

Repentance and Atonement:

The Haftara of Yom Kippur

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The *haftara* for Yom Kippur (*Yeshayahu* 57:14-58:14) was established already by *Chazal*:

On Yom Kippur, we read from *Acharei Mot*, and for the *haftara*, “For thus says the high and lofty one.” (*Megilla* 31a)

This *haftara*, which deals with repentance and the perfection of morals on the one hand and the appropriate character of a fast day on the other, seems especially suited for Yom Kippur. Likewise, it fits in with the series of *haftarot* relating to repentance that we read during this period of the year.

The reasons for selecting this section as the *haftara* for Yom Kippur seem to be so obvious that the reader is left wondering why Rashi felt a need to add the explanation:

For it speaks of the virtue of repentance: “Is this not rather the fast that I have chosen? [To loose the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house?]” (58:6-7).

The Number of *Haftarot* Dealing with Repentance

The examination of another source, found in close proximity to the above-mentioned passage and comment of Rashi, is likely to raise additional questions regarding the matter. Thus write the Tosafot with respect to the order of the *haftarot*:

For we are accustomed, based on the *Pesikta*, to read three [*haftarot* of] calamity before Tish'a Be-Av, namely, "*Divrei Yirmiya*," "*Shim'u devar Ha-Shem*," and "*Chazon Yeshayahu*," and after Tish'a Be-Av seven [*haftarot* of] consolation, namely, "*Nachamu nachamu*," etc. ... and two of repentance, namely, "*Dirshu*" and "*Shuva*." (ibid. 32b, s.v. *Rosh Chodesh*)

For our purposes, the most important point in the Tosafot is that they mention only two *haftarot* of repentance ("*Dirshu*" and "*Shuva*") – which are read on Tzom Gedalya and on Shabbat Shuva. We presumably would have counted at least four *haftarot* of repentance ("*Dirshu*," "*Shuva*," Yom Kippur morning and Yona). Why, then, did the Tosafot not consider the two *haftarot* of Yom Kippur as *haftarot* of repentance?

One possible answer is that the Tosafot's list creates a connection between the *haftarot* of calamity and consolation and the *haftarot* of repentance. The *haftarot* of Yom Kippur could not be included in this system because they belong to a different system. These *haftarot* are part of the *haftarot* of the Tishrei festivals, and they cannot be included in the system comprised of *haftarot* for Shabbat.

Another explanation may, however, be suggested, one that raises a fundamental question regarding the *haftara* in particular and Yom Kippur in general. When we examine the *haftara*, we see that it does not focus on repentance, but rather on atonement. Despite the close, mutual relationship between the two, these are two distinct concepts. Repentance involves perfection of character and actions ("Repent, repent from your evil ways") and/or drawing near to God ("Return to Me, and I will return to you"). In contrast, atonement involves forgiveness and pardon of sin. Of course, one of the main ways to merit atonement is by abandoning sin and drawing near to God, but the bottom line is that we are dealing with two distinct concepts. Thus, it is possible that a person should forsake his wicked ways and yet not achieve atonement – he will have to pay the price for his evil deeds, whether at the hand of God or the hands of man, despite the fact that he already expressed his remorse over his sins. And in the other direction, atonement is possible even without repentance; a person may be saved from punishment for his sins despite the fact that he still clings to his wicked ways.

Indeed, we find in Halakha situations in which atonement and repentance become disconnected. Thus, for example, the well-known position of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi that Yom Kippur atones for sin even without repentance, or the case of the High Priest's confession on Yom Kippur, which atones for the sins of the priests and the people even though it is not an expression of their repentance. We also find the reverse situation, when repentance does not suffice for atonement. For example, this occurs to a person who repented after having violated a prohibition, punishable by lashes, excision, or the death penalty. Such a person does not achieve atonement with repentance alone. Without some additional means of atonement, he remains a repentant sinner who has not attained atonement.

