YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

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**Shiur #02: Introduction to the *Haftarot* from the Book of *Yeshayahu***

About a quarter of the *haftarot* that we read over the course of a year are taken from the book of *Yeshayahu*. This is the largest number of *haftarot* taken from a single book – eighteen in all*.* Only three of these *haftarot* (for *Shemot*, *Yitro*, and *Devarim*) come from the first and largest part of the book, chapters 1-39; fifteen *haftarot* are taken from the second part, chapters 40-66. (The latter number includes the seven *haftarot* of consolation read on the *Shabbatot* after Tisha Be-Av.) The large number of *haftarot* taken from this part of the book of *Yeshayahu* compels me to address the very division presumed here between the different prophecies of Yeshayahu and to express an opinion on it, which naturally will influence how we understand these *haftarot.*

**Different parts of *Yeshayahu* – with different authors?**

Biblical scholars have spilled a great deal of ink in their discussions of the second part of the book of *Yeshayahu*. The great majority of them assume that this section involves another prophet (at least one), who lived in the days of Koresh, king of Persia (mentioned in 44:28[[1]](#footnote-1) - 45:1) – that is to say, about two hundred years after the person who authored the first part of the book. According to them, the prophecies in this part of the book indicate that its prophet lived after the destruction of the First Temple. Several proofs are brought to support this claim. The most prominent of them are:

1. The prophet in this part of the book deals extensively with the ingathering of exiles, the return to Zion, and the building of Jerusalem and the Temple, as we find in the following verses:

It is I who brings My servants' words to be, who fulfils the counsel of My messengers, who tells Jerusalem: Let her be settled, and the cities of Yehuda: Let them be built up. (44:26)

Your holy cities have turned to wilderness; Zion has turned to wilderness, Jerusalem to wasteland; our holy House, our glory, where our ancestors sang Your praise, has become a great conflagration; and all we hold dear has become ruin. (64:9-10)

2. There are no political discussions in this part of the book about agreements and alliances with the kings of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt, as there are in the first part of the book.

3. There is no mention of the names of the kings of Yehuda, the kingdom in which Yeshayahu prophesied.

We could go deeper and expand upon the differences between the two parts of the book, but this is not the forum in which to do so.

The Ibn Ezra (40:1) alludes to the possibility that the second part of *Yeshayahu* was written by another prophet and appended to the book of *Yeshayahu*, in the same way that the prophecies of Natan and Gad were appended to the book of *Shmuel* after Shmuel’s death and continued the description of the days of David. It is true that *Chazal* said this explicitly regarding the book of *Shmuel* (*Bava Batra* 15a), whereas regarding the book of *Yeshayahu*, they said that it was written by Chizkiyahu and his company, implying that they wrote the entire book. This is not, however, conclusive evidence against the possibility of a change in authorship: *Chazal* said the book of *Yehoshua* was written by Yehoshua himself, yet there are verses that were written (by others) after his death; furthermore, in the book of *Melakhim*, which *Chazal* said was written by Yirmeyahu, we find prophecies of Yeshayahu (II *Melakhim* 18-20) and other prophets. So too, one might argue that the authorship of *Yeshayahu* could be different for different sections even though *Chazal* did not say so explicitly. It should be noted, however, that Rachel Margaliot, in *Echad Haya Yeshayahu* (Jerusalem 5714), notes many stylistic proofs and unique linguistic expressions that clearly prove the unity of the book and its having been written by one prophet.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We will follow the path of *Chazal* and Jewish tradition, according to which the entire book was written by the same prophet. However, we cannot ignore the iron wall that modern scholarship has erected between the two parts of the book in terms of their content and style. In short, I posit that Yeshayahu wrote two books, and as is the case with a contemporary author who writes two books – perhaps a commentary to the Bible and novellae on the Talmud[[3]](#footnote-3) – the contents and styles of the two books are very different. However, despite the striking differences between the books, a literary scholar will find in them many recurring linguistic expressions. Below, I will explain the nature of the division of the prophecies into two books, which were eventually combined into a single collection of Yeshayahu's prophecies.

**The Time of the Writing of the Two Parts of the Book**

The opening verse of the book indicates its temporal setting: in the days of Uziya, Yotam, Achaz, and Chizkiyahu. *Chazal* (*Yevamot* 49b) say that Menashe killed Yeshayahu because of his prophecies, which implies that Yeshayahu also prophesied in the days of Menashe. In the days of Menashe, there were quite a few prophets (Nachum, Chabakuk, apparently also Micha, and perhaps also Yoel), as indicated by the following verses:

So the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets: Because Menashe, king of Yehuda, has committed these abominations – worse than all the Amorites did before him – and because he has led Yehuda to sin with his idols. (II *Melakhim* 21:10-11)

The Lord spoke to Menashe and his people, but they would not listen. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 33:10)

