YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The Haftara for Shabbat Chanuka**

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Dedicated in memory of my father,
Hillel ben Yechiel (Herman) Reiter,
of Debrecen, Hungary, whose *yahrzeit*
falls on the 24th day of Kislev.
May his soul be among the Righteous in Gan Eden.

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**“And He Will Choose Jerusalem Once Again”**

Shout out and be joyful, daughter Zion, for I am coming, and I will dwell in your midst – the Lord has spoken. Many nations will join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they will be My people. I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me to you. The Lord will take possession of Yehuda as His portion of holy ground, and He will choose Jerusalem once again. Hush, all flesh, before the Lord, for He has stirred from His holy abode.

Then He showed me Yehoshua the High Priest standing before an angel of the Lord with the Adversary on his right to oppose him. The Lord said to the Adversary: The Lord drives you away, Adversary. The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, drives you away. Yes, this is a firebrand saved from the fire. And Yehoshua, wearing filthy clothing, was standing before the angel, who spoke and said to those standing before him, "Take those filthy clothes off him." Then the angel said to him, "See, I have removed your guilt from you and dressed you in finery." I said, "Place a pure turban on his head," and they placed a pure turban on his head. They dressed him in clothing. The angel of the Lord remained standing. Then that angel of the Lord testified regarding Yehoshua: "So says the Lord of Hosts: If you walk in My ways, if you keep My watch, if you judge My House, and guard My courtyards, then I will give you walkers among these who are standing. Listen, Yehoshua the High Priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of wonders: Behold, I am bringing My servant Tzemach. Upon the stone that I set before Yehoshua, one stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, and I will wipe away the guilt of this land in one day. On that day – the Lord of Hosts has spoken – you will call one to another: Come under the shade of the vine; come under the shade of the fig."

Then the angel with whom I had spoken returned and roused me like a man stirring from his sleep. He said to me, "What do you see?" I said, "I see a candelabrum of pure gold, its bowl at the top. It has seven lamps – seven – and seven indentations for the lamps, which are at the top. Next to it are two olive trees, one to the right of the bowl and one to its left." I spoke and said to the angel with whom I spoke, "What are these, my lord?" And the angel with whom I spoke replied and said, "You know what these are." I said, "No, my lord." Then he spoke and said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubavel: Not with valor and not with strength, but with My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts. Who are you, great mountain before Zerubavel? Surely it will become a level plain. He will remove the re-foundation stone with clamor: Favor, favor to her!" (*Zekharia* 2:14-4:7)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and Shabbat Chanuka**

The third paragraph (in the artificial division based on the division of the chapters) deals with the golden *menora* with its seven lamps, which foreshadows the Temple that would be built in the future – the Second Temple. The dedication of the Temple in the days of the Hasmoneans included the lighting of a *menora* (not a gold one, due to limited means at the time) and the miracle associated with it: that a small amount of pure oil, discovered in an unusual way, sufficed for the lighting of the *menora* for eight days – until new oil could be obtained.

These chapters also serve as the *haftara* for *Parashat Behaalotekha* in the book of *Bamidbar*, for a similar reason: *Parashat Behaalotekha* opens with the *menora* and the mitzva of lighting it.

One might suggest that something was left out, that several more verses in Zekharia’s prophecy could have been included in the *haftara*:

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Zerubavel's hands founded this House, and his hands will complete it. You will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me to you." (*Zekharia* 4:8-9)

These verses highlight a connection between the lighting of the *menora* (alluded to in the previous verses, toward the end of the *haftara*) and the dedication of the Temple – as indeed happened in the days of the Hasmoneans, when the Temple was rededicated with the lighting of the *menora*. The two olive trees surrounding the *menorah*, which represent priesthood and kingship, are also indirectly related to the Hasmoneans: they "appointed a king from the priests, and sovereignty returned to Israel for more than two hundred years."[[1]](#footnote-1)

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There may also be a connection between the prophecy in our *haftara* and the miracle of the oil of the Hasmoneans. The verses that describe the *menora* in our *haftara* are difficult to understand, but it is clear that the seven-branched *menora* Zekharia describes is different from the *menora* that Moshe was commanded to fashion at the time of the construction of the *Mishkan*:

I see a candelabrum of pure gold, its bowl at the top. It has seven lamps – seven – and seven indentations for the lamps, which are at the top. Next to it are two olive trees, one to the right of the bowl and one to its left. (4:2-3)

What is the bowl at the top of the *menora*? And what are the seven "indentations"? What is the purpose of the two olive trees? There are many interpretations of these obscure verses; here, I will follow in the footsteps of my revered teacher, Rabbi Chanan Porat *z"l*,[[2]](#footnote-2)and also add another layer to his interpretation.

