YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

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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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**Do Not Despair**

**Text of the *Haftara***[[1]](#footnote-1)

[Whom can you compare Me to –

 so speaks the Holy One –

 and find them equal?

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. (*Yeshayahu* 40:25-26)][[2]](#footnote-2)

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.

He gives the weary strength,

 the helpless, power: more and more.

Youths will tire, grow weary;

 young men will falter and fall,

but those who wait 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.

Hush before Me, coastlands

 and nations; renew your strength,

and then come forward, speak,

 draw close; let us come into judgment.

Who roused the one from the east

 and called victory to his feet?

Who herded nations before him,

 laid their kings low,

and made his swords numerous as dust,

 his bowshots like chaff in the wind?

He pursued them and came through in peace

 on paths that his feet never walked.

Who was it who acted and did this,

 who called forth generations long before?

I, the Lord, am the first,

 and I shall be,

 I, with the last who will be.

Coastlands witness this and fear,

 earth’s horizons witness, tremble,

 draw near, come.

Each man helps his fellow

 and tells his brother, “Be strong.”

“Strong,” says the wright to the goldsmith,

 the hammerman to him who beats.

He says of the glue, “This is good,”

 and firms it up with nails, never to fall.

And you, Israel, My servant,

 Yaakov whom I chose,

 children of Avraham who loved Me,

whom I lifted and brought from the ends of the earth,

 calling you forth from its furthest corners,

telling you: You are My servant;

 You have I chosen, and I will not reject you –

do not fear, for I am with you;

 do not be afraid: I am your God;

I strengthen you and help you,

 uphold you with My right hand of righteousness.

All who rage against you will

 be shamed, debased; become

like nothing, lost,

 all those who fight you.

Look for them then – you will not find them –

 the men with whom you are wrestling,

adversaries in war –

 like nothing, like no more.

For I am the Lord your God,

 holding your right hand,

telling you: Do not fear,

 for I am here: I help you.

Yaakov: worm,

 men of Israel,

 do not fear;

I will help you,

 so speaks the Lord,

the Holy One of Israel,

 your redeemer.

You shall see: I have made you

 a slotted threshing board,

 new and razor edged;

you will thresh mountains, turn them to powder,

 and hills into chaff.

As you winnow, the wind will lift them,

 and the storm will spread them far;

you will rejoice in the Lord and will,

 through the Holy One of Israel, be praised. (*Yeshayahu* 40:27-41:16)

[The oppressed, impoverished,

 beg for water – there is none –

their tongues are seared with thirst.

I am the Lord; I will answer them –

Israel’s God, I will not leave them. (41:17)]

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

*Parashat Lekh Lekha* describes the beginning of Avraham's journey and the *haftara* mentions Israel as the “children of Avraham who loved Me“ (41:8), but this alone does not seem to justify the assignment of this prophecy to the *parasha*. It seems more likely that those who established the practice of reading this prophecy as the *haftara* for *Parashat Lekh Lekha* relied on the midrashic connection between Avraham, who is making his way from the east to the land of Canaan, and the following verses from the middle of the prophecy:

Who roused the one from the east

 and called victory to his feet?

Who herded nations before him,

 laid their kings low,

and made his swords numerous as dust,

 his bowshots like chaff in the wind?

He pursued them and came through in peace

 on paths that his feet never walked. (41:2-3)

The following *midrashim* interpret these verses in relation to Avraham:

[A *beraita* stated:] “David wrote the book of *Tehillim*, by way of the ten elders.” Why not count also Eitan the Ezraḥite [who is named as author in *Tehillim* 89:1]? Rav said: Eitan the Ezraḥite is Avraham [who is already included in the list]. It is written here [in *Tehillim*]: "Eitan the Ezraḥite," and it is written there [in *Yeshayahu*]: "Who roused the one from the east [*mi-mizraḥ*]. (*Bava Batra* 15a)

