YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT YITRO**

**“Holy, Holy, Holy – The Lord of Hosts”**

In the year in which King Uziyahu died I saw the Lord sitting on a high, raised throne, the hem of His clothing filling the Sanctuary. There were seraphim standing above Him, each with six wings – with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they called out one to another, "Holy, holy, holy – the Lord of Hosts – all the world's fullness His glory." The door pillars shook with the voice of him who called – and smoke filled the House. And I said, "This ache – I am condemned, for my mouth has been defiled, one man among a people with their mouths defiled, and my eyes see the King, the Lord of Hosts." One of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a coal, taken with tongs from the altar top. With this he touched my lips and said, "When this has touched your lips, your iniquity is gone, and all your sin forgiven." 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." He said, "Go – tell this people: Hear, you shall hear but understand it not, see it all but know it not. Fatten the heart of this people; make their ears heavy; coat their eyes with plaster, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and their hearts understand and they return – and are healed." I said, "My Lord, how long?" And He said, "Until the towns are stripped of all who live in them, houses left without people, the land stripped bare, and the Lord dispatches man far hence, and swaths of land will be forsaken; if a tenth there will survive, it will return and will be burnt like the terebinth and oak tree that drop their leaves, and yet the trunk remains – and the trunk is holy seed."

In the days of Achaz son of Yotam son of Uziyahu, king of Yehuda, Retzin, king of Aram, and Pekach son of Remalyahu, king of Israel, launched an attack on Jerusalem, but they could not conquer it. The House of David was told, "Aram is allied with Efrayim." And his heart swayed, and the hearts of his people, as trees of the forest will sway with the wind. And the Lord said to Yeshayahu: Go out now to meet Achaz, you and She'ar Yashuv your son, to the end of the Upper Pool's conduit, by the road to the Fuller's Field. And say to him: Be guarded, stay still, do not fear, and let your heart not soften before these smoking tails of firebrands, before the rage of Retzin and Aram and the son of Remalyahu. For Aram has conspired to harm you, along with Efrayim and Remalyahu's son: "We shall go up to Jerusalem, bring about her end; we shall break her walls open for ourselves and set a new king over her: the son of Taval." (*Yeshayahu* 6:1-7:6)

For a child is born to us, a son is given us; leadership rests on his shoulders, and he shall be called Mighty God Is Planning Wonders, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. To instill great leadership, peace without end, on the throne of David, and over his kingdom, founding and supporting it with justice and with righteousness now and forever; the passion of the Lord of Hosts will bring all this to be. (*Yeshayahu* 9:5-6)

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

*Chazal* refer to Chapter 6 of the book of *Yeshayahu* as the *Ma’aseh Merkava* ("Workings/account of the [Divine] Chariot)"[[1]](#footnote-1) because of its description of God's angels who accompany the *Shekhina*. Those who selected the *haftarot* saw this passage as appropriate for our *parasha*, whichcontains the revelation of God at Mount Sinai. Chapter 4 in the book of *Devarim* implicitly indicates that the glory of God was revealed at Mount Sinai, and with it many images of sacred beasts, and the Torah warns against making statues in their image and likeness. More explicitly, *Chazal* referred to Chapter 1 of the book of *Yechezkel* as the *Ma’aseh Merkava*.[[2]](#footnote-2)That chapter was chosen as the *haftara* for Shavuot, when we read the account in our *parasha* of the revelation at Mount Sinai. A comparison between the two accounts of the *Ma’aseh Merkava*[[3]](#footnote-3) is found in tractate *Chagiga*:

Raba said: All that Yechezkel saw, Yeshayahu saw. What does Yechezkel resemble? A villager who saw the king. And what does Yeshayahu resemble? A townsman who saw the king. (*Chagiga* 13b)

There is great similarity between the revelation at Mount Sinai in our *parasha* and the *Ma’aseh Merkava* described in the two *haftarot* read with the account, in *Yeshayahu* and *Yechezkel*,but there is also a sharp contrast: The revelation at Mount Sinai involves a revelation of the *Shekhina* to the people of Israel, whereas the *Ma’aseh Merkava* in the Prophets involves the removal of the *Shekhina* from the people of Israel.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**II. Historical Background**

*Chazal* interpret "the year in which King Uziyahu died" not as the year in which the king actually died, but rather the year in which he contracted leprosy, a leper being considered as if he were dead:

Four are alive and yet Scripture refers to them as dead, namely: the destitute, the leper, the blind, and the childless. From where do we know about the leper? As it is stated: "In the year in which King Uziyahu died." Why does Scripture refer to him as dead? Rather, he contracted leprosy, as it is stated: "In the year in which King Uziyahu died" – when he contracted leprosy. (*Tanchuma Parashat Tzav*, and elsewhere)

This is also how Yonatan translates the verse here: "In the year in which King Uziyahu was afflicted [with leprosy]."

