YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**Understanding the haftarot**

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**Shiur #03: Bereishit - The Promise of Redemption**

So says God, the Lord, who created the skies, who stretched them across and set down the land and all her children, who gave breath to the people upon her and spirit to those who walk on her. I, the Lord, call you forth in victory, and I will hold your hand; I shall form you and make you a covenant people, make you a light unto nations, to open blinded eyes, to bring prisoners out of captivity, and those who dwell in darkness from their jail. I am the Lord; this is My name, and I share not My glory with others, My praise with idols. What I said at the beginning: see, it has come, and I tell you now what will be afresh before it pushes through the earth; you will hear it first from Me. Sing out to the Lord a new song, His praise from the ends of the earth, You who go to sea, and all that fill it, distant coastlands and you who live there. Desert and its towns, raise your voices, Kedarites in their scattered camps; those who dwell in the rocks must sing out joy from the mountaintops, shout and give the Lord His glory; His praise will be spoken in the distant coastlands. The Lord sets out like a hero, rousing His passion like a man of war; He gives the war cry, bellows the war cry, overthrows His enemies. Always I held still and was silent, held back – I will bellow out like one giving birth, breathing out, breathing in all together. I will vanquish hills and mountains and will dry up all their green; I will turn the rivers into islands and desiccate the lakes. I will lead the blind along a way they know not; on paths unknown I shall guide them; I shall turn darkness to light before them, the treacherous road to a plain; these things I will perform, and will not fail. Those who trust in idols will step back ashamed, those who say to molded statuary, “You – you are our gods.” All you deaf ones – listen, and you who are blind – now see. Who is blind if not My servant, who deaf like the messenger I send? Who could be blind like the devoted one, blind like the Lord’s servant? Many things seen, but you remember not; with open ears, you hear nothing. Yet the Lord has desired that His righteousness be known to raise aloft His teachings, to confer majesty. It is a plundered, torn-apart people, who are trapped away in pits, hidden in prison; they are given over to plunder with none to save them, to looters with none to cry, “Give back!” Who among you will listen to this, will hear it and heed for the future (*le-achor*)? Who was it who gave Yaakov up for looting, Israel for plunder – was it not the Lord, against whom we sinned? They cared not to follow in His ways and did not heed His teaching. He poured out the fire of His rage against them, His terrible warfare, and flames raged all around them, yet they did not know; they burned but still they took it not to heart.

And now, Yaakov, so says the Lord, your Creator, the One who formed you, Israel: Do not fear. I redeem you; I name you; you are Mine. Though you pass through waters – I am with you – through rivers – they will not wash you away. Though you walk right through the fire – you will not be burned, and no flame will take hold of you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your rescuer. I have paid Egypt as your ransom, Kush and Seva in your place. Because you are valued in My eyes, you are honored – I love you enough to give up other men for you, whole nations in your place. Do not fear, for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east, will gather you back from the west. To the north I will say, “Give over”; to the south, “Imprison no more.” Bring My sons from far away, My daughters back from the ends of the earth – all the people I called by My name, created for My glory; I formed them, I made them. He brought out a people – blind though they have eyes, deaf though they have ears. Were all the nations to gather, the peoples to come into session, who of them could tell of this? Who could speak of this before? Let them bring their witnesses to vindicate them, so that hearers may say, “This is truth.” You are My witnesses, so says the Lord, My servants whom I chose, so that you should know, and trust in Me and understand that I am He – before Me, no god was made, and after Me – no other. (*Yeshayahu* 42:5-43:10)

**I. The Connection Between the *Parasha* and the *Haftara***

The prophecy opens with the act of creation and the fact of God being the Creator of heaven and earth. It continues with the statement that God created everything for His glory (43:7), and it concludes with the declaration that God is the first and He is the last. Thus, the beginning and the end of the *haftara* are clearly connected to our *parasha*, which also deals with the creation of the world. In the middle, however, the *haftara* deals primarily with the deliverance of the people of Israel from their imprisonment among the nations and with their long journey back to their land.