To summarize, in a case where a person achieves atonement without repentance, he is regarded as a wicked person, but will not be punished, whereas in the reverse case, when a person repents but does not achieve atonement, he is regarded as a righteous person, who will nevertheless be punished.¹[1]

These two elements – repentance and atonement – are the essence of Yom Kippur, as formulated by the Rambam:

Yom Kippur is a time of repentance for all, both individuals and the community at large. It is the apex of forgiveness and pardon for Israel. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 2:7)

Repentance is an independent goal, and it constitutes the climax of the process taking place during the Ten Days of Repentance, which Yom Kippur brings to an end. From this perspective, Yom Kippur is a day for perfecting one's actions, for expressing remorse over the sins of the past and for resolving to abandon sin in the future. It is a day that falls entirely under the banner of "Let us search and try our ways, and turn back to the Lord" (*Eikha* 3:40).

1 [1] Regarding all that is stated in this section, see *Yoma* 85b-86a; *Or Zaru'a*, no. 112; *Iggerot Ha-Grid*, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1.

On the other hand, as its very name attests, Yom Kippur is a day of atonement. Let us not forget that the name and objective of the day are explicitly stated in the Torah: "For it is a day of atonement to make atonement for you before the Lord your God" (*Vayikra* 23:28). As was mentioned above, R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi's position that Yom Kippur achieves atonement even without repentance is the clearest expression of the day's element of atonement, but it is true according to all opinions, for no one disputes the fact that atonement is part of the day's essence.

In light of the above, a question arises regarding the *haftara* of Yom Kippur: Is its primary lesson one of repentance or is it one of atonement? In light of the distinction between the two concepts pointed out above, it is important to emphasize that, for the most part, these two concepts are closely connected, for surely God pardons and atones for one who improves his ways and abandons his wickedness. Atonement can be a byproduct of repentance, and the opposite is also true – sin can be abandoned for the purpose of achieving atonement, and repentance itself is a means to achieve atonement. For this reason, the examination of whether our *haftara* deals with atonement or with repentance cannot be conducted by way of a superficial survey of the words mentioned in it. The two concepts are intertwined and presumably will appear together. The focus of the *haftara* can only be determined by way of a careful examination of the text based on an attempt to identify its objective.

A *Haftara* of Repentance or Atonement

Let us go back now to Rashi's previously cited comment that our *haftara* deals with the virtue of repentance. His words attest to the fact that he viewed the rebuke found in the *haftara* as intending to cause the people of Israel to repent on Yom Kippur. The prophet tells the people of their sins in order to bring them to repent; and repentance is to be pursued due to the intrinsic importance of proper conduct and nearness to God, and not as a means to achieve atonement. Loosening the chains of wickedness, undoing the bonds of the yoke, and providing food for the hungry and clothing for the naked are mentioned by the prophet as the appropriate path with respect to the objective of repentance – namely, the performance of good deeds!

All this notwithstanding, it might be suggested that the objective of the *haftara* is atonement. First, we must consider the fact that the basic character of the day is a day of atonement, and therefore it is reasonable that the *haftara* should focus on the essence of the day. Second, the theme of the Torah reading is certainly atonement, rather than repentance. The reading deals with the sacrificial service, which atones for the sins of all of Israel,

rather than with repentance. Surely, the High Priest can not repent on behalf of the people at large! (Had we wanted to read a section dealing with repentance on Yom Kippur, we could have read from the section about repentance at the end of *Devarim* or the like, and not from that describing the sacrificial service.)

In addition to these circumstantial proofs, it seems that the content of the *haftara* fits in specifically with the process of atonement, as we shall presently demonstrate.

***Mitzvot* between Man and His Fellow and *Mitzvot* between Man and God**

The heart of the *haftara* deals with the importance of *mitzvot* between man and his fellow (*bein adam le-chavero*), with the moral-religious corruption of oppressing and exploiting the weakest elements of society, and with the hypocrisy of performing the *mitzvot* between man and God (*bein adam la-Makom*) while trampling those between man and his fellow, with special emphasis placed on this point in the context of fast days.

The essence of the argument against the hypocrisy of observing the *mitzvot* between man and God while disregarding the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow, a rebuke repeated by several prophets, is not the inconsistency or the selective observance of the *mitzvot*, but rather a more fundamental moral matter, one that impairs the religious observance of one who acts in this manner. If we accept the idea that “*derekh eretz*”^[2] preceded the Torah,” it is not only because we regard the *mitzvot* that govern the relationship between man and his fellow as more *basic*, but also because we see them as an *introduction* to the *mitzvot* that govern the relationship between man and God. When a person fails to observe the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow, then even the *mitzvot* between man and God that he in fact performs are impaired.

