YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT NOACH**

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Dedicated in memory of

Rabbi Jack Sable *z”l* and Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*,   
by Debbie and David Sable

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**Shiur #04: Covenant and Oath**

Barren woman, never a mother, rejoice; break out in joyful song though you have not given birth, for the children of the forsaken woman will outnumber those of the wife; so says the Lord. Broaden the site of your tent; stretch out your canvas home; do not hold back; lengthen your tent cords and strengthen its pegs: you shall overflow rightward and left, your children possessing nations, and filling forsaken towns with life. Do not fear – you will not be shamed; fear not, for none can disgrace you. You will forget your youthful abjection; the debasement of your widowhood you will call no more to mind; for your husband, He who made you – the Lord of Hosts is His name, and your redeemer, Israel’s Holy One – will be named God of all the world. For as a woman abandoned, of sorrowful spirit, the Lord has called to you: Can the young bride ever be rejected? says your God; for one small moment I left you; with infinite care I will gather you back; in the flash of My fury I hid My face from you for just a moment, and in everlasting love I will care for you now. So speaks the Lord, your redeemer. For these are the waters of Noach to Me, and I swore that the waters of Noach would never sweep again over the earth. And so did I swear no more to be furious with you, no more to rebuke you. For mountains may move, hills may crumble away; but My love for you will not be moved, nor My pact of peace crumble. So speaks the Lord, who cares for you. Oppressed and storm-swept, never comforted – behold: I am paving your ground with garnet, lapis lazuli your foundations. I am fitting your windows with rubies, your gates with glowing granite, marking your borders with stones men covet. All your children will be students of the Lord, and great will be your children’s peace. On righteousness will you be founded; stay far from oppression – you will not fear, and terror will never come near you. No strife can arise without My assent; who among you fears one who could come upon you? For I create the craftsman who blows the charcoal fire and brings forth the tools of his trade; I create also the destroyer to do harm. No weapon made to harm you can prevail; any tongue that calls you into judgment, you will prove its fault. This is the birthright of the Lord’s servants, for their innocence is Mine – so says the Lord. You who are thirsty, all – come to water; you who have no silver – come, take food and eat; come and take food without silver, wine and milk without cost, for why should you weigh out your silver for no bread, your labor bringing you no fullness? Listen – listen to Me: let goodness nourish you, and let your souls delight in plenty. Turn your ear to Me and come; listen, that your souls may live; let Me forge an everlasting covenant with you – like David’s faithful promises, for I make him a witness to nations, a leader, a ruler of nations; for you shall call out, call, to a people you know not, and a people who know you not will come running out to you for the sake of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your glory. (*Yeshayahu* 54:1 – 55:5)

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

The verse that links the *haftara* to the *parasha* is the verse that mentions “the waters of Noacḥ” (54:9), i.e., the waters of the flood. The prophet declares that just as God promised in the covenant of the rainbow that flood waters would never again destroy the world, so too He promises the people of Israel that He will cancel His anger and rebuke.

This prophecy goes beyond the verses in our *parasha* in that it ascribes the force of an oath to God's promise regarding the waters of Noah, whereas the Torah mentions only a covenant. An oath has greater force than a covenant, just as the oath that God swore to Avraham at the *Akeida* had greater force than the covenants that preceded it (the covenant of the pieces and the covenant of circumcision):

And He said, “By My own Self I swear, says the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only one, I will bless you greatly and make your descendants as many as the stars of the heavens, as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess their enemies’ gate." (*Bereishit* 22:16-17).

Is Yeshayahu revealing here an oath that the Torah concealed, or does this oath also appear in the text of the Torah? There are several possible ways to see it in the Torah's verses:[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The Torah gives an unusual description of God’s decision to make this promise:

The Lord smelled the fragrant aroma and said in His heart, “Never again will I curse the land because of man; the inclination of the human heart is evil from its youth. And never again will I destroy all life as I have done. As long as earth and time endure – sowing time and harvest, cold and heat, summer, winter, day, and night will not cease.” (*Bereishit* 8:21-22)

The expression "the Lord said in His heart" is both unusual and difficult. It cannot indicate a covenant, for it was not said to Noach and his sons. It is possible that this phrase, as perhaps indicated by the prophet, indicates an oath not to repeat the flood, the cessation of the laws of nature, or the smiting of the earth and every living thing.