In my understanding, the bowl at the top of the *menora* is full of oil, and the "indentations" are tubes for pouring oil from the bowl into each of the lamps. (As was customary in the past, the lamps are receptacles for the lit wick and for the oil that feeds it.) When we imagine these "indentations," we may recall the miracle of oil that the prophet Elisha performed for the widow and her children:

And so she left him. When she closed the door behind her and her sons, they kept bringing vessels to her while she kept pouring. (II *Melakhim* 4:5)

Zekharia's *menora* does not need anyone to perform the mitzva of preparing the lamps, filling them with oil in order to light them for another night. The oil flows by itself from the bowl to the lamps, and when the bowl runs out of oil, the olive trees on the sides of the *menora* drip oil into it, and thus the supply never ends. This is the essence of the miracle of the oil that took place in the days of the Hasmoneans when they rededicated the Temple after recovering it from the Seleucid Greeks.

One may wonder: Why did Zekharia foresee in his prophecy, which was delivered before the building of the Second Temple, a miracle that would take place in the distant future during the Hasmonean era? Is this interpretation of the prophecy nothing more than a far-fetched and detached midrashic exposition?

In order to explain this, let us delve deeper into the importance of the miracle of the oil on Chanuka, the value of which goes beyond the technical ability to push up the lighting of the *menora* seven days before the arrival of new pure oil. *Chazal* address the importance of lighting the lamps in the Temple:

"Outside the veil of testimony" (*Vayikra* 24:3) – Does He require the light? Surely, during the entire forty years that the Israelites traveled in the wilderness, they traveled only by His light! But it is a testimony to mankind that the Divine Presence rests in Israel. (*Shabbat* 22b)

God does not need the light of the *menora*, nor the bread on the table, nor the incense, nor the sacrifices. It seems to me that the *baraita* presented here originated in the court of the Hasmoneans, and that it clarifies the significance of the miracle of the oil.

First, note that the Temple and all its contents are the work of man, while the Divine abundance that flows to it is expressed through what happens in the Holy of Holies:

This was the dedication offering for the altar after it was anointed. When Moshe entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the Lord, he would hear the Voice speaking to him from above the cover over the Ark of the Covenant, from between the two cherubim. Thus did He speak to him. (*Bamidbar* 7:58-59)

The voice of God that was heard between the two cherubim, the place of the *Shekhina*, is the source of prophecy, and it is the expression of the Divine abundance that descends to the Temple and from there to the people of Israel.

The Ark, however, was hidden away (or captured) at the end of the First Temple Period, and the Holy of Holies was empty in the Second Temple; therefore, prophecy stopped a short time later. The *Shekhina* did not rest in the Temple built under the patronage of the king of Persia, a gentile and idolater, and did not enter the Temple through the Shushan Gate in the east, the gate that commemorates the honor of the heathen kingdom. The fire that came down from heaven to the *Mishkan* on its first day, and to Shlomo's Temple at its dedication, did not descend to the Second Temple *until* the monarchy returned to Israel – during the Hasmonean period, with the victory over the Seleucid Greeks. Even then, however, the Ark did not return to its place; instead, the *Shekhina* revealed itself in the miraculous fire that came down from the sky to the lamps of the *menora* in the Temple.

The *menora* in the Second Temple is thus the continuation of the Ark cover, and its light is the continuation of the light of the Torah projected from the Ark of the Covenant and its contents – "for the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light" (*Mishlei* 6:23). (Note that the Ark cover with its cherubim and the *menora* with its branches were the only two vessels in the *Mishkan* and the Temple that were made of pure beaten gold.) Thus, the miracle of Divine abundance that descended on the Temple on the day of its dedication in the days of the Hasmoneans, after the departure of prophecy, found expression in the light of the *menora* instead of in the Voice heard from between the two cherubim.

There is no indication that the prophet Zekharia foresaw details of the Hasmonean kingdom, such as its wars, but he did foresee in our *haftara* that the *Shekhina* would rest through fire from heaven, as it did in the *Mishkan* and the First Temple. He foresaw that the *menora* in the Second Temple would serve as testimony that the *Shekhina* indeed rests in Israel in this period as well, as expressed in the Hasmonean *baraita* cited above. The *menora* replaced the Ark of Testimony and became, as stated later in the *baraita*, the "*Menora* of Testimony." The abundance from heaven would be manifested through the *menora* – through miracles – the miracle of the oil. Zekharia envisioned a *menora* whose oil poured from trees to bowl to “indentations” and finally to the lamps, without help from human hands. *For the miracles and for the redemption and for the mighty acts and for the salvation and for the wars that You performed for our forefathers in those days in this season!*

On the other hand, we also learn from Zekharia's words that without human effort, courage, and selfless dedication, there will be no Divine abundance either.

