YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The Haftara for Shavuot**

It was in the thirtieth year in the fourth month on the fifth day of the month. I was in the exile, by the Kevar River; the heavens opened up, and I saw Godly visions. On the fifth day of the month, the fifth year of the exile of King Yoyakhin, so it was: the word of the Lord came to Yechezkel son of Buzi the priest, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Kevar River; there the hand of the Lord was upon him. And I looked: Behold, a storm wind came from the north, a great cloud and a flaring fire with a radiance around it, and inside it, within the fire, the look of something luminous, and within that was the form of four living beings. This was their appearance: they had the form of a man; each one had four faces, and each one of them had four wings; their legs were straight-standing, and their feet were like a calf's hoof, gleaming with a look of burnished bronze; they had man's hands beneath their wings on their four sides, and the four of them had faces and wings. Their wings were joined to each other; they did not turn when they moved but moved in the direction of one of the faces. Their faces were in the form of the face of a man with the face of a lion on the right of the four, the face of an ox on the left of the four, and the face of an eagle on all four of them. Their faces and their wings were separated above: each one had two joining it to the others and two covering its body; each moved in the direction of one of the faces – wherever the spirit would move, they moved – they did not turn when they moved. The form of the living beings, their appearance, was like coals burning, like the appearance of torch flames; it passed among the living beings; the fire had a radiance, lightning flashed out from the fire, and the living beings ran forward and back with the appearance of darting flames. I looked at the living beings, and there, a wheel was on the ground beside each of the living beings with the four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their design had the look of an aquamarine gem, all four of them with the same form; their appearance and their design were as though one wheel were inside the other. When they moved, they moved on any of their four sides; they did not turn as they moved. Their rims, towering, inspired fear; and the rims of all four of them were covered, all around, with eyes. When the living beings moved, the wheels moved beside them, and when the living beings rose above the ground, the wheels also rose; wherever the spirit would move, they moved; there where the spirit moved, the wheels rose with them, for the spirit of the living being was also in the wheels: when they moved, they too moved, and when they stood still, they too stood still, and when they rose from the ground, the wheels too rose with them because the spirit of the living being was in the wheels. Above the head of the living being was the form of an expanse with a look of ice, its overawing glare, suspended over their heads from above, and beneath the expanse, their wings reached out toward each other. Each had a pair covering them; each had a pair covering their bodies. I heard the sound of their wings when they moved; it was like the sound of great rushing waters, like the voice of Shaddai, a clamor like the noise of a gathered army. Standing still, they lowered their wings; a voice came from upon the expanse which was over their heads – standing still, they lowered their wings. Above the film which was over their heads, with the appearance of a sapphire, was the form of a throne; and upon the form of the throne – upon it, above – was a form with the appearance of a man. And I saw: something that looked luminous, the appearance of fire encasing it from what appeared to be his waist and above; and from what appeared to be his waist and below, I saw an appearance like fire with a radiance around it; it was like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day; the radiance around it had that appearance. This was the appearance of the form of the glory of the Lord. I saw it and I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice speak. (*Yechezkel* 1:1-28)

**I. The Connection Between the Festival of Shavuot and the *Haftara***

Our *haftara* is referred to in the Mishna as *ma'aseh merkava* ("the work of the Chariot"), and it deals with the revelation of God, together with His entourage of angels, to the prophet Yechezkel. This is also how the Sages imagined the giving of the Torah, which is at the heart of the festival of Shavuot and is the subject of its Torah reading:

At the time when God revealed Himself on Mount Sinai, twenty-two myriads of angels descended with Him, as it is stated: "The chariots of God are myriads, even thousands upon thousands" (*Tehillim* 68:18). (*Bamidbar Rabba* 2)

The description in the book of *Devarim* supports this *midrash* (and others), along with the idea that the image of the angels was like the image of the *chayot* (“living beings”) of the Chariot:

And you came close and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was ablaze to high heaven and shrouded in dark clouds. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no image; there was only a voice… And so take great care for your own sake not to act in self-destruction, making yourselves any idol, an image of any shape, any form of man or of woman, or in the form of any animal of the land, or any winged bird that flies in the sky, or in the form of anything that crawls on the ground, or of any fish in the waters below the earth. (*Devarim* 4:11-18)

The Torah reviews the revelation at Mount Sinai and emphasizes that the people did not see the image of God's glory. They saw forms of animals, beasts, and birds out of the fire, but these were the figures of accompanying angels, like the *chayot* of the Chariot – not the "image" of God. This is the meaning of the prohibition of making an idol or an image.