The incident is presented in greater detail in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

But as he grew powerful, his arrogant heart grew corrupt, and he broke faith with the Lord his God: he entered the Lord's Sanctuary to offer incense on the incense altar. Azaryahu the priest followed him with eighty of the Lord's priests – powerful men – and confronted King Uziyahu. "It is not for you, Uziyahu, to offer incense to the Lord," they said to him. "That is for the priests, the descendants of Aharon, who have been consecrated to offer incense. Leave the Sanctuary because you broke faith – it will bring you no glory from the Lord God." Uziyahu – with the incense burner in his hand, about to offer incense – flew into a rage, but as he raged at the priests, skin-blight broke out on his forehead before the priests in the House of the Lord by the incense altar. Azaryahu the head priest and all the priests turned to him – and suddenly, he had skin-blight on his forehead! They rushed him out of there, and he too was in a hurry to leave, for the Lord had struck him. King Uziyahu remained a blighted man until his dying day. He remained in secluded quarters, blighted, banned from the House of the Lord, while his son Yotam took charge of the palace and governed the people of the land. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 26:16-21)

According to *Chazal*,this took place in the twenty-seventh year of Uziyahu (who ruled for fifty-two years). They derived this from a verse in II *Melakhim* (15:1): "In the twenty-seventh year of Yorovam, king of Israel, Azarya son of Amatzya, king of Yehuda, became king." This is what they say in *Seder Olam*:

Uziyahu and Yorovam reigned as one, but Yorovam reigned one year in the days of his father, as it is stated: "And Yorovam sat on his throne." "In the twenty-seventh year of Yorovam, king of Israel, Azarya son of Amatzya, king of Yehuda, became king." Can we say this? Surely the two of them reigned as one! Rather, he reigned a plagued kingship (*malkhut menuga’at*). (*Seder Olam Rabba* 19)

Calculating the years of the kings listed in the book of *Melakhim* indicates that Uziyahu, king of Yehuda, and Yorovam son of Yoash, king of Israel, reigned at approximately the same time (with a small difference), so it is impossible to date the reign of Uziyahu to the twenty-seventh year of Yorovam. The argument that Scripture notes the twenty-seventh year as the time when King Uziyahu "reigned a plagued kingship " does not accord well with the plain sense of the verse, and requires explanation. There are quite a few hints in the Bible that in the days of Uziyahu, king of Yehuda, and Yorovam, king of Israel, the two kingdoms united to a large extent under Uziyahu's scepter, and together they turned into a great power and a kingdom that stretched out close to the promised borders – from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates. For instance:

As for the rest of Yorovam's history and all his deeds and heroic feats in battle, and how he restored Damascus and Chamat to Yehuda in Israel – they are recorded in the Book of the History of the Kings of Israel. (II *Melakhim* 14:28)

Scripture describes the conquest of Damascus and Chamat by Yorovam, but states that he returned them to Yehuda, and not to the kingdom of Shomron.

It stands to reason that this unification took place in the twenty-seventh year of Yorovam (and of Uziyahu), and the aforementioned verse, which notes that Uziyahu reigned in the twenty-seventh year of Yorovam, means that Uziyahu was reappointed in that year as king over the united kingdom of Yehuda and Israel. It would seem that in that same year, in the wake of his having grown in power, he arrogantly entered the Temple to burn incense, and contracted leprosy on his forehead. This is what the author of *Seder Olam* meantby "he reigned a plagued kingship." The arrogance that brought leprosy upon him was not a random occurrence, but a long process, as will be discussed below.