The *menora* and its miracles are a fitting title for our *haftara*:

For I am coming, and I will dwell in your midst… I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me to you. (2:14-15)

**II. “Many Nations Will Join Themselves”**

Many nations will join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they will be My people. I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me to you. (2:15)

Zekharia's universal vision at the beginning of his prophecy requires explanation: Why is a prophet living in the days of the return to Zion, when the people of Israel are fighting for their very existence in their land, prophesying about the repair of the world in the end of days, when all nations will flock to see the glory of God in Jerusalem?

To understand this, we must familiarize ourselves with the historical background of Zekharia's prophecy. Zekharia began prophesying in the second year of Darius, king of Persia. This was about eighteen years after Cyrus's proclamation and the beginning of the return to Zion, which was led by Zerubavel son of She'altiel (a descendant of Yehoyakhin, king of Yehuda) and Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak (a descendant of Sarya, the last High Priest, who was executed at the time of the destruction of the First Temple).

Cyrus's proclamation failed to a great extent: after the altar was built, a royal ban was issued barring the building of the Temple, because of slander spread by the non-Jewish nations who had settled in the land after Israel was exiled from it. Some of these other nations were those brought by Asarchadon king of Assyria to replace the inhabitants of Shomron at the time of the destruction of the kingdom of Israel. Some of them were Edomites, who flocked to the land after the Nabateans and other Arab tribes took possession of their land. And some were members of other non-Jewish nations from the surrounding area, who saw that the land was abandoned by its own people and immigrated to it.

Now, fifty-two years after the destruction of Jerusalem, following Cyrus's proclamation, the Jews began to return to Israel, but not in large numbers – only about forty-four thousand came from Persia and Babylon – and they met with strong opposition, through natural means, to their rebirth in their land.

In the second year of Darius, eighteen years after the altar was erected and the foundations were laid for the House of God and after its construction was stopped, two prophets, Chagai and Zekharia, joined together to command the people to continue building the House of God, even though their permission to do so had been rescinded, and to encourage them to persist until it was finished. How will the people who returned to Zion succeed in building God's House without a license, when their neighbors, the surrounding nations who rush to inform the authorities about their actions, are constantly watching?

The two prophets seem to have had different answers to this question – answers which are not necessarily contradictory, but primarily complement each other.

Chagai followed a path similar to that later expressed by another leader, David Ben-Gurion, saying: "Our future depends not on what the gentiles will say, but on what the Jews will do." Chagai examines Israel's relationship with their Father in heaven, who alone, according to His will, can assure their success. Chagai makes it clear to the people that the drought, poverty, and hunger they have experienced are a signal of criticism from God for not building His House:

Is it the time for you yourselves to sit under roofs in your homes while this House lies desolate? Now says the Lord of Hosts: Take your ways to heart. You sow much but bring in little, eat but are not satisfied, drink but remain sober. You clothe yourselves but are not warmed, and anyone who earns wages receives them into a pouch full of holes… You expect much but receive little. You bring it home; I cause it to wither. Why? Because of My House which remains desolate while each of you keeps running back to his own house, says the Lord of Hosts. Therefore, the skies lock up the dew above you; the land locks up its produce. I will call forth a drought over the land and the mountains; over the grains, the young wine, and the fresh oil; over everything the land produces. I will declare a drought over man and animal, even over the labor of their hands. (*Chagai* 1:4-11)

After they begin building, the prophet encourages them, declaring that they will succeed in their construction and that the nations will be compelled to come acknowledge God's House, due to His strong hand and outstretched arm:

For so says the Lord of Hosts: One more thing, but a small thing, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, they will come with the riches of all the nations, and I will fill this House with glory, says the Lord of Hosts. For Mine is the silver and Mine the gold; the Lord of Hosts has spoken. The glory of this latter House will be greater than the glory of the first, says the Lord of Hosts, and I will bestow peace upon this place. The Lord of Hosts has spoken. (*Chagai* 2:6-9)

Chagai continues his prophecy two months later, on the eve of Chanuka (!), and says:

Tell Zerubavel, governor of Yehuda: I am going to shake the heavens and earth, I will overturn the thrones of kingdoms, and I will destroy the mighty dominion of nations; I will overturn the chariot and its riders. The horses and their riders will fall, every man cut down by the sword of his brother. On that day – the Lord of Hosts has spoken – I will take you, Zerubavel son of She'altiel, My servant – the Lord has spoken – and wear you close like a signet ring, for it is you whom I have chosen. The Lord of Hosts has spoken. (*Chagai* 2:21-23)

Zekharia continues the approach adopted by Chagai, focusing on God's wrath against the nations, but adds to it a more conciliatory line, in the prophecy that begins a few verses before the beginning of our *haftara*:

For so says the Lord of Hosts: In the wake of Glory He sent me to the nations that have plundered you, for he who harms you harms that which is reflected in His eyes. I will brandish My hand over them, and they will be plundered by their slaves. You will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me.