Our *haftara* confirms the notion that the *Shekhina*’s retinueincludes angels with the forms of familiar animals, but they are only the retinue, surrounding the place from which the voice of God is sounded, with nothing seen in it, like the cherubim on the Ark cover [*kaporet*]*.*

The *Mekhilta* explicitly connects the images in the book of *Devarim* with the *ma'aseh merkava* in the book of *Yechezkel*:

One must not make for Him an image of all these, but may he make for Him an image of the angels, the cherubim, the *ofanim* or the *hashmalim*? Therefore, the verse states: "which is in the sky." (*Mekhilta Yitro*, *masekhta de-bahodesh*, *parasha* 6)

Our *haftara* is one of those that holds a contrast to its corresponding Torah reading, giving us the complement to the Torah reading – a phenomenon that is also found in other *haftarot*, such as those of *Parashat Tzav* and *Parashat Kedoshim*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The *parasha* we read on Shavuot describes the resting of God's *Shekhina* and His retinue before the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, which was the basis for the construction of the *Mishkan*, whereas our *haftara* describes in similar fashion the removal of the *Shekhina* from the Temple on the eve of the destruction of the First Temple.

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A *baraita* actually records two opinions regarding the Torah reading and the *haftara* for Shavuot:

On Shavuot, [we read] "Seven weeks" (*Devarim* 16:9), and a *haftara* from *Chavakuk*. According to others, "In the third month" (*Shemot* 19), and for the *haftara*,the *merkava* (*Yechezkel* 1). (*Megilla* 31a)

According to the first opinion, the Torah reading is not about the giving of the Torah, but discusses Shavuot as a harvest festival and relates especially to the *mitzva* to celebrate it together with the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. This is also the view in the Mishna (*Megilla* 3:5). The *haftara* from *Chavakuk*, on the other hand, does describe God's revelation at Mount Sinai:

God appears from Teiman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah His splendor covers the heavens; the earth is filled with His glory. His radiance illuminates like light; rays emanate from His every side; therein lies His hidden strength. Before Him will come plague, fiery blight at His feet. He stands and the earth shakes; He looks and nations tremble; age-old mountains shatter; everlasting hills bow low; all the world's ways are His. (*Chavakuk* 3:3-6)

The passage in *Chavakuk* is very reminiscent of the description in the book of *Devarim*:

[Moshe] said: "The Lord came from Sinai, He shone upon them from Se'ir, He appeared over the crest of Paran and came among myriads of holy ones: at His right hand, darting fire. (*Devarim* 33:2)

However, according to the account in *Chavakuk*, the revelation is not for the purpose of giving the Torah, but for God's war for the salvation of His people, as in his appearance at "Sinai" – Mount Tavor – in the war waged by Devora and Barak against Sisera, the commander of Yavin's army. The chapter in *Chavakuk* continues with:

Is the Lord angry at the rivers; is it against the rivers that You rage? Is Your fury against the ocean so that You ride upon Your horses of war, Your chariots of deliverance?…

The sun, the moon stand still in their spheres; by the light of Your bolts the world will march, by the glow of Your flashing spear…

You emerge to liberate Your people, to liberate Your king. (*Chavakuk* 3:8,11,13)

Our custom in the Land of Israel is the opinion of the "others" in the *baraita*. The first opinion, and that of the Mishna, is followed today outside the Land of Israel on the second day of Shavuot. We will concentrate on the *haftara* for the first day according to our custom, the *haftara* of the *ma'aseh merkava*.