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The leprosy that appeared on the king's forehead was not the only disaster that befell Jerusalem in the wake of Uziyahu's forbidden entry into the Sanctuary. It is possible that it was at that time that Jerusalem was hit by the severe earthquake that destroyed a large part of the city. This earthquake is mentioned explicitly twice in the Prophets:

These are the words of Amos of the herdsmen of Tekoa, who prophesied regarding Israel during the days of Uziya, king of Yehuda, and Yorovam the son of Yoash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. (*Amos* 1:1)

On that day His feet will stand upon the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives will split through its middle – into a great valley – from east to west. Half the mountain will shift northward and half southward. And you will flee from this Valley of the Mountains, for the Valley of the Mountains will reach as far as Atzal; you will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uziya, the king of Yehuda. (*Zekharya* 14:4-5)

This earthquake is also alluded to in our *haftara*, which mentions the shifting of the foundations of the Temple due to an earthquake:

The door pillars shook with the voice of him who called – and smoke filled the House. (6:4)

**III. Is our *haftara* Yeshayahu’s prophecy of consecration?**

Most *midrashim* understand this passage as Yeshayahu's prophecy of consecration, even though it is Chapter 6 in the book. According to them, chronologically, our chapter is the beginning of the book of *Yeshayahu*:

Similarly, "in the year of the death of King Uziyahu" – this was the beginning of the section [=book]. Why then was it written here? Because there is no earlier or later in the Torah. (*Mekhilta Massekhet Shira*, *parasha* 7)

Rashi writes in similar fashion:

This section is the beginning of the book and the beginning of Yeshayahu's prophecy, and the five previous sections [=chapters] were stated after this section. But there is no earlier or later in the Torah. (Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 6:1)

The main reason for seeing our *haftara* as a prophecy of consecration is the verse that alludes to the beginning of Yeshayahu's mission:

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." (6:8)

The parallel to the *Ma’aseh Merkava* in *Yechezkel* 1 also points to the possibility that this is a prophecy of consecration, for Yechezkel as well began his prophecy with the *Ma’aseh Merkava*.

However, not all commentators accepted this assumption that our prophecy is a prophecy of consecration. This is what the Abravanel writes:

The plain sense of the verses indicates that this was not the first prophecy that Yeshayahu saw, since it is not written at the beginning of the book… Scripture already explained that Yeshayahu prophesied in the days of Uziya, and this prophecy was after his death in that year. This is one of the things that prove that this prophecy was not his first, and that the chapters appear in their order.

I will adopt the Abravanel's position only with respect to his statement that our chapter is not a prophecy of consecration. In my understanding, not only is it not a prophecy of consecration, but on the contrary, it points to the removal of Yeshayahu's prophecy – a removal that is not final, but nevertheless brings in a cessation of Yeshayahu's prophecy for decades, from the twenty-seventh year of Uziyahu to the days of Achaz son of Yotam in Chapter 7, in the continuation of our *haftara* (according to the Ashkenazi rite).

Let us examine our prophecy:

He said, "Go – tell this people: Hear, you shall hear but understand it not, see it all but know it not. Fatten the heart of this people; make their ears heavy; coat their eyes with plaster, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and their hearts understand and they return – and are healed." I said, "My Lord, how long?" And He said, "Until the towns are stripped of all who live in them, houses left without people, the land stripped bare, and the Lord dispatches man far hence, and swaths of land will be forsaken. (6:9-12)

God commands the prophet not to let the people hear and understand his prophecy, so they will not repent because of it. In the wake of the removal of the *Shekhina* (which will be discussed below), prophecy was removed for a period of over forty years.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Moreover, as mentioned, our *haftara* contains an allusion to the earthquake that took place in the twenty-seventh year of Uziyahu's reign ("the door pillars shook with the voice of him who called"). In the prophecies preceding our prophecy, the earthquake is still a future vision:

Climb into the rock face; bury yourself in the dust for dread of the Lord before the loftiness of His majesty. The proud eyes of man are fallen, man's erect bearing bent low; the Lord alone will be exalted on that day. It is the day of the Lord of Hosts for each exalted, each proud man, for each man who is raised – to be brought down. For all the cedars of Lebanon, high and exalted; for all the oaks of Bashan; for all the lofty mountains, all the high hills; for each tall tower, each impenetrable wall… And people will run to the caves among the rocks, into the caverns of dust, for fear of the Lord and His dazzling majesty as He comes to strike dread across the earth… he will go into the rocks' clefts, the cliff's hidden places for fear of the Lord and His dazzling majesty as He comes to strike dread across the earth. (*Yeshayahu* 2:10-21)

The high towers and fortified walls that will fall as a result of the earthquake allude to Uziyahu's construction enterprises:

Uziyahu built towers in Jerusalem on the Corner Gate and the Valley Gate and at the Angle, and he reinforced them. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 26:9)

Additional elements in these verses allude to an unbearably difficult natural phenomenon, beyond the control of man, and may be interpreted as referring to the aforementioned earthquake. The same is true about the following verses, all of which precede the prophecy of our *haftara*:

And those who are left in Zion, surviving in Jerusalem, "holy" will be said of them, of all in Jerusalem who are inscribed to live… And that shelter will be shade all day from searing heat and a covering, a hiding place from the deluge, from the rain. (*Yeshayahu* 4:3-6)

And so – Sheol spreads herself wide; her mouth gapes wide without limit. And My people’s glory, her crowds and her noise, will all fall with those who rejoice in her.

