one of the courses of the sin. The first is directed toward the ingratitude manifested by Israel regarding the expulsion of the Emori. It primarily consists of the withdrawal of God's helping hand from Israel's military efforts and the turning of Divine providence from assistance to hindrance. Corresponding to the favor of:

Yet I destroyed the Emori before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit from above, and his roots from beneath. (2:9)

will come:

Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart presses down that is full of sheaves. So the flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his force, nor shall the mighty man deliver himself: nor shall he who handles the bow stand; and he who is swift of foot shall not deliver himself: nor shall he who rides the horse deliver himself. And he who is courageous among the mighty shall flee away naked on that day, says the Lord. (2:13-16)

However, beside the sin itself, there is also the problem of severing the connection and denying the relationship that exists between Israel and their Father in Heaven. The end of the *haftara* is dedicated to the treatment of this problem, and its essence is noting the intensity of the connection and the fact that it is impossible to deny it, because the connection is so fundamental. The punishment itself is presented as expressing the connection between Israel and God, for "the Lord reproves him whom he loves" (*Mishlei* 3:12) and He punishes because He cares and desires to repair. Not punishing a sinning nation is not a sign of Divine love, but rather indifference and insensitivity to their fate. Therefore, the punishment reaching Israel for their sins because of the first element of the content of the sin expresses, in paradoxical manner, the intensity of the second element of the connection. This basic principle is expressed by Amos in the famous verse that formulates this idea in the clearest manner: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (3:2). From here the prophet continues and clarifies the strength of the connection between God and His creatures, and thus the *haftara* ends with a manifest rebuke that conceals consolation and love:

Can two walk together, unless they be agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he has taken nothing? Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where there is no lure for it? Does a snare spring up from the earth, and have taken nothing at all? Shall a shofar be sounded in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it? Surely the Lord God will do nothing, without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy? (3:3-8)

As is evident from the last two verses, the prophet and prophecy are assigned an important task, for the reasons mentioned above. Israel tried to deny the connection between God and His people, and corresponding to this, the prophet declares the centrality of prophecy and its meaning within the framework of the relationship of knowledge and destiny presented here. God chose Israel and knows them, and the instrument used is prophecy. Of great interest is the description of prophecy at the end of the *haftara* as the revelation of a secret between God and the prophets; man is a partner to the Divine mystery and God sees fit to share His mysteries with him because of the closeness between God and His creatures. The importance of prophecy lies precisely in this point of partnership, and not in the transmission of contents, and with this the *haftara* concludes.

THE MEANING OF MIRACLES

As a postscript as we enter into Chanuka, let us note that the meaning of a miracle lies not in the overturning of the laws of nature in and of itself, but in God's readiness to act for the sake of His people and in what this readiness reflects about the relationship between God and His people. This is not the forum to expand upon this idea, but the reader is invited to reflect upon this point and thus achieve a more profound understanding of the meaning of the Chanuka.

(Translated by David Strauss)