**II. Historical Background**

And I looked: Behold, a storm wind came from the north, a great cloud and a flaring fire with a radiance around it. (*Yechezkel* 1:4)

Our prophecy opens with a storm coming from the north, similar to the opening of Yirmeyahu's prophecy about thirty-five years earlier:

The word of the Lord came to me a second time: "What do you see?" I answered, "I see a boiling cauldron facing the north." And the Lord said to me: "From the north disaster shall burst forth upon all the inhabitants of the land, for I am about to summon all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north," declares the Lord. "They shall come; each shall set up a throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem against her ramparts roundabout and against all the cities of Yehuda. (*Yirmeyahu* 1:13-15)

Yirmeyahu sees a boiling cauldron, giving off steam that, because of the wind, is oriented from north to south, similar to the cloud and the flaring fire in our prophecy. Yirmeyahu explains the meaning of the direction – the storm coming from the north. The subject is the army of the king of Babylon, who will come to the Land of Israel with his allies, from north to south. Babylon is located to the east of Israel, but the caravan route (and here, the route of the army) reaches the Land of Israel from the northeast. In any case, it seems that this is the meaning of the beginning of our *haftara*, which describes the wind coming from the north.

**II­­a. Yirmeyahu and the False Prophets in the Fourth Year of Tzidkiyahu**

Our prophecy was delivered in the fifth year of the exile of King Yehoyakhin, which is the fifth year of Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda (who ascended the throne immediately after Yehoyakhin was sent into exile).[[2]](#footnote-2) One year earlier, in the fourth year of Tzidkiyahu, two events occurred that seem to constitute the background of our prophecy.

The first event was Yirmeyahu's prophecy of reins and bars:

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. (*Yirmeyahu* 27:2-6)

The prophecy of the reins and the bars was intended to convince Tzidkiyahu, his people, and the emissaries of the mentioned nations who came to him, not to rebel against Nevukhadnetzar, to whom God had handed over all of the lands. In the background of this prophecy were the false prophecies of those who supported a joint rebellion against the king of Babylon and promised that the vessels of the House of God, that had been brought to Babylon together with Yehoyakhin and his exiles, would all return to Jerusalem. This is what Yirmeyahu said about these prophecies:

And to the priests, and to all these people, I said, "This is what the Lord said: Do not listen to the words of your prophets, who prophesy to you saying that the vessels of the Lord's House are about to be returned from Babylon – now, quickly. For they prophesy falsehood to you. Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylon and survive. Why should the city become a ruin? If they are indeed prophets, and if the word of the Lord is indeed with them, let them beg of the Lord of Hosts not to allow the vessels that remain in the House of the Lord, and in the palace of the king of Yehuda, and in Jerusalem, to go to Babylon. For this is what the Lord of Hosts has said about the pillars, and the Sea, and the stands, and the other vessels that remain in this city, those that Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, did not take when he exiled Yekhonya son of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, from Jerusalem to Babylon, along with all the nobles of Yehuda and Jerusalem. For this is what the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, had said regarding the vessels that remain in the Lord's House, and in the palace of the king of Yehuda, and Jerusalem: To Babylon they shall be brought, and there they shall remain until the day that I appoint for them, declares the Lord. Then I will bring them up and return them to this place." (*Yirmeyahu* 27:16-22)

At the time of Yehoyakhin's exile, Nevukhadnetzar took all the gold in the Sanctuary itself, but left the large and heavy bronze vessels that were in the Temple courtyard. Important for our purposes, for reasons that will be spelled out below, are the ten bronze lavers and their ten stands – the *mekhonot*. Yirmeyahu warns in his prophecy that if Tzidkiyahu participates in the rebellion against Nevukhadnetzar, the remaining bronze vessels will also be taken to Babylon.

The second event was the false prophecy of Chananya son of Azur, who claimed the vessels that had been exiled to Babylon would return to Jerusalem. During the polemic about his prophecy, Chananya son of Azur broke the bar that was on Yirmeyahu's neck by God's command. At the end of that incident, Chananya came out as the winner in the eyes of the people, because Yirmeyahu remained silent and did not react when the bar was broken:

It was that year, at the beginning of the reign of Tzidkiya, king of Yehuda, in the fifth month of the fourth year, that Chananya son of Azur the prophet, who was from Givon, spoke to me in the House of the Lord, in full view of the priests and all the people. He said, "This is what the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, said: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. In two years I will restore all the vessels of the Lord's House to this place, those that Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylon took from here and brought to Babylon. (*Yirmeyahu* 28:1-3)

Then Chananya the prophet took the bar from the neck of Yirmeya the prophet and broke it. And Chananya spoke in full view of all the people and said, "This is what the Lord said: Thus shall I break the yoke of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, in two years, from the necks of all nations." Yirmeya the prophet went on his way. (Ibid. 10-11)