So the Lord's fury rages against His people, and He stretches His hand out over them and beats them, and the mountains quake, and their corpses will be tossed aside like trash in the streets.

On that day he roars like the roaring of the sea, and he looks down to earth and sees – darkness, pain, and light, darkening, across her clouded skies. (*Yeshayahu* 5)

In my understanding, Yeshayahu's first prophecy is found in Chapter 2.[[6]](#footnote-6) In Chapters 2-5, Yeshayahu describes the arrogance of the king and the rich in Jerusalem and their oppression of the poor, and Chapter 6 (the main part of our *haftara*), which describes the removal of the *Shekhina* and the earthquake in Jerusalem, is the conclusion of this painful vision.

Paralleling Yeshayahu's prophecy in Jerusalem, Amos prophesied in Beit-El and in Shomron, in the kingdom of Yorovam son of Yoash. It seems that his entire prophecy lasted for only two years, starting from two years before the earthquake (which was also in the coastal cities, and not only in Jerusalem) and until the earthquake itself. He addresses the same problems – the sins of violence and oppression by the rich of Shomron. He also concludes with the earthquake that was mentioned in *Yeshayahu*:

I saw my Lord standing beside the altar. He said: "Strike the lintel, and let the doorposts quake… And my Lord, God of Hosts – it is He – who but touches the earth, and it dissolves; all inhabitants in mourning; He makes all the earth rise like the Nile and sink like the river of Egypt. He who built His heavenly dome and established His myriad forces upon the earth, He calls to the sea and spills it out over the land – the Lord is His name. (*Amos* 9:1-6)

**IV. The *Ma’aseh Merkava* in Our Chapter, and its Meaning**

The role of the *Ma’aseh Merkava* in prophecy can be learned from its details in *Yechezkel* (Chapters 1 and 9-11). There, the prophet describes God's *Shekhina* as it departs from the Temple in Jerusalem and heads toward Babylon, in order to be there with those who were exiled with Yehoyakhin.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is how the description of the journeys of the *Shekhina* ends there:

The cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them, and above, upon them, the glory of the God of Israel. The glory of the Lord rose from within the city and stood upon the mountain east of the city. And a spirit lifted me up and brought me back to the Chaldeans, to the exile, in a vision by the spirit of God, and the vision I had seen rose off me. (*Yechezkel* 11:22-24)

So too, the *Ma’aseh Merkava* in our *haftara* describes the removal of the *Shekhina* from the Temple – due to the sins of arrogance, both towards God and towards the weaker people in the nation. In Yeshayahu's description, however, the *Shekhina* does not go east to Babylon, but ascends to heaven. Therefore, the chariot in *Yeshayahu* has no wheels, but primarily wings:

There were seraphim standing above Him, each with six wings – with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. (6:2)

The cherubim that Yeshayahu sees are those on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies:

These cherubim should have wings spread upward, sheltering the cover. They should face one another, and look toward the cover. (*Shemot* 25:2)

The wings of Yeshayahu's cherubim cover their faces instead of turning one to the other, because they express the concealment of the face of the *Shekhina* and its removal in the wake of the sin. Yeshayahu's cherubim also cover their feet, thus canceling their standing in the Temple in Jerusalem (like the raising of a plane's wheels when it takes off to the sky). With their third pair of wings, the cherubim fly, bringing the *Shekhina* from its place in God's Temple in Jerusalem to its alternative place in the sky, not among humans.