According to the plain understanding of the text, this expression in the *parasha* seems to parallel what was stated before the flood and in anticipation of it:

Then the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was touched with sorrow. The Lord said, "I will erase My creation, humankind, from the face of the land – man, even animals and creeping things, even birds of the heavens – for I regret having made them." (*Bereishit* 6:6-7)

2. Even though the Torah called the rainbow a "covenant," a covenant generally includes something that binds both parties, and is conditional on its reciprocity. In God's main covenants with us, such as the covenant at Mount Sinai, God promised us "then you will live long in the land," but demanded of us to keep His commandments. The covenant of the rainbow, despite its stylistic similarity to the covenant of circumcision,[[2]](#footnote-2) is not a mutual covenant[[3]](#footnote-3) (perhaps apart from the demand made of man to procreate and thus sustain the world); therefore, it has instead the force of an oath, which is unilateral and cannot be broken – more like God's oath following the *Akeida*. It is possible that in our *haftara* as well, the prophet emphasizes that God’s anger and rebuke will not return even after Israel's wrongdoing, and that God will find other ways to bring the people of Israel to repair their sins.

3. The prophet Yecḥezkel explains the significance of the appearance of a rainbow, through which God promised not to bring another flood:

It was like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day; the radiance around it had that appearance. This was the appearance of the form of the glory of the Lord. (*Yecḥezkel* 1:28)

We may not understand this verse in its full depth, but it suggests that the rainbow is, as it were, God's "personal signature" on His word regarding the flood. This special signature is like a mention of His name on His promise, and is treated like an oath in His name. The cloud, in which God's glory is seen in the rainbow, adds force to this oath.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The Covenants of the Patriarchs and of Sinai, and God’s Oath After the Flood**

At a time of Divine anger, when God wanted to destroy Israel due to the sin of the golden calf, Moshe mentioned God's oath to the Patriarchs – i.e., the oath He took at the *Akeida* (no other oath was given to the Patriarchs) – which we too are accustomed to mention in our supplications to God, and not God's oath to Noach. Why does Yeshayahu specifically mention "the waters of Noach," and not follow Moshe’s example?

Perhaps the prophet sees the sins of Menashe and his people, which in my opinion serves as the backdrop of this prophecy,[[5]](#footnote-5) as too serious for even the oath of the *Akeida* to cover up for them. Therefore, he instead references the sins of the generation of the flood, which were even more serious than the sins of Menashe, and God's oath in their regard that He would never again destroy the world. Only in this way will Yeshayahu’s promise – that God will have mercy on Israel despite their sins, though they have exceeded virtually every limit – have a hold on reality.

If we follow the conventional assumption, that Yeshayahu is addressing what will happen after the destruction of the Temple in this prophecy, and not relating to the days of Menashe, we can suggest that he understood that the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple created a completely new reality in the history of Israel. In this reality, the covenant God made with the Patriarchs and with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai has (temporarily) collapsed, and it is necessary to return to the ancient covenant, made in the wake of the flood, in order to bring about the renewed blossoming of the people of Israel.

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Even if there will not be a flood of mass destruction, a terrible disaster may still befall the world because of its sin, such as perhaps a severe earthquake. The prophet also mentions this possibility, and makes it clear that God's covenant with His people and His mercy upon them are stronger even than this calamity, stronger than mountains and hills being uprooted from their place:

For mountains may move, hills may crumble away; but My love for you will not be moved, nor My pact of peace crumble. So speaks the Lord, who cares for you. (*Yeshayahu* 54:10)

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We cannot ignore the unusual designation given by the prophet to the flood – "the waters of Noach." The *Zohar* relates to this term:

Because the Holy One, blessed be He, had told him that he and his children would be saved by the ark, Noach did not plea for mercy on behalf of the world, and they all perished. Because Noah did not plea for them, the flood waters are named after him, as it is written: "For these are the waters of Noach to Me, and I swore that the waters of Noach would never sweep again over the earth." (*Zohar* *Noach* 67b)

The *Zohar* criticizes Noach because he failed to pray on behalf of the wicked people of his generation, unlike Avraham who prayed for Sodom and Moshe who prayed for those who sinned with the golden calf. Therefore, the flood is ascribed to him – "the waters of Noach."