**IIb. The Connection Between the Bronze Vessels in the Courtyard and the Heavenly Chariot**

It is explicitly stated in the book of *Melakhim* that the lavers, and especially their stands, were constructed according to the principles of the structure of the heavenly Chariot:

He made ten stands of bronze; each stand was four cubits long, four cubits wide, and three cubits high. This is how the stands were constructed: They consisted of panels; the panels were joined by frames. On the panels in between the frames were lions, oxen, and cherubim; there was a base above the frames, and hammered spirals beneath the lions and oxen. There were four bronze wheels on every stand, with bronze axles. Its four legs had brackets underneath the laver; the brackets were cast with spirals on each side. Its spout rose a cubit above the capital; the spout was shaped like a cylindrical base, a cubit and a half across. On the spout, too, there were carvings; its panels were square, not round. The four wheels were beneath the panels, with the wheel sockets fixed into the stand; each wheel was a cubit and a half high. The wheels were designed like chariot wheels; their sockets, rims, spokes, and hubs were all of cast metal. (I *Melakhim* 7:27-33)

The *chayot* of the Chariot*,* the wheels, and the bronze wheel sockets look like their counterparts in the *ma'aseh merkava* described in our *haftara*, which were "gleaming with a look of burnished bronze." It seems that the bronze animals and the bronze wheels of the stands were like "bodies" containing the "soul," namely, the angels of the heavenly Chariot. The Chariot rested in the courtyard of the Temple, and the *Shekhina* inside the Temple. The role of the Chariot was to allow the *Shekhina* to leave the Temple when the actions of the people of Israel did not justify the resting of the *Shekhina* among them, in the Temple and in Jerusalem.

Our prophecy was delivered in Babylon exactly one year after the confrontation between Yirmeyahu and the false prophets led by Chananya son of Azur, in the fifth month of the fifth year of Tzidkiyahu and the exile of Yehoyakhin. In the fifth month of the fourth year, Chananya had claimed that the vessels of the Lord's house would return in two years, and Yechezkel's vision regarding the carrying of the Chariot eastward, to Babylon, largely decided the debate in Yirmeyahu's favor. The bronze vessels are to move to Babylon just as the heavenly Chariot is moving there.

**III. The Chariot’s Journey**

And the living beings ran forward and back with the appearance of darting flames. (1:14)

Our *haftara* describes the great movement of a journey, but not a journey in a particular direction. The emerging impression is one of "forward and back," that is to say, running in place, without leaving. Assuming that the journey of the Chariot from the Temple reflects the removal of the *Shekhina* from the Temple and Jerusalem – at this stage, in the fifth year of Tzidkiyahu, this has not yet happened. The removal of the *Shekhina* is still only a threat to the people and the kingdom; there is still room for repentance and correction and keeping the Chariot in its place.

But the *ma'aseh merkava* in our chapter has a continuation in the following years, in the coming chapters.

In the sixth year of Tzidkiyahu (and of Yehoyakhin's exile), Yechezkel sees a terrible vision of God, relating to the abominations committed in the Temple:

It was in the sixth year in the sixth month on the fifth day of the month: I was sitting in my house with the elders of Yehuda sitting before me when the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. And I looked: There was a form with the appearance of fire: from what appeared to be his waist and below, fire, and from his waist and above the appearance of brilliance, the look of something luminous. He stretched out the figure of a hand, which took hold of me by the locks of my head, and a spirit lifted me up between the land and the heavens and brought me to Jerusalem in a Godly vision. (*Yechezkel* 8:1-3)

Based on what is stated in that prophecy, the vision continues the *ma'aseh merkava* from our *haftara*:

And there was the glory of the God of Israel as in the vision that I saw in the valley. (*Yechezkel* 8:4)

According to the false prophecy of Chananya son of Azur and his company, the vessels of the Lord's house, and with them the full resting of the *Shekhina*, should have returned to Jerusalem in the sixth year. What happens in the prophecy of Yechezkel is the exact opposite.