"In the greatness of Your majesty, You overthrew those who rose against You" (*Shemot* 15:7) – You greatly exalted against those who rose against You… Who rose against You? Those who rose against Your children. Who are they? "Kedorlaomer, king of Eilam, and Tidal, king of Goyim… He divided his forces against the captors at night and defeated them" (*Bereishit* 14:1,15). "Who roused the one from the east and called victory to his feet?" What is stated there? "He pursued them and came through in peace." (*Mekhilta Beshalaḥ massekhta de-shira* 6)

This idea appears in many other places in the words of *Ḥazal* as well. This is also how Rashi explains our *haftara*, and other commentaries follow in his footsteps. The *midrashim* are attached to two points in the text of the *haftara*:

1. The description of the man who was roused in the east (in Ur Kasdim) and brought with him the teaching of righteousness. Let us recall what was said about Avraham:

For I have chosen him so that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, that the Lord may bring about for Avraham what He spoke of for him. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

1. “Who herded nations before him, laid their kings low, and made his swords numerous as dust, his bowshots like chaff in the wind?” (42:2). God delivered nations and kings into the hands of Avraham and his men – namely, Kedorlaomer and his company. Midrashic tradition goes so far as to derive from this verse that Avraham's sword and arrows became as numerous as dust and chaff, which is how he defeated his many enemies in one night.

Indeed, based on this verse, the Gemara adds something amazing. It tells about Nachum of Gimzo, who mistakenly brought dust to the emperor as a gift, and was on the verge of being killed. Eliyahu the prophet appeared and told them that the dust was of the dust Avraham used in his war against Kedorlaomer and his company, dust that turns into swords against the enemy. The Gemara first recounts the story of Avraham’s battle, in the voice of his servant:

The Holy One, blessed be He, took Avraham and placed him at His right hand, and they [God and Abraham] threw dust which turned to swords, and chaff which turned to arrows… and it is written: "Who roused the one from the east and called victory to his feet? Who herded nations before him, laid their kings low, and made his swords numerous as dust, his bowshots like chaff in the wind?" [The Gemara proceeds to introduce Nachum of Gimzo…] Then Eliyahu came, disguised as one of theirs [the Romans], and suggested to them: Perhaps this is the dust of Avraham, the Patriarch, who threw dust which turned to swords, and chaff which became arrows! So they examined it, and found it to be even so: and a district which they had been unable to conquer, they threw this dust at it and conquered it. (*Sanhedrin* 108b-109a)

According to these *midrashim*, the prophet likens the people of Israel – returning from their exile in the east, near Avraham's birthplace, to the land that God indicates, the land of their fathers – to their ancestor, who had made the same journey thousands of years before. The weak returnees, who have no military experience, fear that enemies await them in the land or may rise against them from Babylon and Eilam, like Nevuchadnetzar, who had exiled them. The prophet promises the people that God's great and mighty hand will deliver them from the kings of the east just as it delivered their ancestor, Avraham.

The image of the sword as dust and the bow as chaff also brings to mind the end of our *haftara*:

You shall see: I have made you

 a slotted threshing board,

 new and razor edged;

you will thresh mountains, turn them to powder,

 and hills into chaff.

As you winnow, the wind will lift them,

 and the storm will spread them far. (41:15-16)

As noted in previous *shiurim*, in connection with the two previous *haftarot*, the prophet Yeshayahu does not depict redemption in accordance with the model of the exodus from Egypt, but in accordance with the model learned from the first chapters of the book of *Bereishit* – the model of the creation of the world and of God's oath to Noaḥ, and in our *haftara*, the model of the mighty hand with which God saved Avraham. This point support and strengthens the words of our great teacher, the Ramban:

