YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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In memory of Albert W. and Evelyn G. Bloom,   
who taught "Am Yisrael, Torat Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael" in deed and word.

Akiva and Shanen Werber and family

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**PARASHAT VAERA**

**A Crushed Reed of a Staff[[1]](#footnote-1)**

So says the Lord God: When I gather the House of Israel in from the peoples where they have been scattered and I am sanctified through them in the eyes of the nations, when they live on their land that I gave to My servant Yaakov – they will live on it in safety; they will build houses, plant vineyards, live safely; when I execute judgments over all those from their surroundings who scorn them, they will know that I am the Lord, their God.

In the tenth year in the tenth month on the twelfth of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: Man, set your face against Pharaoh, king of Egypt; prophesy against him and against all of Egypt. Speak and say: So says the Lord God: Behold, I am upon you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, great crocodile crouching in his Nile streams who says, "It is mine, this Nile; I made it for myself." I will fix hooks into your jaw; I will make the fish from your streams stick to your scales; I will drag you up out of your streams, and all the fish from your streams will stick to your scales; I will abandon you in the desert, you and all the fish of your streams. You will fall in the open field and be neither collected nor gathered up; to the animals of the land and the birds of the skies I will give you over as food. All the inhabitants of Egypt will know that I am the Lord – for they were a reed staff to the House of Israel: when they grasped hold of you, you crumbled, tearing their shoulders; when they leaned upon you, you broke, buckling their loins. So the Lord God says this: I will bring the sword down upon you, cut off man and beast from you. The land of Egypt will be desolate, ruined, and they will know that I am the Lord. Because he said, "The Nile is mine; I made it," for this, I am coming down upon you and your Nile streams. I will turn the land of Egypt into a waste of desolate ruins from Migdol to Sevene and to the border with Kush. The foot of no man will pass through her; the foot of no animal will pass through her; she will not be inhabited for forty years. For forty years I will make the land of Egypt desolate among desolate lands, and her cities will lie desolate among ruined cities. I will strew Egypt among the nations, scatter them over the lands. Yet, so says the Lord God, at the end of forty years I will gather Egypt in from the people among whom they were scattered. I will restore the fortunes of Egypt; I will restore them to the land of Patros, the land of their origin, and there they will be a lowly kingdom. She will be the lowest of the kingdoms and will never again elevate herself above the nations; I will reduce them to a state where they cannot dominate among the nations. They will no longer be a source of trust for the House of Israel but merely a reminder of Israel’s sin in turning to them, and they will know that I am the Lord God."

It was in the twenty-seventh year in the first month on the first day of the month that the word of the Lord came to me: "Man: Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, exerted his army to labor hard against Tyre. Every head was rubbed raw, every shoulder worn down bare, but from Tyre neither he nor his army received pay for the hard work with which they toiled against her. So the Lord God says this: See that to Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, I will give the land of Egypt. He will carry off her wealth, ransack her spoils, and seize her loot; she will be the pay for his army. I shall give him the land of Egypt as his payment, for which he has labored, which he has done for Me, declares the Lord God. On that day I will make a horn of strength grow for the House of Israel, and you – I will let your voice be heard among them, and they will know that I am the Lord. (*Yechezkel* 28:25-29:21)

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

Our *parasha* deals primarily with the plagues inflicted upon Egypt as punishment for their harsh enslavement of the people of Israel, in order to teach them the greatness of God and to convince them to send Israel out to worship God. The prophecy in our *haftara* also deals with plagues that were inflicted upon Egypt – the downfall of Egypt many years later, close to the time of the destruction of the first Temple. We will also see an important similarity in the contents of the plagues.

In my book *Ki Karov Eilekha* on the book of *Shemot*, I argued at length that the plague of blood was not necessarily a chemical reaction that changed the structure of the water molecules in the Nile to blood, but was rather the result of a mighty blow from Aharon's staff – wielded with the strength of the strong hand and outstretched arm of Him who had sent Aharon, i.e., God – which created enormous shock waves in the water, splitting open the many crocodiles in the river and thus flooded the Nile with blood. This is how God took His revenge against the gods of Egypt, the great crocodiles of the Nile. These crocodiles thereby received their due punishment, after having brutally devoured the Jewish children thrown into the Nile on Pharaoh's orders, even before they had a chance to drown in the water.

Our *haftara* also describes God taking revenge against “the great crocodile, crouching in his Nile streams,” but with one important difference: The crocodiles in the *parasha* were killed (in my opinion) by shock waves created by the blow of the staff, whereas the crocodile in our prophecy will die when the river dries up and all of Egypt turns into a desolate wilderness.