The continuation of the calamity is described in the following verses:

Now the glory of the God of Israel had moved off the cherub it had rested upon to the threshold of the House. (*Yechezkel* 9:3)

The glory of the Lord rose from the cherub upon the threshold of the House; the House was filled with the cloud, and the radiance of the glory of the Lord filled the court; the sound from the wings of the cherubim could be heard all the way to the outer court – like the voice of E-l Sha-ddai when He speaks. (*Yechezkel* 10:4-5)

And the cherubim rose up – these were the living beings that I saw by the Kevar River – and when the cherubim moved, the wheels moved with them; and when the cherubim lifted up their wings so that they could rise up above the land, the wheels that were with them did not turn: when they stood, they too stood, and when they rose up, they too rose up, for the spirit of the living beings was in them. And the glory of the Lord left the threshold of the House to stand upon the cherubim; the cherubim lifted their wings, and they rose up from the ground to leave – before my very eyes – with the wheels beside them; they stood at the entrance of the eastern gate of the House of the Lord, and the glory of the God of Israel was resting upon them from above. (*Yechezkel* 10:15-19)

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 back me 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)

These verses describe the chariot traveling eastward from between the two cherubim to above the cherub, to the threshold of the house and the outer court, from there to the eastern gate of the Temple, into the city, to the mountain that is east of the city (the Mount of Olives), and to the land of the Chaldeans, to the exile – and from there, the vision rose to heaven. In the words of *Chazal*:

Rav Yehuda bar Idi said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: The *Shekhina* traveled ten journeys, as derived from the verses. And corresponding to them, the Sanhedrin was exiled [in ten stages], as is known from tradition. The *Shekhina* traveled ten journeys, as derived from the verses: From the Ark coverto the cherub; and from the cherub to the cherub; and from the cherub to the threshold; and from the threshold to the courtyard; and from the courtyard to the altar; and from the altar to the roof; and from the roof to the wall; and from the wall to the city; and from the city to the mountain; and the mountain to the wilderness; and from the wilderness it ascended and rested in its place. (*Rosh ha-Shana* 31a; differently in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 34, and differently again in *Eikha Rabba*, *petichta* 25, and in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 13)

The *Shekhina* did not remove itself completely. It went to Babylon and remained there with the exiles of Yehoyakhin, hoping to return to the Land of Israel. Yirmeyahu spoke similarly in the prophecy of the figs (chap. 24), and the same follows from the epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon:

Know, that at first, when Israel went into exile with Yekhonya and the craftsmen and the smiths, and several prophets were with them, they brought them to Neharde'a, and Yekhonya king of Yehuda and his company built a synagogue and they erected it with stones and soil that they brought with them from the Temple, to fulfill what is stated: "For your servants love her very stones; they even cherish her dust" (*Tehillim* 102:15). And they called that synagogue the Shaf ve-Yativ Synagoge in Neharde’a, that is to say, the Temple traveled and settled here. And the *Shekhina* was with them, as it is stated in *Megilla*: "Where in Babylon? Rav said: In the Hutzal Synagogue, and Shmuel said: In the Shaf ve-Yativ Synagogue." (*Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon* [*Rabbanan Savorai*], chap. 1)[[3]](#footnote-3)

**IV. The Difference Between the *Ma'aseh Merkava* in *Yechezkel* and in *Yeshayahu***

*Chazal* compared the *ma'aseh merkava* detailed in our *haftara* to the *ma'aseh merkava* in chapter 6 of *Sefer Yeshayahu*, read as the *haftara* for *Parashat Yitro*, which deals with the revelation at Mount Sinai (the passages we read on the festival of Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah). This is what is stated in *Yeshayahu*:

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. (*Yeshayahu* 6:1-4)

There are several differences between the two accounts:

1. The angels of Yeshayahu's Chariot are not *"chayot"* as in *Yechezkel*, but "seraphim." (Perhaps they appeared to be made out of hot bronze, like the seraph made by Moshe in the wilderness [*Bamidbar* 21:9], and as is stated in our *haftara*: "gleaming with a look of burnished bronze.")