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The prophet sees God sitting on a high, raised throne:

In the year in which King Uziyahu died I saw the Lord sitting on a high, raised throne, the hem of His clothing filling the Sanctuary. (6:1)

It is possible to translate this verse differently, applying the description of “high and raised” to God rather than to His throne, and *Chazal* grappled with the two readings:

Similarly you say: "In the year in which King Uziyahu died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and raised." And we do not know whether the throne is high and raised, or God. Therefore the verse teaches (*Yeshayahu* 57:15): "Thus says the high, the exalted One." (*Midrash Tannaim Devarim* 14)

It is possible to come to two opposite conclusions on this question. The plain sense of the verses seems to be in accordance with *Chazal's* conclusion in the *midrash*, and this is also the conclusion of those who arranged the cantillation notes – that God is high and raised (verbs, and not adjectives). Or in a more accessible formulation: God, who until now has been sitting on His throne, rises and elevates Himself from His throne in the Temple and goes up to heaven. His *Shekhina* removes itself from the Temple.

It seems that those who established the text of the liturgy, when they inserted these words at the end of *Pesukei De-zimra* on Shabbat and festivals, deliberately changed their meaning. They intended the words "high and raised" to serve as a description of the throne – for their goal was not to address the removal of the *Shekhina,* but to formulate praise of God who dwells among us.

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The angels proclaim aloud:

And they called out one to another, "Holy, holy, holy – the Lord of Hosts – all the world's fullness His glory." (6:3)

"Holy" here means "separated"[[8]](#footnote-8) – God is separated by way of this declaration from the "company" of men, and His *Shekhina* leaves them. His (dimmed) glory fills the world, and is no longer concentrated in the Temple. This is like Yeshayahu's final prophecy:

Thus speaks the Lord: The heavens are My throne; the world, My footstool. What house, then, would You build for Me, where could I rest? (*Yeshayahu* 66:1)

In that prophecy as well, the *Shekhina* departs from the Temple and goes up to heaven, and to the entire world, because of the sins of those who visit the Temple:

While he, killing his ox is like a murderer of men, the one who offers up a lamb might so well behead a dog; the offering brought may just as well be pigs' blood; and his remembrance incense is a blessing of iniquity. These men, they choose their paths, their souls desire their disgusting things. (*Yeshayahu* 66:3)

In the future, when the *Shekhina* returns to the Temple, instead of "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of hosts," it will be said: "The Lord shall reign forever – He is your God, Zion, for all generations. *Halleluya*!" (*Tehillim* 146:10).

**V. The Prophet’s Purification from Sin, and the People’s Punishment**

We should not ignore the fact that the words of the angels also contain praise for God, and so too their statement "Holy, holy, holy – the Lord of hosts." The prophet, who hears this in his vision, wants to join with them in their sanctification of God's name, just as we say in our *Kaddish* prayer: "Let us sanctify and extol You, echoing the sweet words of the company of the holy seraphim," but his lips do not obey, and they remain silent. The prophet blames himself and his people for this, being of unclean lips. Then an angel-seraph draws near to him, holding a coal taken from the altar, and he cleanses his lips from the impurity which has attached to him as a human being:

And I said, "This ache – I am condemned, for my mouth has been defiled, one man among a people with their mouths defiled, and my eyes see the King, the Lord of Hosts." One of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a coal, taken with tongs from the altar top. With this he touched my lips and said, "When this has touched your lips, your iniquity is gone, and all your sin forgiven." (6:5-7)[[9]](#footnote-9)

Now Yeshayahu can recite the holiness formula with the angels, but God sends him (after he volunteered) on a different mission. This is a mission to the people, with a message of removal:

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." He said, "Go – tell this people: Hear, you shall hear but understand it not, see it all but know it not. (6:8-9)

The *Shekhina*’s departurewill last until the day of a great future calamity, when only about a tenth of the people will remain (Yehuda, after the exile of Shomron), and the calamity will even consume some of them in the days of Sancheriv:

I said, "My Lord, how long?" And He said, "Until the towns are stripped of all who live in them, houses left without people, the land stripped bare, and the Lord dispatches man far hence, and swaths of land will be forsaken; if a tenth there will survive, it will return and will be burnt like the terebinth and oak tree that drop their leaves, and yet the trunk remains – and the trunk is holy seed." (6:11-13)

 **VI. The Prophecy in the Days of Achaz**

The Ashkenazi custom adds six verses from the days of Achaz to our *haftara* (as well as two verses of consolation from Chapter 9, thus bringing the *haftara* to twenty-one verses – the minimal length of a *haftara*).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Achaz was a weak and wicked king. He was the first to erect *bamot* in the Ben Hinom Valley next to Jerusalem, and he himself passed his son through fire (or sacrificed him) to Molekh.[[11]](#footnote-11) Later, he ordered that the altar of the Assyrian king be brought into the Temple, thus causing God's sanctuary to remain closed for an extended period of time. Retzin king of Aram and Pekach son of Remalyahu king of Shomron wanted to join Achaz and the kingdom of Yehuda in their rebellion against the one who saw himself as the king of kings in the region, Tiglat Pileser, king of Assyria, but Achaz was afraid to cooperate with them and preferred to remain subject to Tiglat Pileser. Retzin and Pekach decided to go up to Jerusalem and take control of it, and make the son of Taval, who cooperated with them, king instead of Achaz.