Shout and be joyful, daughter Zion, for I am coming, and I will dwell in your midst – the Lord has spoken. Many nations will join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they will be My people. I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me to you. (*Zekharia* 2:12-15)

The phrase "that the Lord of Hosts sent me" emphasizes the relationship between the two parts of the prophecy. In the first part, the nations will receive their punishment, while in the second part, in our *haftara*, they themselves will come to the Temple, acknowledge the greatness of God who commanded His sons to build His Temple, and join them in doing so.

Zekharia later continues this line, in another prophecy about the building of the Temple:

So says the Lord of Hosts: Once again nations, dwellers of many cities, will come, and the dwellers of one city will go, saying one to another, one by one, “Let us go entreat the face of the Lord, beseech the Lord of Hosts. I too will go.” Then many nations will come – great peoples – to beseech the Lord of Hosts in Jerusalem, to entreat the face of the Lord. So says the Lord of Hosts: It will be in those days that ten men of many languages will cling, they will cling to the hem of a Jewish man and say, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” (*Zekharia* 8:20-23)

**III. “Hush, All Flesh”**

Hush, all flesh, before the Lord, for He has stirred from His holy abode. (*Zekharia* 2:17)

The prophet uses an expression that may sound jarring to us, even though it is only a parable – as if now, when the other nations are causing Israel distress, God is sleeping and we must wait for Him to wake up. This is how Eliyahu mocked the worshippers of the Ba'al on Mount Carmel:

At noon, Eliyahu began to mock them: "Shout louder," he said, "for he is a god – he may be in conversation, or busy, or out traveling; he may be asleep – he might wake!" (I *Melakhim* 18:27)

In contrast, the Song of *Haazinu* attests that even in times of calamity, God only hides His face because of Israel's sins; He is still present, and He sees the troubles of his children.

Similar expressions, however, are also found in the book of *Tehillim*:

Stir – why do You sleep, Lord? Rouse Yourself! Do not forsake us forever. (*Tehillim* 44:24)

Then the Lord awoke as if from sleep, like a warrior shaking off wine, and beat back His foes, subjecting them to lasting shame. (*Tehillim* 78:65-66)

The prophets and the psalmist must have known their limits in their metaphorical personifications of God. We certainly would not dare use such language.

The expression, "Hush, all flesh, before the Lord," also calls for explanation. It is possible that Zekharia is responding in his prophecy to the harsh words of Chavakuk, who prophesied in the days of Menashe king of Yehuda about the rise of the Chaldeans, the destroyers of Jerusalem. Seeing this difficult vision saddened the prophet, and he cast harsh words toward heaven:

How much longer must I implore You, O Lord, though You do not listen. I scream out to You "violence!" yet You bring no salvation. Why then do You show me this evil? You who see the oppression, why are ruin and corruption before me so that strife endures and contention rises? This then is why law will cease to exist and justice will never prevail, for the wicked besiege the righteous, and justice becomes twisted. (*Chavakuk* 1:2-4)

When the Lord opened his eyes, the prophet ended his prophecy, before beginning the "prayer of Chavakuk the prophet," with the sentence:

But the Lord is in His heavenly dwelling. All the earth, be silent before Him. (*Chavakuk* 2:20)

Years passed, Jerusalem and the Temple of God were destroyed, and its people fell by the sword and were taken into captivity. Now, at the time of the return to Zion, just before the construction of the Second Temple, Zekharia continues Chavakuk’s prophecy, "All the earth, be silent before Him," with the prophecy, "Hush, all flesh, before the Lord," and with the statement that the Lord is returning to His Temple and raising His people from the dust.

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 Our prophecy is very rich and requires many profound discussions. This study comes to an end, but it is not finished; we will address other matters pertaining to this prophecy when we come to the *haftara* for *Parashat Behaalotekha*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Megilla ve-Chanuka* 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Me'at min ha-Or* (Israel 5768), pp. 61-62, based on some of the *Targumim* and some of the commentators. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)