I will tell you a principle by which you will understand all the coming portions of Scripture concerning Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It is indeed a great matter which our Rabbis mentioned briefly, saying: "Whatever has happened to the Patriarchs is a sign to the children." It is for this reason that the verses narrate at great length the account of the journeys of the Patriarchs, the digging of the wells, and other events. Now someone may consider them unnecessary and of no useful purpose, but in truth they all serve as a lesson for the future: when an event happens to any one of the three Patriarchs, that which is decreed to happen to his children can be understood. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:6)

Nothing was lacking in all the events that happened to the Patriarch that would not occur to the children. The Rabbis have explained this subject in *Bereishit Rabba*: "Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Oshaya: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: 'Go forth and tread out a path for your children!'" (Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:10)[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the previous two *shiurim*, we mentioned that the prophet refrained from mentioning the conventional model of salvation in the Torah – God's mighty deeds at the time of the exodus from Egypt – because the exodus from Egypt seemingly "expired" at the time of the destruction, when God, who had redeemed His slaves from Egypt, sold them to a foreign king, to Nevuchadnetzar and his successors.

**II. Koresh, the Prime Mover of the Return of Zion**

Despite *Ḥazal's* delightful interpretation of the aforementioned verse, an interpretation because of which we have been granted this beautiful *haftara*, we cannot ignore what seems to be the plain meaning of the biblical text – the interpretation of the Ibn Ezra:[[4]](#footnote-4)

In my opinion, [“the one from the east”] alludes to Koresh, because the entire passage is connected. It is written: "Calling the kite from the east" (46:11), and afterwards: "I roused him from the north – he came; from the place of sunrise he called My name" (41:25), and the entire passage there is explicitly Koresh.

"From the east" – because Eilam is northeast of Babylon. (Ibn Ezra 41:2)

The Ibn Ezra asserts that this entire collection of prophecies all relates to the same person – Koresh. In fact, later in his prophecy, the prophet mentions Koresh explicitly:

Who says of Koresh: he is My shepherd,

 fulfilling all My will,

that he should tell Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’

 and the Sanctuary, ‘Let her be founded.’

Thus says the Lord

 to His anointed one, to Koresh,

into whose right hand I invested strength

 to subjugate nations before him,

and I shall loosen the girdles of kings

 to unlock doors before him, open

 city gates, never to be closed. (44:28-45:1)

In this context, we must say a few words about Koresh and his part in the return to Zion.

Koresh began as the king of Anshan, a small kingdom that was subject to the great kingdom of Media, which took possession of half of the kingdom of Assyria at the end of the seventh century BCE, about twenty-five years before the destruction of the Temple. He was king during the time of Astyages (Akkadian Ishtumego), king of Media. According to the accepted hypothesis among historians, Koresh began to rule in 558 BCE; five years later, he rebelled against Astyages; and three years after that (550), he defeated him and took him into captivity. He captured Akhmata, the capital of Media, and took control of all of Media, and also of the smaller Persia, Anshan's neighbor. As king of the larger Media, Koresh began to pose a danger the other kingdoms in the region. Lod in Asia Minor, Babylon, Egypt, and Sparta in Greece formed an alliance against him. Koresh conquered the rich Lod and its capital, Sardis (546), and took its king, Croesus, captive. All its treasures fell into his hands (as hinted in the prophecy below), and he turned to conquests in eastern Iran. When he finished that campaign, he went on a war of conquest against the Babylonian Belshatzar, and won a great victory in a decisive battle near the city of Ophis (539). Belshatzar fled to Babylon, where he held a glorious feast (known to us from *Daniel* 5) as a kind of compensation for his defeat and a show of his desire to rise once again. But that night, Babylon opened its gates to the new conqueror, and Belshatzar was killed. Sumer and Akkad also opened their gates and submitted themselves to Koresh, and thus Koresh became the ruler of a huge empire – the empire of Persia and Media that ruled over everything. He was a religiously tolerant king and restored the temples of many of the idols of the nations he conquered. It is possible that he heard about what happened to Belshatzar on his last night, when he desecrated the vessels of God's Temple, and about the inscription on the wall that Daniel deciphered, and decided as a result that he did not want to own these vessels; instead, he he sent them to the Temple that would be built in Jerusalem in his days.