The two struck the king of Yehuda with devastating blows:

The Lord his God handed him over to the king of Aram. He defeated him, took a great number of his people captive, and led them to Damascus. He was also handed over to the king of Israel, who dealt him a crushing blow. Pekach son of Remalyahu killed 120,000 of Yehuda in a single day, all powerful warriors, for they had abandoned the Lord, God of their ancestors. Zikhri, a warrior of Efrayim, killed Maaseyahu the king's son, and Azrikam the chief officer of the palace, and Elkana, second to the king. And the Israelites took 200,000 of their brothers captive – women, boys, and girls; they also seized vast amounts of spoil from them, and they brought the spoil to Shomron. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 28:5-8)

As mentioned, their goal was the conquest of Jerusalem and the removal of Achaz and the House of David in favor of a king of their choice.

It seems as if the only realistic option before Achaz, whose army was destroyed, was to seek the help of the king of Assyria. The spiritual and national cost of this possibility was terrible,[[12]](#footnote-12) and in the prophet's view – unbearable. God sends the prophet to offer Achaz a different way:

And the Lord said to Yeshayahu: Go out now to meet Achaz, you and She'ar Yashuv your son, to the end of the Upper Pool's conduit, by the road to the Fuller's Field. And say to him: Be guarded, stay still, do not fear, and let your heart not soften before these smoking tails of firebrands, before the rage of Retzin and Aram and the son of Remalyahu. (7:3-4)

Yeshayahu exits from the northern side of the wall of Jerusalem, which was closed because of the fear of Retzin and Pekach, to the pool where the residents of Jerusalem washed their clothing, supposedly to wash his clothes. The terrified guards call to him to return immediately to the city, but the prophet mocks them and their fear and remains there to wash his clothes, saying that Retzin, Pekach, and their armies are nothing more than smoking tails of firebrands, which will collapse in a few days. The prophet's intention is to prevent Achaz from shamefully submitting to the king of Assyria, and to suggest that he pray to God and go back to keeping His commandments. In exchange for this, the prophet promises a miraculous victory (probably the kind of victory that took place at the gates of Jerusalem a few years later, when God's angel struck the entire Assyrian camp). He promises that the plot of Retzin and Pekach will never come to pass:

For Aram has conspired to harm you, along with Efrayim and Remalyahu’s son: "We shall go up to Jerusalem, bring about her end; we shall break her walls open for ourselves and set a new king over her: the son of Taval." Thus says the Lord God: It will not come to pass; it will not be. (7:5-7)

**VII. The Prophecy Concerning Chizkiyahu**

From the verses that are not included in our *haftara*, it appears that Achaz refused to heed the prophet's words, turned to the king of Assyria, and paid the full spiritual and national price for that.

After our chapter (and its continuation – Chapter 8), Yeshayahu leaves Achaz and turns to the next generation, in order to at least save them:

For a child is born to us, a son is given us; leadership rests on his shoulders, and he shall be called Mighty God Is Planning Wonders, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. To instill great leadership, peace without end, on the throne of David, and over his kingdom, founding and supporting it with justice and with righteousness now and forever; the passion of the Lord of Hosts will bring all this to be. (9:5-6)

The "child" is Chizkiyahu, who was already born to Achaz at the time of the prophecy, and here Yeshayahu earmarks him to receive the "leadership," the kingdom, after Achaz. This will be a kingdom of justice and righteousness, a kingdom that believes in God and worships Him. Yeshayahu himself was from the royal house,[[13]](#footnote-13) and he educated Chizkiyahu and prepared him for the great religious revolution that began immediately following the death of Achaz with the purification of the Temple and of Jerusalem from the idolatry that had been practiced there.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See Rashi (*Yeshayahu* 6:3), citing a *midrash*, and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Yechezkel*  346 and *Shir Ha-shirim* 982. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To these two must be added the *Ma’aseh Merkava* seen by the prophet Mikhayahu son of Yimla (I *Melakhim* 22:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quite a few *haftaroth* contain a prophecy that contradicts what was stated in the *parasha.* A few examples:

a. *Parashat* *Tzav* speaks in praise of the sacrifices, whereas its *haftara* (*Yirmeyahu* 7) states: "Heap your burnt offerings upon your other sacrifices and eat the meat. For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt, I did not speak to them, nor did I command them about matters of burnt offerings and sacrifices."