The rest of Menashe’s history, his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the Lord, God of Israel, are in the chronicles of the kings of Israel. His prayer and God’s response to it, all his sins and how he broke faith, and the places where he built high shrines and set up sacred trees and idols, before he humbled himself, are recorded in the chronicles of My seers. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 33:18-19)

These prophets were not associated with the name of Menashe, nor is it mentioned that they prophesied in his time, because "he was not fit," as stated by the author of *Seder Olam* (chapter 20). Prophets were associated with the names of other kings who were not fit, such as Achaz and Yehoyakim, but Menashe apparently was exceedingly evil and even killed Yeshayahu, his maternal grandfather, and perhaps other prophets as well; therefore, his name was not associated with any of the prophets.

Comparing the following two verses also provides a Scriptural source that Menashe killed prophets:

And what is more, Menashe shed much innocent blood (*dam naki*). (II *Melakhim* 2:21)

But know well that if you kill me, you will have brought the blood of an innocent man (*dam naki*)upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants. For, truthfully, the Lord did send me to you to speak all these words to you. (*Yirmeyahu* 26:15)

According to the straightforward understanding, the innocent blood spilled by Menashe is the blood of prophets, as was said in relation to the attempt to kill Yirmeyahu.

In my opinion,[[4]](#footnote-4) the first part of the book of *Yeshayahu* was said in the days of Uziya, Yotam, Achaz, and Chizkiyahu, while the last chapter in this part, chapter 39, was said after Chizkiyahu's illness in the days of Sancheriv's siege. The second part of the book was said (primarily) in the days of Menashe, and this fact changed the nature of this part of the book.

Can we find a clear connection between the second part of the book and the days of Menashe? It may be possible, and for this purpose, let us examine the text:

The righteous man is gone and none take it to heart; all good people are gathered up, with none to understand: it is this evil that causes the righteous to be gathered up. Yet peace will come; they lie still in their resting place, those who walked upright. Now draw close, you children of sorcery, sons of a philanderer and an adulterous wife. To whom do you go for your delight; to whom do you open wide your mouth and make your mocking tongue long? Are you not children of sin, the offspring of lies, inflamed with the false gods under every leafy tree, slaughtering children in rivers and under the crags of the rocks. You took your share amid the riverbeds’ smooth stones; they are your destiny; to them as well you poured out offerings, brought sacrifices. Am I to be comforted for that? Upon the high and lofty mountains you laid down your bed; there too you went up to make your offerings. Behind the door, the doorpost, you mounted your keepsakes, for you are uncovered and gone from Me; you made your bed broad, forged your covenant with them; you have loved to lie with them, loved every hand you saw. Daubed in oils, you paid your court to kings; how great your perfumery is; you sent your messengers out afar and lowered yourself as deep as Sheol. (*Yeshayahu* 57:1-9)

Perhaps the "righteous man" here is Yeshayahu, who was killed by Menashe, and his death (the account of which was written by his disciples, like the description of Yehoshua's death in chapter 24 of his book) portends evil for the people. The prophecy then refers to some of the most serious instances of the sins of idol worship and bloodshed found in the Prophets, including the slaughter of children to strange gods on the high mountains and under every leafy tree. These verses do not fit in well with the theories about a prophet living in Babylon during the days of the return to Zion and discussing consolation and redemption, but they are very well suited to the evil days of Menashe.

The same is true about the following verses:

It is your sins that separated you from your God, your iniquities that hid His face from you, Him from your hearing. For the palms of your hands are disgusting with blood, your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue frames violence. No one calls out in integrity; none come honestly to be judged; they trust in emptiness, speak hollow words, pregnant with treachery, breeding sin. They hatch out adders’ eggs and weave spiders’ webs. Anyone eating those eggs will die; kicked apart, they will hatch out vipers. Those webs will not make them a garment, nor will their actions hide them. Their actions are acts of wickedness, and violence is in their hands. Their feet race toward evil; they rush to spill innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of wickedness, with violent destruction strewn along their road. (59:2-7)

I spread My hands out all the day to a people that turned away – walking the path of no good after their wandering thoughts. The people anger Me, always there before Me sacrificing in gardens, burning incense on the slabs, sitting among the graves and passing the nights in caverns, eating the meat of pigs and filling their bowls with a broth of foulness, saying: Stand with your own kind; do not come near me; I am holier than you – these people are smoke in My nostrils from fire burning all the day. Behold, it is written before Me: I shall not be silent until I have repaid, thrust everything back into their arms, your iniquities with those of your parents; so says the Lord. They who burned incense on the hills and blasphemed Me from the mountaintops – I have measured their payment out from the first into their arms… While you who forsake the Lord, forgetting My holy mountain while laying a table for Gad, pouring lavish libations to Meni – I have marked you out for the sword; you will all bow to the slaughter. For I have called out to you, and you did not answer; I spoke, but you were not listening; you did what was evil in My sight and chose what I never desired. (65:2-12)

These are isolated prophecies, but they have weight and cannot be ignored.[[5]](#footnote-5) They are particularly suitable for the days of Menashe!