What is the connection between the creation of the world and the redemption of Israel? The simple explanation is that the creation of the world is mentioned as a reason for believing in God's ability to redeem Israel, for He who created everything can run the world as He desires and redeem His people who are abandoned in exile. In the Torah, however, it is the exodus from Egypt, not the creation of the world, that is singled out as the basis for belief in God's ability and desire to redeem His people, and it is the covenant made between God and Israel at the time of the exodus that serves as the foundation for the promise of redemption:

Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them nor despise them and annihilate them, will not break My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God. I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God; I am the Lord. (*Vayikra* 26:44-45)

So too in the book of *Devarim*,Moshe uses the memory of the exodus as the basis for trusting that God will one day redeem the outcasts of His people from the ends of the earth:

You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, all his officials, and all of his land. Your own eyes saw the great trials, the signs, and the great wonders…

When all these things have come upon you, the blessings and the curses I have set before you, and you – amidst all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you – take them to heart, and return, you and your children, to the Lord your God, obeying Him with all your heart and all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the Lord your God will bring your captives back and show you compassion. He will bring you back together from all the nations among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. If you should be expelled to the furthest of horizons, even from there the Lord your God will gather you; from there He will take you back. The Lord your God will bring you into the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will possess it. He will make you yet more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors were. (*Devarim* 29:1-30:5)

The story of the exodus is also used to encourage the people in anticipation of war with the peoples of Canaan:

You might say to yourself, "These nations are more numerous than I. How can I possibly dispossess them?" Do not be afraid of them. Remember well what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. Your own eyes saw the great trials, the signs and wonders, the mighty hand and the arm stretched forth, with which the Lord your God brought you out. The Lord your God will do the same to all the peoples you fear. (*Devarim* 7:17-19)

In other words, when you despair of being able to dispossess the Canaanite nations, remember God's mighty deeds at the time of the exodus, for He will perform similar deeds on your behalf during the conquest of the land.

The exodus from Egypt is indeed connected to redemption, and it demonstrates God's mighty deeds in His struggle with the nations who enslave Israel and harm them. The creation of the world seems less connected to redemption, for it does not express God's special relationship with Israel or His desire to redeem them.

*Chazal* tried to bridge this gap with the following midrashic interpretation:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rabbi Berakhya said: Heaven and earth were created only by virtue of Israel, as it is written: "In the beginning [*Be-reishit*, which can also be understood as ‘by virtue of *reishit*’], God created" (*Bereishit* 1:1). And *reishit* means Israel, as it is stated: "Israel is a treasure to the Lord, the beginning [*reishit*] of His harvest" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:3). (*Vayikra Rabba Bechukotai* 36)

Rabbi Berakhya explained that the creation of heaven and earth is indeed connected to the special relationship between God and the people of Israel, and presumably also to their redemption – and were it not for this special relationship, God would not have created the world.

That which was not stated explicitly in the Torah, that the creation of the world attests to God's ability and desire to redeem His people, was stated explicitly by the prophets in several places:

He makes the earth by His power, establishes the world by His wisdom, and stretches out the heavens by His understanding. As He makes His voice heard, there is rumbling water in the heavens, and He raises clouds from the end of the earth. He makes lightning bolts with the rain and brings out wind from His storehouses… Not like these is the portion of Yaakov, for He formed all things. Israel is the tribe He possesses. Lord of Hosts is His name. (*Yirmeyahu* 10:12-16)

Yeshayahualso highlights the connection between the creation of the world and the redemption of Israel:

Raise your eyes skyward and see: Who created all these? Who summons their legions by number and calls each man by name? In His great might, His adamantine strength, not one of them is lost. Why do you say, Yaakov; Israel, why declare, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my God overlooks my claim"? Do you not know this; have you not heard? The Lord is God eternal, Creator of all horizons; He does not weary, does not tire; no one can plumb His understanding… but those who hope for the Lord – their strength will be renewed; they will rise on their wings like eagles, will run and never grow weary, will walk on and never grow tired. (40:26-31)

Observation of the stars, which are part of the created world, should lead to the knowledge that Israel’s path, and their judgment, are not hidden from God, and that He will eventually strengthen those who wait for Him on their path to the redemption.