**II. The Abandoned Woman**

The prophet likens the people of Israel to God's "wife," even though this image is incomprehensible according to our understanding of God. Other prophets also did this, perhaps following the precedent of *Shir Ha-shirim.* It may be noted that *Chazal* generally described the relationship between God and His people as that between a father and son, usually a king and the king's son.

Why did *Chazal* veer from the path of the prophets? I wish to propose two possible answers:

1. The relationship between husband and wife has the potential to lead us in our imagination of our relationship with God to dangerous and inappropriate places. The prophets, in their sublime world, were less concerned about this. *Chazal*, in their more realistic world, often preferred to avoid the issue.

2. The marital relationship is liable to be interpreted as a conditional relationship. By its very nature, this relationship may terminate because of a serious quarrel or an act of infidelity. The father-son relationship, on the other hand, is characterized by unconditional love. Even if the son betrays his father or angers him beyond measure, the father will forever remain the son's father and will always strive to find him a path towards repair and repentance. *Chazal,* on the brink of a long exile from all that the prophets described, saw a need to replace the metaphor of a marital relationship with the father-son relationship, which can never be voided.

The prophet uses various images of a lonely woman to portray the people of Israel after the removal of the *Shekhina* from among them. They are described as a barren woman, who neither gave birth nor conceived, a shamed young girl (what we would call a single woman), a debased widow, a divorcee ("can the young bride ever be rejected"), and an *aguna* who was abandoned by her husband ("for as a woman abandoned"). All the richness of the description of her sadness is meant to highlight the great kindness that God will perform for her when He returns to her, at the time of her redemption. At that time, her many sons will come back and, as it were, be reborn.

**III. The Tent and the House**

The first part of the prophecy describes the new tent of the resurrected people of Israel: "Broaden the site of your tent; stretch out your canvas home; do not hold back; lengthen your tent cords, and strengthen its pegs" (54:2) – whereas in the second part, Israel lives in a magnificent and well-fortified palace:

Behold: I am paving your ground with garnet, lapis lazuli your foundations. I am fitting your windows with rubies, your gates with glowing granite, marking your borders with stones men covet. All your children will be students of the Lord, and great will be your children’s peace. (54:11-13)

These two parts of the prophecy remind us quite naturally of “the place that God will choose.” The Torah did not specify where this place would be, perhaps for the simple reason that there were two: the *Mishkan* in Shilo, which was a tent, and the Temple in Jerusalem, which was a strong, magnificent building. The prophetic concerns regarding the need to transition from a tent and tabernacle to a "house of cedars" are well described in the words of Natan the prophet to David (II *Shmuel* 7). The transition to a permanent building is conditioned on the kingdom of Israel also being a permanent monarchy.

The tent (the *Mishkan*) will be built by the woman (the people of Israel) alone, with her own strength.[[6]](#footnote-6) Who will build the magnificent house? *Chazal* explained this midrashically:

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: The disciples of the wise increase peace in the world, as it is stated: "All your children [*banayikh*]will be students of the Lord, and great will be your children’s peace." Read not *banayikh* [your children], but *bonayikh* [your builders]. (*Berakhot* 64a)

The sons – the sons of the people of Israel – are also the builders; they will build the house, with the lapis lazuli and other stones that men covet.

When will the transition from the tent to the house take place? This is hinted at later in the prophecy in our *haftara*:

Turn your ear to Me and come; listen, that your souls may live; let Me forge an everlasting covenant with you – like David’s faithful promises, for I make him a witness to nations, a leader, a ruler of nations. (55:2-4)

**IV. The Kingdom of the House of David**

As we mentioned, the transition from a tent to a house is connected to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty to its place. To the best of my understanding, this is how the verses are to be read:

The first stage does not depend on Israel's actions; it takes place entirely at the mercy of God, who returns to His abandoned wife – and she restores her tent, her dwelling.