There is a short (and amusing) story about the war against Babylon before it fell to Koresh: The king of Babylon removed the idols from the temples of many Babylonian cities, and brought them to Babylon so that they would help him defend the city against Koresh. Yet, "despite" the idols that "protected" the city, it fell into the hands of Koresh without a fight.

The prophet sees Koresh as God's agent, even if Koresh himself is unaware of that role, and determines that Israel's salvation will come through him. This is what Yeshayahu says about him:

I walk before you;

 I will level out mountain lands;

I will break through doors of bronze

 and cut down iron bars.

I give to you treasures of darkness,

 buried hoards in hidden places,

for you to know that it is I the Lord

 who calls your name –

 I, the God of Israel –

all for My servant Yaakov,

 for Israel, My chosen.

For them I call you by your name

 and give you your title though you know Me not.

I am the Lord – there is no other,

 no gods aside from Me –

 and I gird you though you do not know Me. (45:2-5)

Let us return to the story about the Babylonian idols that failed to protect their city, and in light of it, reread the verses in our *haftara* concerning Koresh's progress in his conquests – in which, we will see, the prophet mocks the heathen idols:

Who roused the one from the east

 and called victory to his feet?

Who herded nations before him,

 laid their kings low,

and made his swords numerous as dust,

 his bowshots like chaff in the wind?

He pursued them and came through in peace

 on paths that his feet never walked.

Who was it who acted and did this,

 who called forth generations long before?

I, the Lord, am the first,

 and I shall be,

 I, with the last who will be.

Coastlands witness this and fear,

 earth’s horizons witness, tremble,

 draw near, come.

Each man helps his fellow

 and tells his brother, “Be strong.”

“Strong,” says the wright to the goldsmith,

 the hammerman to him who beats.

He says of the glue, “This is good,”

 and firms it up with nails, never to fall. (41:2-7)

Later, he will have more to say about this:

Bel is prostrate; Nevo falls;[[5]](#footnote-5)…

The gods fell, were laid prostrate together;

 they cannot deliver this burden;

 they themselves are prisoners. (46:1-2)

**III. The King that God “Aroused from the East” – Another Possible Identity**

In the second *shiur* of this series, which introduces the first three *haftarot* in *Bereishit* – that come from the second part of the book of *Yeshayahu* – we noted the difficulty of seeing Yeshayahu, who lived long before the destruction, so clearly describe Koresh, who established the Persian Empire about fifty years after the destruction. Shmuel David Luzzatto, known as Shadal, solved this problem in his commentary to the book of *Yeshayahu* in a colorful and beautiful way, describing God as "placing" the prophet in the distant future, and the prophet seeing his vision as if he were present in the here and now. As mentioned, this is a beautiful interpretation, but it seems that there is room for another approach. I wish to suggest[[6]](#footnote-6) that the "Koresh" to whom Yeshayahu refers is Cyaxares, king of Media and father of the aforementioned Astyages, who was beaten by the well-known Koresh. According to historians, Cyaxares reigned in Media in the years 625-585 BCE, and turned it into a world power. According to the accepted dating, the year he began to rule was the fifteenth year of King Yoshiyahu. The fierce blow with which Cyaxares struck the Assyrians enabled the spiritual development of Yoshiyahu's revolution in the eighteenth year of his reign.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the twenty-eighth year of Yoshiyahu's rule, King Cyaxares of Media conquered Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

It is possible that Yeshayahu knew about Cyaxares in his youth, and saw in his prophetic vision that this is the future king who would help lift the Assyrian yoke from the kingdom of Yehuda – the king that God raised up from the east in our *haftara*. If we accept this assumption, it is possible that the prophecy of the ingathering of Israel's exiles, which is mentioned in our *haftara* and in other prophecies in the second part of the book of *Yeshayahu* (including the *haftara* for *Parashat Bereishit*,which we already studied), refers to the ingathering of the ten tribes that occurred in the days of Yoshiyahu and that is mentioned in *Yirmeyahu* 3-4 and 31. About this ingathering of exiles, *Ḥazal* said: "When Yirmeyahu brought them back, Yoshiyahu reigned over them" (*Arakhin* 33a).