How are we to understand the difference between the Torah, which relates redemption to the exodus from Egypt, and the prophets, who connect redemption to the creation of the world?

It is possible that the Torah’s approach is an ideal, as it makes the obvious connection between the redemption from Egypt and the redemption of Israel that is possible in every generation. The prophets, however, saw God deliver Israel into the hands of the nations, creating situations reminiscent of the bondage in Egypt; they could not use the image of the exodus from Egypt as a model for redemption because, in a sense, God had already cancelled the force of the exodus with the new servitude.

An example of this problem can be found in the following *midrash*:

"Men from the elders of Israel came and sat before me" (*Yechezkel* 20:1). They said to him: Yechezkel, if a slave was sold by his master, does he not leave his domain? He answered: Yes. They said to him: Since God has sold us to the nations of the world, we have left His domain. (*Sifrei Shelach* 115)

The prophets sought to establish God's ability to redeem Israel on a foundation that exists forever, even when God has sold His people to the nations and the exodus from Egypt has lost some of its force. They found what they were looking for in the creation of the world; perhaps this is what Yeshayahu wants to tell us in our *haftara.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

**II. The Road to Redemption**

In our *haftara*, Yeshayahu refers to God's might that is demonstrated when He brings Israel out from under the hand of an oppressor:

The Lord sets out like a hero, rousing His passion like a man of war; He gives the war cry, bellows the war cry, overthrows His enemies. (42:13)

But he relates primarily to the miracles performed on the long journey from foreign land to the land of redemption:

I will vanquish hills and mountains and will dry up all their green; I will turn the rivers into islands and desiccate the lakes. I will lead the blind along a way they know not; on paths unknown I shall guide them; I shall turn darkness to light before them, the treacherous road to a plain; these things I will perform, and will not fail. (42:15-16)

Though you pass through waters – I am with you – through rivers – they will not wash you away. Though you walk right through the fire – you will not be burned, and no flame will take hold of you. (43:2)

The road to the land of redemption resembles a desert in the eyes of those who are not familiar with it (the "blind"). This is a road along which there are hindrances like the Sea of Suf and the Jordan River, a road with high mountains and other obstacles ("treacherous roads"). The Torah also relates, in great detail, not only to the miracles of the battle with Egypt but also to the miracles of travel in the wilderness:

Who led you through the vast and terrifying wilderness, an arid wasteland with venomous snakes and scorpions, who brought forth water from flint rock for you, and fed you manna in the wilderness, something your ancestors did not know. (*Devarim* 8:15-16)

To commemorate the miracles associated with walking through the wilderness, the Torah established the festival of Sukkot. Similarly, in the account of the return to Zion (*Ezra* 7), weight is given to miracles performed along the way for the returnees – who had brought with them much silver and gold, thus inviting attacks by highwaymen.

**III. The Prophet – Messenger of God**

It is necessary to pay attention as well to the importance of the prophet's mission and his credibility (which is also dealt with in other prophecies in *Yeshayahu*). We will begin this discussion with the verses immediately preceding our *haftara*:

Bring forth your claim, so says the Lord; present your case, says Yaakov’s King. Let them lay it out and tell us what is yet to be. The long-gone past – what happened then? Tell. Let us listen closely and know their future also; let us hear what is to come. Tell over the signs (*hagidu ha-otiyot le-achor*) so that we know that you are gods, that you bring good and harm; let us tell and confront one another… I look and there is no man, no counselor among all these to question, that he might answer; behold, all of them are worthless, nothing all their deeds, cold wind and emptiness their molten images.