b. *Parashat Kedoshim* deals with Israel's separation from the rest of the nations, whereas its *haftara* (according to the Ashkenazi rite, *Amos* 9) states that there is no difference, as it were, between Israel and the nations: "Are you not to Me like the children of Kush, O children of Israel? Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt as I brought the Philistines up from Kaftor and Aram from Kir?"

c. *Parashat* *Bamidbar* deals extensively with counting the Israelites, whereas its *haftara* (*Hoshea* 2) declares: "Yet the children of Israel will number like the sands of the sea, not measurable or countable." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Uziyahu ruled for another twenty-five years, after which his son Yehoram ruled for sixteen more years, and after that began the days of Achaz. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It has a clear opening – "The vision of Yeshayahu son of Amotz, which he saw regarding Yehuda and Jerusalem." It is difficult to say that Chapter 1 is the beginning of Yeshayahu's prophecy, because it describes Sancheriv's siege of Jerusalem in the days of Chizkiyahu, three generations after Uziyahu*,* as noted by Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The same is true regarding the *Ma’aseh Merkava* in the prophecy of Mikhayahu son of Yimla to Ahav, mentioned above, but this is not the place to expand on that prophecy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare *Vayikra* 20:20: "Be holy to Me, for I the Lord am **holy**, and **I have set you apart** from all other peoples to be My own." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There are two different ways of interpreting these verses:

a. According to the interpretive assumption mentioned above, that this is a prophecy of consecration, the coal that cleanses the impurity of Yeshayahu's lips in preparation for his prophecy reminds us of the *aggada* regarding Moshe in his childhood, that Gavriel the angel pushed his hand to take a coal of fire (instead of a gold coin from the hand of Pharaoh), to put it in his mouth, and become thereby of "uncircumcised lips" (see *Shemot Rabba* 1:26). God also put His hand on Yirmeyahu's mouth when he was consecrated (see *Yirmeyahu* 1:9), and Yirmeyahu later said: "Behold, My word is like fire, declares the Lord" (*Yirmeyahu* 23:29).

b. *Chazal* saw Yeshayahu's words about God's people as words of slander. The burning coal placed in his mouth was meant to atone for this sin (see *Yevamot* 49b and *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Ashkenazi custom is puzzling for two reasons:

a. The six verses from the days of Achaz do not relate to our *parasha*, nor to the main part of the *haftara* (the prophecy in Chapter 6). They were said, as mentioned, over forty years later and in a completely different historical context. Many *haftarot* do not meet the requirement to read 21 verses; some are even shorter than the thirteen verses of our *haftara* according to the custom of the Sephardim, which ends at the end of Chapter 6.

b. The six verses are cut in the middle of a section, and even in the middle of a sentence. The last sentence, which begins with the words, "For Aram has conspired to harm you," ends with the verse that follows our *haftara*, and is not read with it: it is only half a sentence, preceding the statement: "Thus says the Lord God: It will not come to pass; it will not be" in verse 7. This is the consolation, which states that Jerusalem shall not fall as planned by Retzin and Pekach son of Remalyahu. Those who decided on the *haftara* cut this sentence in two, and in its place they inserted a consolation from a third period and from a third chapter, from the days of Chizkiyahu. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Compare what is stated in II *Melakhim* (16:3) to the verse in II *Divrei Ha-yamim* (28:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. a. As mentioned, Achaz replaced the altar of God in the Temple with the altar of the king of Assyria. This is one example of the prices he paid in the area of idolatry, and we do not know them all.

b. To a certain extent, he can be compared to Bashar Assad, the president of Syria, who, when pressed by his enemies, turned for help to the Russians and Iranians, thereby losing all control over his people and his country. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Megilla* 10b and *Sota* 10b, and especially *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 14. Amotz, the father of Yeshayahu, was the brother of Amatzya, father of Uziyahu. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)