2. The angels of Yechezkel's Chariot have only four wings – two covering their bodies, and two joining them to the others on either side (*Yechezkel* 1:11) – whereas the angels of Yeshayahu's Chariot have six wings. Covering their faces with two of the wings may be an expression of hiding their faces; covering their feet with two of the wings may be a kind of "folding up of the wheels" of an airplane when it takes off; and with two wings they fly upwards, rather than racing eastward like the chariot seen by Yechezkel, which goes off to Babylon to be there with the Jews living in exile. The angels of Yechezkel's Chariot have wheels, which move horizontally. Yeshayahu's Chariot, in contrast, takes off upwards, toward heaven, and removes itself from our world.[[4]](#footnote-4) Therefore, the angels say: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord…"; God is "holy," that is to say, set apart. The angels of Yechezkel's Chariot may say instead: "Blessed is the Lord's glory from its place" (*Yechezkel* 3:12), which may mean “from its new place in the Babylonian exile.”

3. In *Yechezkel*, at the stage described in chapter 1, the movement to Babylon had not yet begun – until the sixth year (*Yechezkel* 8-11) – whereas in *Yeshayahu*,the movement begins at the time of the prophecy itself. The shaking of the door pillars and the house filling with smoke are the result of the earthquake that took place in the days of Uziyahu king of Yehuda, in that very year.

**V. “Like the Sound of Great Rushing Waters”**

I heard the sound of their wings when they moved; it was like the sound of great rushing waters, like the voice of Sha-ddai, a clamor like the noise of a gathered army. Standing still, they lowered their wings. (1:24)

The description of the sound of the place of the *Shekhina*,"like the sound of great rushing waters,"is familiar from the account of creation:

When God began creating heaven and earth, the earth was void and desolate, there was darkness on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved over the waters. (*Bereishit* 1:2)

"The spirit [*ru'ach*] of God" may be interpreted as a very strong wind [*ru'ach*], which causes a strong movement of water and tremendous waves that give expression to the "void and desolation" (in the sense of a lack of order and control) that preceded creation. The only thing that emerges from this unclear reality is the presence of God, powerful but without a clear direction, until the creation of the light of the first day.

This sound appears in similar circumstances during the flood around the solitary ark; it is also the sound of the presence of God, who exercises the attribute of judgment over the destroyed world.

The sound is also well known to us from the presence of the *Shekhina* at the time of the splitting of the Sea of Suf, and from Israel's proclamations in their song:

This is my God, I will glorify Him, my father's God, I will exalt Him. (*Shemot* 15:2)

The Lord will reign forever and all time. (*Shemot* 15:18)

The sound of the great rushing waters, even before the creation of the world, may express the attribute of judgment, for punishment like the flood, or salvation, like the splitting of the Sea of Suf. In *Yechezkel*,it heralds a great calamity that can still turn into salvation if the people of Jerusalem desist from their evil. Had they done that, we would have merited God's throne rather than His Chariot. We would have merited to hear, with regard to Yechezkel's prophecy in our *haftara,* the song of the Levites:

Your throne has always stood firm; You are of eternity. The rivers rise up, O Lord; the river sounds surge; the rivers surge and swell and crash. More powerful than the sounds of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea, is the Lord on high. Your decrees are most faithful; holiness adorns Your House, Lord, for evermore. (*Tehillim* 93:2-5)

**VI. “A Form with the Appearance of a Man”**

Above the film which was over their heads, with the appearance of a sapphire, was the form of a throne; and upon the form of the throne – upon it, above – was a form with the appearance of a man. (1:26)

This is the most difficult verse in our *haftara*, and perhaps the most difficult in the Bible. The image of the Chariot with which we are familiar is that of the Ark cover [*kaporet*]on top of the Ark of the Testimony. The Ark of the Testimony is like a royal throne and footstool. This is evident from several places in the writings of the prophets:

Then, declares the Lord, there will no longer be a call for the Ark of the Lord's Covenant. It will neither enter anyone's mind nor be remembered nor be missed; nor will it be replaced by another. At that time, they will call Jerusalem "the Lord's throne." (*Yirmeyahu* 3:16-17)

We will not dwell on the explanation of this difficult verse, but what emerges from it is that "the Ark of the Lord's covenant" is replaced in the prophecy by "God's throne."