**II. Egypt’s Sin**

One reason for the expressions of wrath against Egypt – the "religious reason," mentioned twice in the prophecy – is the king of Egypt's attitude toward himself as the god who created the Nile:

Who says, "It is mine, this Nile; I made it for myself." (29:3)

Because he said, "The Nile is mine; I made it." (v.9)

However, we will deal primarily with the second reason:

All the inhabitants of Egypt will know that I am the Lord – for they were a reed staff to the House of Israel: when they grasped hold of you, you crumbled, tearing their shoulders; when they leaned upon you, you broke, buckling their loins. (*Yechezkel* 29:6-7)

This prophecy was delivered, as stated at its beginning, on the 2nd of Tevet (the tenth month) in the tenth year of Tzidkiyahu’s reign, half a year before the walls of Jerusalem were breached. The siege of Jerusalem had begun a year earlier, on the tenth of Tevet in the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu.

Nevukhadnetzar's decision to destroy Jerusalem came in the wake of Tzidkiyahu's violation of his oath of loyalty to him, by cooperating with the neighboring nations (Edom, Moav, Amon, Tyre, and Sidon) in an alliance with Egypt to rebel against Neṿukhadnetzar. Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel had warned Tzidkiyahu against taking this step, which was a betrayal of faithfulness and of his oath in the name of God to Nevukhadnetzar. Tzidkiyahu was also attempting to circumvent God's decree, delivered by Yirmeyahu: to serve the king of Babylon for seventy years without Jerusalem and the Temple being destroyed and without the people dying or being exiled from their country. Tzidkiyahu went astray after the kings of the surrounding nations, whose emissaries came to persuade him to join the alliance against Nevukhadnetzar, and in the end, they all betrayed him and the kingdom of Yehuda.

The worst betrayal of all was that of Egypt – who had promised to help as soon as Nevukhadnetzar appeared but turned out to be “a crushed reed of a staff.” This was also the case a hundred and thirty years earlier, when Chizkiyahu rebelled against Sancheriv, king of Assyria. As Ravshakeh, the Assyrian king's emissary to Jerusalem, rightly said at the time:

Have you placed your trust in that crushed reed of a staff, in Egypt, who pierces and punctures the palm of anyone who leans upon it? For that is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to all who place their trust in him. (II *Melakhim* 18:21)

Yechezkel uses this image in our prophecy at a time when history is repeating itself. Tzidkiyahu relied on the king of Egypt just as Chizkiyahu had trusted him a hundred and thirty years earlier, and in both cases, Egypt's help was no help at all.

Let us take a look at the Egyptian aid to Jerusalem during Nevukhadnetzar's siege, which lasted a year and a half – from the tenth of Tevet in the ninth year (of Tzidkiyahu's reign) to the ninth of Tammuz in the eleventh year, the day that the wall of the city was breached:

Now Pharaoh's army set out from Egypt, and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard of this, they withdrew from Jerusalem. The word of the Lord came to Yirmeyahu. This is what the Lord, God of Israel, said: "This is what you are to say to the king of Yehuda, who sent you to Me to inquire of Me: Pharaoh's army, which set out to help you, is about to return to his land, to Egypt. The Chaldeans will return and attack this city. They will capture it and burn it down with fire." (*Yirmeyahu* 37:5-8)

These verses describe a respite of a few days (it is not known how many) in the siege, when the Chaldean army removed itself from Jerusalem in order to stop Pharaoh. Pharaoh did not fight the Chaldeans; as soon as he saw them advancing towards him, he turned back and returned with his army to Egypt. In the meantime, Yirmeyahu tried to leave Jerusalem for his field in Anatot, but was caught and imprisoned. During that same period of respite, the people of Jerusalem broke the covenant they had made to free their slaves (we will discuss this in detail when we study the *haftara* for *Parashat Mishpatim*). The Chaldeans returned a short time later and continued the siege of Jerusalem for another six months, until its destruction. The atmosphere in Jerusalem during the second part of the siege changed completely, and the hope of rescue with the help of the Egyptians gave way to great despair, which combined with the hunger and weakness that prevailed in Jerusalem.

The date of our prophecy indicates that the Egyptians probably arrived and retreated at the beginning of Tevet in the tenth year – that is, about a year (or a little less) after the beginning of the siege.

The prophet expresses his great anger at the Egyptians, who did nothing for the benefit of the kingdom of Yehuda, their ally, and had been nothing but a (crushed) reed of a staff. Therefore, proclaims the prophet, Egypt will turn into a desolate wilderness.