According to this explanation, we can say that initially the prophecies dealing with "Koresh" referred to Cyaxares, and only after the potential of redemption in the days of Yoshiyahu was missed, the name mentioned by the prophet "drifted" to Koresh, King of Anshan, who ruled in the days of the return to Zion; thus, Yeshayahu's prophecy was fulfilled after some delay.

**IV. The Opening Verses of Our *Haftara***

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.

He gives the weary strength,

 the helpless, power: more and more.

Youths will tire, grow weary;

 young men will falter and fall,

but those who wait 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. (40:27-31)

These verses reflect the great fatigue, helplessness, and grave despair of the people. As I have written, these feelings are most appropriate for the ten tribes, who were exiled a long time earlier and did not find rest in their exile, those whom Yechezkel referred to in his prophecy (chap. 37) as "the dry bones." However, it is also possible that these verses refer to the exiles of Yehuda, and that they too arrived at the overwhelming fatigue described here. The prophet must employ great oratorical power when he comes to encourage the desperate and helpless on their way to Israel. Our generation experienced a similar journey of the Ethiopian exiles, from Gondar to the shores of Sudan, in Operation Moshe. Through their terrible journey we can contemplate the prophet's call to the captives of Zion at the beginning of our *haftara*, understand the hearts of the exiles, and appreciate the powerful call of the prophet.

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In conclusion, I wish to note that in the verses of the *haftara* cited at the beginning of our discussion, I added verses at the beginning and at the end in accordance with the Rambam's version. According to this version, these are the verses with which the *haftara* opens:

Whom can you compare Me to –

 so speaks the Holy One –

 and find them equal?

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. (40:25-26)

The description of raising our eyes to the many stars in the sky makes a statement: just as God knows the number of stars, the name of each star, and its place in the sky, so God has not forgotten His people, and the path and judgment of his people have not been hidden from His eyes. We are accustomed to raise our eyes to the sky, to see the moon as it renews, and to be inspired to wish for our redemption and the restoration of the kingdom of the house of David. Yeshayahu also saw this in the stars – the armies of God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. All Tanakh translations in this series are taken with permission from *The Koren Tanakh - Magerman Edition*, (c) Koren Publishers 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The first two verses and the last verse are in brackets because they are an addition to the *haftara* according to the Rambam's version, the reading of which has been preserved in the Italian and Yemenite rites. I read this in Rabbi Elchanan Samet's instructive article on the *haftara* found on the website of the Herzog College. He offered a fine explanation there, which does not need to be duplicated here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted that the Ramban specifically mentions a "sign for the sons" one more time (*Bereishit* 24:17), and there the sign is an act of the Matriarchs: "And in *Bereishit Rabba*: 'And she filled her jar and came up' – all the women went down and filled their pitchers from the well. But this one, as the waters saw her, they immediately rose. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: 'You are a sign of blessing to your children.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Malbim has another interpretation (probably following *Midrash* *Zuta Shir ha-Shirim* 2:9), according to which these verses refer to the Messianic king. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bel and Nevo were the main idols in the Babylonian kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Based on the words of H. Hefetz (*Malkhut Paras u-Madai bi-Tekufat ha-Bayit ha-Sheni u-le-Faneha – Iyyun mei-Chadash*," *Megadim* 14, Alon Shevut 5751, pp. 78-147 and pp. 98-99), and based on what I wrote there in the introduction to his article (ibid., pp. 46-77 and pp. 63-64). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See II *Melakhim* 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)