My servant, I uphold him; the one I chose, I wanted. I have placed My spirit over him to draw justice out to nations; he will not shout nor raise his voice; in the street he will not be heard; not one crushed reed will break beneath him, no dimming wick be quelled – he will open out judgment to truth, never himself dimmed or crushed until he has brought the world justice, and all the distant coastlands quake before his teaching. (*Yeshayahu* 41:21-42:4)

The prophet appeals in the name of God to those who have claims against Him and wish to set Him aside. He calls upon them to say what will happen in the future ("let us hear what is to come"; "tell over the signs"[[3]](#footnote-3)), as the prophet does, and sees that there is nobody among them who can contend with him. God supports His servant (in my opinion, the prophet), who draws out the judgment of the nations from God and reveals it to the public. He then continues to the beginning of our *haftara* – to open the eyes that are blind to the approaching light of redemption and to what it demands of the people:

I, the Lord, call you forth in victory, and I will hold your hand; I shall form you and make you a covenant people, make you a light unto nations, to open blinded eyes, to bring prisoners out of captivity, and those who dwell in darkness from their jail. (*Yeshayahu* 42:6-7)

He goes on to prove the reliability of the prophet – the correctness of his words in the past and his ability to tell the future before it happens:

What I said at the beginning: see, it has come, and I tell you now what will be afresh before it pushes through the earth; you will hear it first from Me. (42:9)

The main polemic with those who challenge the prophet is evident further on in the *haftara*. The prophet calls upon the people to see God's hand in the impending deliverance: "All you deaf ones – listen, and you who are blind – now see" (42:18), but those who hear him answer him defiantly, as if in the name of God:

Who is blind if not My servant, who deaf like the messenger I send? Who could be blind like him – who is devoted, blind like this, the Lord’s servant? (42:19)

 In other words, it is the prophet who is blind and deaf. He does not really know the word of God.

What is the nature of this challenge to the words of the prophet and of the doubt raised against believing him?

In the previous *shiur*, which provided a general introduction to the *haftarot* taken from the second part of the book of *Yeshayahu*, I argued that these prophecies are from the days of Menashe – who ultimately killed Yeshayahu. It seems that the following *midrash* expresses a great disappointment in the prophecies of Yeshayahu:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint ̣Ḥizkiyahu as the Messiah, and Sanḥeriv as Gog and Magog; whereupon the attribute of Justice said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe… will You appoint ̣Ḥizkiyahu as Messiah, who did not sing before You in spite of all these miracles which You wrought for him? (*Sanhedrin* 94a)

Indeed, the first part of the book of *Yeshayahu* contains many prophecies (such as *Yeshayahu* 11-12) that foretell the coming of the Messiah following the salvation of Jerusalem from the siege of Sanḥeriv, and that see Ḥizkiyahu fulfilling this role. From this part of the book, it appears that Sanḥeriv's three-year siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of dozens of cities in the kingdom of Yehuda, following the destruction of the kingdom of Shomron, will prove to be the last calamity before the coming of the final redemption. But in the disappointing reality, less than a generation after the salvation of Jerusalem, in the days of Esar-Ḥadon and Ashurbanipal (the Assyrian kings who came after Sanḥeriv) the Assyrians retook control of the land. They treated the kingdom of Yehuda harshly and increased the burden on it in the days of Menashe, and the disappointment with Yeshayahu's prophecies of redemption was unbearable.[[4]](#footnote-4) This severe disappointment resulted in three serious developments:

1. Menashe and his contemporaries abandoned God and no longer wanted to follow His ways.
2. As mentioned, Menashe condemned Yeshayahu as a false prophet and killed him.
3. The entire nation doubted the words of the prophet and said to him, as if in the name of God: "Who is blind if not My servant, who deaf like the messenger I send?"

God continues to see the prophet Yeshayahu as His messenger to herald the deliverance, even though the deliverance he had prophesied about in the days of Ḥizkiyahu did not materialize. If there was an explicit prophecy from God, how could it fail to happen? The only possible answer is that free choice and the recompense for it are stronger than the obligation for the prophecy to come true.