2 [2] I am using the term “*derekh eretz*” in the sense in which it is generally used today, and based on the assumption that *derekh eretz*’s priority to the Torah gives expression to the prevailing moral outlook in our time. Our spiritual world is based on this outlook, as may be inferred from the broad use of this statement in our day, regardless of whether this is the statement’s original meaning. For the various senses and uses of the expression “*derekh eretz*” in Rabbinic writings, see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, s.v. *derekh eretz*.

From one perspective, the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow and the *mitzvot* between man and God draw from two entirely different sources. Man is obligated to his Creator as a slave is to his master; this finds expression not only in man's very obligation to God's command, but also in the contents of many *mitzvot*. Through the *mitzvot*, man offers gratitude to God, praises Him and expresses commitment to Him. The words of the Ramban in his commentary to the Torah strongly emphasize this aspect of the *mitzvot* between man and God:

Similarly, many *mitzvot* serve as a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. They are all to be for us in all generations testimony by way of signs that will not be forgotten, so that there be no room for the heretic to deny faith in God. For one who buys a *mezuzah* for a *zuz* and affixes it to his entranceway and understands its significance has already admitted the creation of the world, God's knowledge and providence, and also prophecy, and expressed belief in all the cornerstones of the Torah, in addition to having admitted that the Creator's lovingkindness for those who do His will is exceedingly great, for He took us out from slavery to freedom...

Therefore, [the Sages] said: Be as careful with a minor *mitzva* as with a major one, for all are very dear and beloved. For through them, a man does every hour acknowledge [or give thanks to] his God. And the purpose of all the *mitzvot* is that we should believe in our God and acknowledge to Him that He has created us. That is the purpose of creation itself, for we have no explanation of creation, and the most high God has no desire in His creatures other than that man know and acknowledge to his God that He has created him. The reason for the raising of one's voice during prayer and the reason for synagogues and the merit of public prayer is this – that people should have a place where they can congregate and thank [acknowledge] God who has created them and brought them into existence, and they will publicize this and declare before Him, "We are your creatures." (Ramban, *Shemot* 13:16)

These principles are clearly inapplicable to *mitzvot* governing the relationship between man and his fellow. One person is not obligated to another as is a slave to his master, nor need he thank him for his very existence or praise his exaltedness. On the contrary, many of the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow, such as charity, usury, fraud and the like, are based on the need to help the weak and offer them support. A person arrives at these *mitzvot* from a position of strength, as opposed to the *mitzvot* between man and God, which are fulfilled from a position of weakness. Even in the case of *mitzvot* between man and his fellow that are not directed at the feeble, one person approaches the other as equals ("your fellow," "your peer," "your brother"), while in the case of *mitzvot* between man and God one comes as a creature before one's Creator. From this perspective, there is indeed a big difference between *mitzvot* between man and God and *mitzvot* between man and his fellow. From this standpoint, it even seems that the *mitzvot*

between man and God are more important than those between man and his fellow.

Nevertheless, our previous assertion regarding the intimate connection between the two realms of *mitzvot* remains intact. I shall try to explain this assertion by means of the *haftara*. While at first glance, the theme of the *haftara* is the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow and the appropriate character of a fast day, when we dig deeper into the matter, we see that the main spiritual problem addressed by the *haftara* is pride and the resulting egocentricity. Observance of the *mitzvot* between man and God while one disregards the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow not only constitutes hypocrisy, but also demonstrates that even the *mitzvot* between man and God are performed out of a desire for personal gain.

This also follows from the argument: “Why have we fasted, say they, and You see not? Why have we afflicted our soul, and you take no heed?” (*Yeshayahu* 58:3). Those who put forward this argument saw the observance of the *mitzvot* between man and God as a means for advancing and improving their situation, and therefore they complained that the *mitzvot* had not been effective. In other words, the person sets himself, rather than God, at the center. Man is the important being, for whom the *mitzvot* must be observed, while God is meant to serve him and ensure his benefaction. The root of the problem of such an outlook is pride and egocentricity.