**The Difference Between Prophecy in the Public Square and Underground Prophecy**

From this, we can infer about all the prophecies of redemption in the second part of the book: they are distant visions dealing with the revival that will come after the days of Menashe, in the days of Yoshiyahu, and perhaps only after the destruction of the Temple and the return to Zion. These are prophecies for the future that are recorded in books – not prophecies for the here and now that are delivered in public squares, like those delivered by Yeshayahu in the days of the earlier kings. The role of the prophecies delivered in public squares was to influence the kings and the people in the here and now, and in fact they had a weighty influence on life and on the presence of God's word in it.

We find a similar shift at a certain point in the days of Achaz, who despised the prophecies of Yeshayahu (though he did not persecute him to death). Yeshayahu fell silent then for decades and did not appear in public:

Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching in My students. I will wait for the Lord, who hides His face from Yaakov; I will hope for Him. Here am I, and all the children the Lord gave me as messages and as signs to Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who rests upon Mount Zion. (8:16-18)

The prophet binds up the testimony, the prophecy; he seals the teaching in his students, and hands over the sign to his children. He closes himself up in the *beit midrash* (as did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai on the eve of the destruction of the Second Temple, while his townspeople failed to heed him and shed blood in every corner), and cultivates underground his most important student, Chizkiyahu – who, immediately after ascending to the throne, will conduct a religious revolution and thereby save Jerusalem.

Menashe's rein lasted longer than that of Achaz and was in a later period. It is highly doubtful that Yeshayahu merited to see his successor, Yoshiyahu, as a child, and to educate him in preparation for the religious revolution he organized – but it is possible that his disciples did in fact do so.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Prophecies delivered in a closed *beit midrash* or underground are by their very nature different in style from prophecies proclaimed in public squares, in the same way that an academic or Torah article differs in style from a daily newspaper. This is the source of the stylistic differences between the different parts of the book of *Yeshayahu*.

If this is correct, and many of the fifteen *haftarot* read from the second part of the book of *Yeshayahu* are from the time of Menashe, this will have a significant effect on their interpretation. We will see this already in the next three *haftarot –* for *Parashot Bereishit, Noach,* and *Lekh-Lekha*, which are taken from the second part of the book.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all references are to the book of *Yeshayahu.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Y. Kaufmann, among the great Biblical scholars who wrote about the book of *Yeshayahu*, mentioned Margaliot's arguments but dismissed her convincing claims with trifles (*Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit*, Jerusalem 1956, vol. V [called vol. IV, book I], p. 51). He himself followed the view of the scholars (most of whom are not Jewish) who divided the book of *Yeshayahu* into two. Many of them even divided "Isaiah II," as they called it, into several prophets; there is no end to the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, consider the relationship beween Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk's book on the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, *Or Same'ach*, and his biblical commentary, *Meshekh Chochma*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many years ago, I heard this argument summed up in one sentence from Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, and I have tried to expand upon it and understand all of the aforementioned prophecies based on it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Unless we turn, as do some academic scholars, to the theory of many prophets and individual prophecies from different periods interwoven in the book of *Yeshayahu* – which, in my opinion, is like erasing the entire book. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I tend to associate the main points of Yeshayahu's prophecy in the second part of the book with the expected revival in the days of Yoshiyahu, and not to push them off to the days of the return to Zion after the destruction of the Temple. In my opinion, the destruction of the Temple was not decreed until the end of Yirmeyahu's days, and there was no point in talking about the return to Zion in the days preceding the decree of destruction. Elsewhere (*Megadim* 14), I have argued that the "Koresh" who is mentioned in *Yeshayahu* is Xsaya-rsa (commonly known by the Greek form of his name, Xerxes), king of the Achaemenid empire, who was the most important political factor in eradicating the rule of Assyria – a rule that led to all the evils of Menashe and Amon, and that created the external background that made Yoshiyahu's religious revolution possible. Only after Yoshiyahu's revolution hit an obstacle was Yeshayahu's prophecy of deliverance pushed off to Koresh of the days of the return to Zion.

Verses like "Our holy house, our glory, where our ancestors sang Your praise, has become a great conflagration; and all we hold dear has become ruin" (64:10) can also be understood as referring to the situation in the days of Menashe. The Temple was closed and neglected for decades until its major renovation in the days of Yoshiyahu (II *Melakhim* 22), and it is possible that parts of it caught fire back in the days of Menashe. Jerusalem and the surrounding cities could also have been in ruin because of the Assyrian rule, which imposed a heavy burden on Yehuda in the days of Menashe. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)