This conclusion also emerges from our *haftara*, and the prophet makes it clear that Israel's suffering at the hands of their oppressors, as they are looted and plundered, stems from their sins and from the fact that they did not follow the path of God and did not obey His Torah:

It is a plundered, torn-apart people, who are trapped away in pits, hidden in prison; they are given over to plunder with none to save them, to looters with none to cry, “Give back!” Who among you will listen to this, will hear it and heed for the future? Who was it who gave Yaakov up for looting, Israel for plunder – was it not the Lord, against whom we sinned? They cared not to follow in His ways and did not heed His teaching. He poured out the fire of His rage against them, His terrible warfare, and flames raged all around them, yet they did not know; they burned but still they took it not to heart. (42:22-25)

**IV. The Act of Creation and the Mission of Prophecy**

Let us return to the first verses of the *haftara*:

So says God, the Lord, who created the skies, who stretched them across and set down the land and all her children, who gave breath to the people upon her and spirit to those who walk on her. I, the Lord, call you forth in victory, and I will hold your hand; I shall form you and make you a covenant people, make you a light unto nations, to open blinded eyes, to bring prisoners out of captivity, and those who dwell in darkness from their jail. (42:5-7)

It may be explained, as suggested above, that the prophet attaches the verses of creation to Israel’s deliverance "from their jail," but it is also possible that the prophet is connecting the verses of creation to his own appointment as a prophet and messenger of God. This would make a different statement. What is the connection between the creation of the world and the appointment of the prophet to "open blinded eyes"?

In the story of creation as it is described in chapter 1 of *Parashat Bereishit,* it is difficult to find any connection to the prophet's mission. This creation sees man as the crown of creation, the one who was created in the image of God and whose role is to subdue and rule over all of creation.

So let us look at the story of creation as it is described in detail in chapter 2, in the account of the Garden of Eden. In this chapter, man was not created as the crown of creation, but as having a role and a mission. He does not rule over the created world, but is meant to "work it and safeguard it." He is God's agent to repair creation and make it worthy of the resting of God's name:

No shrub of the field yet grew on earth, and no plant had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not yet brought rain upon the earth, and there was no one to work the land… Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the land and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being… The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and safeguard it. And the Lord God commanded the man… (*Bereishit* 2:5-16)

In future generations, it is the prophet who fulfils the task of preparing the ground for the resting of the *Shekhina*. He does this in anticipation of the redemption of Israel, in the difficult generation when they are subject to plunder and looting, for this is what the prophet himself said at the beginning of his journey:

I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “I am here. Send me.” (*Yeshayahu* 6:8)

In our *haftara* as well, the prophet mentions God as the Creator of the world, who sends the prophet on his mission, the redemption of Israel, for the purpose of resting the *Shekhina* anew in Jerusalem, as it had rested in the Garden of Eden as long as man fulfilled the mission for which he had been placed there.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In my opinion, this *midrash* can be anchored in the plain sense of the text, but this is not the forum to do so. See my book, *Ki Karov Eilekha – Bereishit* (Israel 2014), pp. 20-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A parallel dispute exists between the Rambam and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi*.* The Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 1) bases the principles of belief in God on the creation and governance of the world, whereas the exodus from Egypt is not included in his 13 principles of faith. In contrast, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (*Kuzari*, part I) sees the the foundations of belief as based on the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah that followed it; in his opinion, these events are the foundation for believing in God as the Creator of the world.

Our relationship to God as Creator sees God as "our Father," whereas our relationship to God as He who brought us out of Egypt sees Him as "our King," for when He redeemed us from the house of bondage, He acquired us to serve Him instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "*Hagidu ha-otiyot le-aḥor*" – "*Le-aḥor*" means in the future, as opposed to "*le-fanim be-Yisrael*" (I *Shmuel* 9:9), which means in the past. In Modern Hebrew, the forms are reversed – one who looks forward looks into the future, whereas one who looks backward contemplates the past. We can see the future and know where we are going, so to speak, whereas the past is less important. It seems that we should return to the Hebrew of the prophets, to the original Hebrew, and to the understanding that we are going to the future that is behind us – we do not know what the future holds, just as we cannot see what is behind us. Sometimes we can draw conclusions about the future from a deep examination of the past, but even these are uncertain. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Due to the limitations of space, we will not discuss here the reasons (besides Ḥizkiyahu's failure to recite a song to God) for which the redemption was missed after a heavy price had been paid for it during the years of the siege. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)