This point finds further expression with respect to the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow. In order to observe these *mitzvot*, a person must recognize that he does not stand at the center of the universe and that he is no better than others. The egocentric person imagines that the entire world was created to serve him, and he sees others as tools to improve his situation. In contrast, he who has internalized the idea that he is no better than others will not exploit them; on the contrary, he will understand that he must help them. This assistance can come from altruism, the desire to benefit another person and act kindly toward him, or from more utilitarian motives. In either case, anyone who does not see his own existence as the total picture will aspire to observe the *mitzvot* governing the relationship between man and his fellow, whereas he who is immersed in himself will treat them with contempt.

To summarize, if a person’s attitude toward his fellow is that of subject and object, and his relationship is that of I-he, he will not act kindly towards him, but rather exploit him. But if he views him as a subject, and the

relationship is based on an I-thou attitude, he will integrate the *mitzvot* into his world.

This point finds major expression in the *mitzvot* of charity (upon which our *haftara* focuses). On the one hand, one is obligated to give charity because of the duty to assist the weak in his struggle to survive. From this perspective, it is a *mitzva* that came to the world owing to the human needs of the poor and the responsibility of the stronger elements in society to help its weaker members. On the other hand, the *mitzva* of charity has another level, in which the giver stands at the center. The objective of the *mitzva* is not only the help offered the weak and the achievement of the goal of “and your brother shall live with you,” but also the implantation of desirable character traits in the soul of the giver. The Rambam in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* emphasizes the nurturing and encouragement of feelings of compassion and the suppression of cruelty and miserliness on the part of the giver. The question of whether it is the giver or the recipient of the charity who stands at the heart of the *mitzva* has many halakhic ramifications which cannot be expanded upon here.

The Meaning of the *Mitzvot* between Man and His Fellow vis-à-vis God

However, whether the *mitzva* focuses on the needs of the destitute or it comes to develop the good traits of the affluent, it still assumes a relationship of strong and weak, with the giver and the recipient standing on opposite sides of the fence. There is, however, another principle in the *mitzva* of charity, which changes the status of the giver in the framework of the *mitzva*. In the wake of this change, which will be explained below, charity acquires a dimension of *bein adam la-Makom*.

Man’s life is a gift from his Creator, and Judaism expects him to recognize this fact. How does a person show gratitude to one who has helped and benefited him, be he man or God?

First, he thanks and blesses him for the kindness that he has performed for him, whether by way of explicit words of praise and gratitude or by way of demonstrations of respect and appreciation toward the benefactor. Thus, for example, we find that a child is obligated to respect his parents, a student is obligated to respect his teacher, and the like. This, however, is not enough. In addition to expressing gratitude in words and in the heart for the

good that was received, a person is also obligated to deepen his recognition of the good and bestow benefaction upon others.

Thus, for example, a person's gratitude toward his parents finds expression in the raising of his own children. When he was young, his parents raised him, and now it is his turn to raise his own children, the next generation. When he does this, he demonstrates two things: 1) that he is prepared to repay the debt and contribute his share, and 2) raising children is the way of the world, and every generation does its part. Through the raising of his children, a person demonstrates that he does not see himself as the center of the universe, as one whom everyone must serve while he is exempt from helping others. Were his parents to feed him, support him, and take care of all his needs without his doing the same for his children, he would thereby prove that he is an egoist, who sees himself as fit to be served by others, while he is not prepared to provide the same service to them. When a person cares for his children, he proves that he is among those who receive and give, rather than those who receive but do not give, and also that giving is the way of the world, and even that which he received reached him owing to his parents' obligations. Accordingly, when he cares for the next generation, he repays a debt and demonstrates that he does not see his own needs as the whole story.

This pattern repeats itself in many places. A student respects his teacher because of the *mitzva* to respect his teacher and the *mitzva* to respect Torah scholars in general, but he repays his debt to his teacher when he, in his own time, teaches his own students. The citizen of a country repays his debt to society when he serves in the army; when he defends the next generation he repays his debt to the previous generation, which had defended him in his early years. This is the case in other realms as well.

In the *mitzva* of charity, a person is given the opportunity to repay his most basic debt – his debt to God, who opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing. A person's debt to his parents, to society, and to other humans is nothing in comparison to his debt to the King of kings, to whom he owes his entire existence. How can a person repay even a part of that debt, and express thereby his gratitude for everything that he received?