King David rose to his feet and said: "Hear me, my brothers and my people – I had my heart set on building a resting place for the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant and for the footstool of our God." (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:2)

In the words of David, the Ark is God's "footstool," and so too in the verse: "Exalt the Lord our God and bow at His footstool. He is holy!" (*Tehillim* 99:5). This is also what our prophet Yechezkel said:

And a wind lifted me up and brought me to the inner courtyard… He said to me: "Man, this is the site of My throne and the place of My footstool, where I will dwell among the children of Israel forever." (*Yechezkel* 43:5-7)

Let us return to the cover on the Ark of the Covenant. The two cherubim of the Chariot spread their wings over it, and the glory of the Lord speaks between them, but nothing is visible, for He cannot be likened to anything:

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* 7:89)

How then can Yechezkel compare the appearance of His form to the form of man?

I cannot explain, except to say that a "man" standing in the middle of a group of "*chayot* (animals)," as in the Garden of Eden, who controls them and is their leader, is the metaphor for understanding the appearance of God among his angels, as He controls them and leads them as He wishes, even without any physical form.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**VII. “Like the Appearance of a Rainbow”**

It was like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day; the radiance around it had that appearance. This was the appearance of the form of the glory of the Lord.[[6]](#footnote-6) I saw it and I fell upon my face… (1:28)

The appearance of the rainbow, like the first rainbow that Noach saw when he emerged from the ark, expresses the calm and hope that follow after the wind of the storm coming from the north at the beginning of our prophecy and the rain that comes in its wake, or the flood in the days of Noach, which obliges everyone to find shelter. A person who is wet to the bone and shivering with cold expects the sun to rise, to dry and warm him, and its colors will be reflected in the many waters "like the appearance of a rainbow."

This is also how the prophetess Devora saw the dedicated warriors of Barak son of Avinoam after Sisera’s soldiers perished on the night of the storm in the Kishon river. Barak's wet and shivering warriors waited for the storm to subside, for the good sun to shine on the water with all its colors:

Thus may all Your enemies perish, O Lord, and may His friends be like the risen sun! (*Shoftim* 5:31)

This is also how Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite[[7]](#footnote-7) saw Iyov's future consolation, as the sun and the light after the "flood" of troubles that had overcome him. In the light of the sun, reflected in the flood waters flowing over the land after the rains stopped, the colors of the rainbow are visible:

He tells the snow, "Fall upon the earth," the rain and the storm, His mighty torrential rains… From the chamber comes the storm, and from the constellations, the biting cold… He weighs down the fog with moisture, and the clouds scatter His lightning… Do you know when God commands them and lightning shines in His cloud?... Why do your clothes grow warm as the land is stilled by the south wind?... And yet, even if the sun is unseen, obscured high up in the heavens, a wind passes and sweeps the clouds away. (*Iyov* 37)

Similarly, Yechezkel promises in our *haftara* thatafter the tempestuous storm from the north that will bring the destruction, consolation will come in the colors of the rainbow.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Editor’s note: See the [*shiur* on the *haftara* of *Parashat Bamidbar*](https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/neviim/sefer-hoshea/haftarat-bamidbar) for another example of an oppositional relationship between *parasha* and *haftara*. As noted there (note 2), some of Rav Medan’s *shiurim* on other examples have not yet been translated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The prophet does not explain his opening words: "It was in the thirtieth year." According to *Chazal* and the commentators, he is referring to the thirtieth year in the count toward the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year was the eighteenth year of the reign of King Yoshiyahu – the year during which the book of the Torah was found in the Temple, in the wake of which the prophetess Chulda delivered her prophecy of destruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This understanding is very puzzling to me, as it seems to contradict *Yechezkel* 20:39-42. May God enlighten my eyes. This is not the forum to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yeshayahu’s prophecy of the Chariot (according to *Chazal*’s view, as well as the plain meaning of the verses, that it was delivered in the twenty-seventh year of Uziyahu) is the last prophecy he uttered until the middle of the reign of Achaz, when Retzin and Pekach came up to Jerusalem in war. That is to say, the *Shekhina* departed for more than forty years. Other prophets did not prophesy during this period either. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Rambam and the sages of Montpellier, led by Rabbi Shlomo Min ha-Har, engaged in a lengthy disagreement along these lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My revered teacher, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, explains this simile by means of a white light, which expresses the unity of the worlds on day one of the creation of the world. This light splits (through a prism or water) into the many colors of the rainbow, and in this way God expresses in His world the unity of the multiplicity and the variety of colors that become one. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Should he be compared to Yechezkel son of Buzi?! [↑](#footnote-ref-7)