**III. The Fish that are Stuck to the Scales**

The prophecy emphasizes the fate of the fish that are stuck to the scales of the crocodile:

I will make the fish from your streams stick to your scales; I will drag you up out of your streams, and all the fish from your streams will stick to your scales; I will abandon you in the desert, you and all the fish of your streams. (29:4)

It is possible that the fish stuck to the scales are the Egyptians, who depend on their king; alternatively, the reference may be to all the small nations who voluntarily adhered to the Egyptian promise to protect them from the Chaldean army and will pay the price for this in the future. Yirmeyahu had warned the nations not to cooperate with Egypt against Nevukhadnetzar, but they did not listen to him:

This is what the Lord said to me: "Make yourself the reins and bars of a yoke, and place them upon your neck, and send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moav, the king of the Amonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, and by way of the emissaries who come to Jerusalem, to Tzidkiyahu, king of Yehuda. And instruct them to tell their masters: This is what the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, has said, and this is what you should say to your masters: It is I who made the earth – the humans and the animals upon the face of the earth – with My great might and My arm stretched forth, and I gave it to whom I saw fit. And now, I have delivered all these lands into the hands of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, My servant. I have even given him the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations will serve him, his son, and his son's son, until his land's time will also come, and many nations and great kings will subjugate him. The nation and kingdom that will not serve him – Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon – and will not submit its neck to the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will visit sword, famine, and pestilence upon that nation, declares the Lord, until I finish them off by his hands. As for you, do not listen to your prophets and diviners, your dreamers and soothsayers and sorcerers, who tell you not to serve the king of Babylon. For what they prophesy to you is false, with the result that it will remove you from your land. I will drive you away, and you will be lost. But the nation that will submit its neck to the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, that nation I will leave upon its soil," declares the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 27:2-11)

It is unclear whether Egypt was indeed conquered by Nevukhadnetzar in the twenty-seventh year of his reign, eight years after the destruction of the Temple (or in the twenty-seventh year of our exile, sixteen years after the destruction of the Temple). We do know about a Babylonian campaign against Egypt about twenty years after the destruction of the First Temple, but today's historians claim that Egypt was only conquered by Cambyses II, king of Persia, about sixty years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the years after the destruction of Jerusalem, Amon, Moav, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon were also defeated by the king of Babylon, and Yechezkel saw this as revenge for their betrayal of the kingdom of Yehuda in the time of its troubles. These nations acted as if they were friends of Jerusalem and Tzidkiyahu, but when Nevukhadnetzar first came upon Jerusalem, they all rejoiced about its misfortune, as described in Yechezkel’s collection of prophecies concerning the nations (chapters 2-7) as well as by Yirmeyahu in *Eikha*:

I called out to my suitors; they have deceived me… Hear me – I am groaning; there is none to console me. My enemies heard of my suffering – they rejoice: You have done this. When You bring the day You called for, then they will be like me. (*Eikha* 1:19-21)

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The prophecy speaks of forty years of desolation in Egypt, and of Egypt's return and redemption forty years later. From the scant historical information in our possession, it is difficult to understand which event the prophet is referring to and whether it actually took place.

**IV. The Closing Verses of the *Haftara***

Man: Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, exerted his army to labor hard against Tyre. Every head was rubbed raw, every shoulder worn down bare, but from Tyre neither he nor his army received pay for the hard work with which they toiled against her. (29:18)

These verses describe the campaign against Tyre, which began in the year after Jerusalem’s destruction and lasted thirteen years. Tyre (or part of it) was an island not far from the coast; in order to conquer it, Nevukhadnetzar had to erect an embankment that would connect it to the mainland. Apparently, he did not succeed in doing so, and it is possible that he captured only the part of the city on the mainland.

To clarify: the city of Tyre was built on an island near the mainland, and it was surrounded on all sides by water, which also protected it. Over the course of time, when there was no more room on the island, a secondary city developed on the coast, and was joined to Tyre. This part of the city was conquered by Nevukhadnetzar first.[[3]](#footnote-3) Our verses here describe how the embankment was constructed from the coast to Tyre. The hard, exhausting, deadly work was done by captives under the supervision of a Chaldean. The captives are described as "every head was rubbed raw, every shoulder worn down bare" – they were shaved, and their shoulders and torn sleeves bore the mark of their slavery so that they could not escape. It is possible that the statement "neither he nor his army received pay" means that he was unable to conquer the maritime city. The prophet promises that his reward will be the conquest of Egypt, the object of the prophet's revenge in this prophecy. As mentioned, it is not clear whether or not the prophecy about Egypt was fulfilled in its time.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See II *Melakhim* 18:21 and *Yeshayahu* 36:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chapters 44 and 46 in the book of *Yirmeyahu* imply that Nevukhadnetzar defeated Egypt. See also H. Hefetz, "*Malkhut Paras u-Madai bi-Tekufat Bayit Sheni u-le-Faneha*, *Iyun mei-Chadash*," *Megadim* 14 (Alon Shevut, Sivan 5751), pp. 83ff. There are many discrepancies among the historians regarding this period, and we will not decide between them here. The historical blur concerning this period has not been fully resolved. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alexander the Great succeeded in conquering the two parts of the city where Nevukhadnetzar had failed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)