Here, too, in addition to the verbal expression of gratitude in blessings and prayers, a person must give of his own to others, and this he does by way

of charity.^{3[3]} When he gives to one who has no legal claim upon him and who by right does not necessarily deserve it, a person performs an act of kindness that is similar to the acts of kindness that God performs for him and for all of humanity, for God also opens His hand and feeds us, although we have no real claim upon Him. It is not by chance that the verse uses the same expression of “opening a hand” regarding a wealthy person supporting the poor (“But you shall open your hand wide to him,” *Devarim* 15:8) as that used regarding God, who feeds the world (“You open your hand, and satisfy the desire of every living thing,” *Tehillim* 145:16). The two actions are similar in that they reflect a reality of supporting the weak, who by right may not be deserving of support. A person who evaluates his fellow man begging for food by the standards of strict justice, and refuses one whose demand is unjustified, testifies that he too is not worthy of support from Heaven – for if the criterion is strict justice, who will be found fit when standing before the King of kings?

In contrast, one who responds to a poor man’s entreaty and acts with generosity and compassion towards all who seek his aid justifies God’s giving to him. Through his actions, he attests that the world is worthy of being governed with the attribute of mercy, rather than that of justice. Just as the son who raises the next generation and acts kindly to his children repays his debt to his parents, so too one who supports the poor “repays” his debt to God and thus justifies the policy of giving to the weak and undeserving, which God practices with him and the rest of mankind. The verse which states, “He that gives graciously to the poor makes a loan to the Lord” (*Mishlei* 19:17), means that giving to the poor constitutes an act of Godly giving; if that is the case, it involves a repayment of one’s debt to Him.

From this perspective, there is a common denominator between the *mitzvot* governing the relationship between man and his fellow and the *mitzvot* governing the relationship between man and God; even the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow are not based on a position of strength with respect to the weak, but they are rather included in the relationship between man and God and in man’s submission before his Creator.

The *Haftara* as Dealing with Atonement

3 [3] Adducing support from aggadic sources and demonstrating the halakhic expressions of this principle would require extensive discussion, and therefore I have limited myself to an explanation of the principle and the citation of a verse that expresses it.

We see, then, that the phenomenon noted by the *haftara* – observing the *mitzvot* governing the relationship between man and God while trampling the weak and oppressed – is an essential contradiction that makes the observance of the *mitzvot* meaningless. It is not only cruelty but also human arrogance that underlies the conduct condemned by the prophet, and this is what empties even the *mitzvot* between man and God of all meaning.

The prophet advocates repairing social injustice, and this is meant to restore the relationship between Israel and God to its proper track. Therefore, he emphasizes the positive relationship with God that will ensue from the repair of social injustice:

Is not this rather the fast that I have chosen – to loosen the chains of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you hide not yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the morning, and your health shall spring forth speedily; and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then shall you call, and the Lord shall answer; you shall cry, and He shall say, “Here I am.” If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking iniquity, and if you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, then shall your light rise in darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make strong your bones; and you shall be like a watered garden and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. (*Yeshayahu* 58:6-11)

One who concerns himself with the hungry, the naked, and the destitute sees himself as obligated to God. He does not set himself and his needs at the center, but rather bestows benefaction upon others; in this way he brings God close to him, and God will bestow benefaction upon him. Following this understanding, this section is an especially appropriate *haftara* for Yom Kippur, for on this day man must recognize that he stands before God continually.

Now we can go back to the question that was raised above: Is the *haftara* directed at repentance or atonement?

It would seem that the focus of the *haftara* is not turning the day into a day of good deeds between man and his fellow, but rather into a day on which man is brought to stand before God in proper manner, and thus to activate the attribute of mercy towards him. This involves repentance, but also atonement. The issue of atonement is the recompense that God will give the person on the Day of Judgment; achieving atonement means that his sins will be pardoned, with God's mercy, and that he will emerge vindicated. But if he fails to achieve atonement, his sins will testify against him, and he is liable, God forbid, to emerge condemned. God's attitude toward the person also depends upon the person's attitude toward the weak. Thus, the *haftara* can be seen as a guide to the path of atonement.

This explains why the Tosafot did not include our *haftara* among the *haftarot* of repentance. The Tosafot understood that the primary element in the *haftara* is not repentance, but atonement, and therefore it does not fall into this category. And even if one were to regard repentance as the primary element in the *haftara*, it is still important to note the central point arising within it – namely, the relationship between the *mitzva* of charity and man's standing before God.