The second stage, in which the oppressed and storm-swept woman moves from a tent to a magnificent building, relates to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty. It is conditioned on obeying God’s voice and moving towards it: "Turn your ear to Me and come." This might be why the kingdom of Israel was not established when Israel entered the land in the days of Yehoshua: God was still awaiting what is described here in the prophecy. When the people of Israel demanded a monarchy before its time, their demand was viewed with disfavour by God and by his prophet Shmuel. They had to exhaust the intermediate stage, in which the nation of Israel had entered the land and the *Mishkan*, a tent, was at the center of their lives. There was still no permanent kingdom in Israel, and the vision of "Turn your ear to Me and come; listen, that your souls may live" had not yet been fulfilled.

God made an eternal covenant with David, and then the road was paved toward the magnificent building described in our *haftara*, a description that is somewhat similar to the description of the construction of the Temple. This is the stage where God's promise to the people becomes eternal. Is there significance to the establishment of the kingdom of the House of David beyond God’s eternal covenant with it? It would appear from our *haftara* that there is:

For I make him a witness to nations, a leader, a ruler of nations. (55:4)

The early days of the kingdom of Israel turned the Jewish state into an empire under which nations were subordinated, whose king was "a leader, a ruler of nations."

The prophetic vision concerning the future of the people of Israel does not necessarily include ambitions of imperial expansion and the need to rule over many peoples, as we find among the Persians, the Romans, and many other peoples. However, other nations also live in the land promised in the covenant of the pieces, between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates – mainly members of Avraham's family: the descendants of Yishmael, the descendants of Ketura, Edom, Amon, and Moav. Without establishing positive relationships under the power of the people of Israel, Israel could not be secure in their land in the long run. David was "a ruler, a leader of nations," and thus he ensured the safety of Israel. This is also what the prophet aims for in our *haftara*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The best possibility of all is spelled out in the Gemara: "Rabbi Elazar said: 'No' is an oath; 'yes' is an oath. Granted, 'no' is an oath, as it is written: 'And the waters shall no more become a flood,' and it is written: 'For these are the waters of Noach to Me, and I swore.'… Rava said: But only if one said: 'No! No!' twice… for it is written: 'And all flesh shall not be cut off any more by the waters of the floods,' [and also:] 'and the waters shall no more become a flood'" (*Shevuot* 36a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, in the covenant of the rainbow, we find the expressions: "and God said," "this is the sign of the covenant," "between Me and you," "for all generations," "for a sign of the covenant between Me and the land," "My covenant that is between Me and you," and "this is the sign of the covenant that I established." These expressions parallel what is stated regarding the covenant of circumcision: "My covenant between Me and you," "My covenant with you," "I established my covenant between Me and you," "an everlasting covenant for their generations," "My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you.". [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is reason to reject this claim, if we assume that the covenant of the rainbow is connected to the *mitzvot* given to the sons of Noach that are mentioned in the *parasha* – especially the prohibition of bloodshed, the prohibition to eat "flesh with its lifeblood," and the prohibition to eat an organ of a living animal, as understood by *Chazal*. According to this, it is possible that the promise that God made not to strike the world again with a flood is subject to man's keeping the Noachide commandments. The prophet's wording, however, suggests that this was not his understanding. Furthermore, God's talking in His heart (mentioned earlier) indicates a unilateral and unconditional decision on the part of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For greater detail, see my book, *Ki Karov Eilekha – Bereishit* (Israel 2014), pp. 54-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *shiur* #2 for an introduction to the *haftaraot* from the book of *Yeshayahu*, where I argued that most of the prophecies in the second part of the book of *Yeshayahu* are from the time of Menashe son of Chizkiyahu. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should be mentioned that a "tent peg" and the mallet used to pound it into the ground also appear as a woman's tools in the account of Yael the wife of Ḥever (*Shoftim* 4:21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)