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 Esther Leah Cymbalista z"l
Niftera 7 B'Av 5766.
Dedicated by her family.

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In Loving Memory of
Jeffrey Paul Friedman *z"l*
August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012
לע"נ יהודה פנחס ז"ל בן הרב שרגא פייוועל נ"י
כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**The *Haftara* for *Shabbat Nachamu***

Comfort, comfort, My people – these are your God's words – speak to Jerusalem's heart and call out to her that her term is served, her guilt appeased, that she has received at the Lord's hand twice over for all her sins. A voice calls out: "Clear the Lord's way in the desert: smooth across the arid plain a road for our God." Every valley will be raised, each hill and mountain leveled; the twisted road will be made straight; the mountain ranges, open land, to let the Lord's glory be revealed, and all flesh see as one – the voice of the Lord has spoken. A voice speaks: "Call out!" I say, "What shall I call?" All life is nothing more than grass, and all its love, green shoots upon the land. And grass dries up; shoots wither, when the Lord's breath blows over them and yes – this people is but grass. O lady, ascend the high mountain, you who bear tidings to Zion; raise your voice in strength, with tidings to Jerusalem. Raise it – do not fear – call out loud to the cities of Yehuda: "Behold: your God." Behold: the Lord your God coming in all His strength, His mighty arm ruling. Behold: with Him, His prize; His reward walks before Him; like a shepherd He pastures His flock, gathering the lambs into His arms, bearing them in His embrace, guiding His young. Who was it who measured out the waters in His palm and gauged the skies by His handspan? Who measured in His fingers all the dust of earth; who weighed out the hills on His balance and the mountains upon a hand scale? Who could survey the wind? The Lord. Who is the confidant He would tell? To gain His insight, with whom did He hold counsel; who taught Him the path of justice? Who ever taught Him awareness; who showed Him the way of insight? Whole nations are like the drop left in His bucket, as inconsequential as dust on the balance. He sweeps up the distant isles like powder. All Lebanon has not wood enough, or animals, for the burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, less than absence, than emptiness, to Him. And what will you liken to God; what image will you draw of Him? A smith molds a statue; the jeweler plates it with gold and fashions chains of silver for it. Mulberry wood his offering, he chooses a tree that will not rot; he chooses a skilled craftsman to build a statue that cannot fall. Do you not know it, have you not heard, was it not told to you long before? Have you paid no attention to the world's foundations? He sits over the dome of the sky, its dwellers like grasshoppers below; He spreads out the skies like a canvas and pulls them taut like a tent to dwell in. He turns great rulers to nothing, the judges of this earth to emptiness, as if they were not planted, were not sown, as if their stem had no root within the earth. He breathes on them and they dry up to nothing; the storm will sweep them all away like straw. Whom can you compare Me to – so speaks the Holy One – and find them equal? Raise your eyes skyward and see: Who created all these? Who summons their legions by number and calls each man by name? In His great might, His adamantine strength, not one of them is lost. (*Yeshayahu* 40:1-27)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. Introduction**

This *haftara* is mentioned in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* as one of seven *haftarot* of consolation that are read after Tisha be-Av. The *Rishonim* echo this practice:

And the reason is that we follow the *Pesikta* to recite three [*haftarot*] of calamity before Tisha be-Av, namely: "The words of Yirmeyahu," "Hear the word of the Lord," and "The vision of Yeshayahu." And after Tisha be-Av, seven [*haftarot*] of consolation and two of repentance. They are: "Comfort, comfort…." (*Tosafot*, *Megilla* 31b, s.v. *Rosh Chodesh*)

The uniqueness of this *haftara* seems to lie in the doubling of the consolation ("Comfort, comfort"), a phenomenon we see in other *haftarot* of consolation as well:

And furthermore, his [Yeshayahu’s] prophecies were double prophecies: "Arise, arise (*uri uri*)," "Awake, awake (*hitoreri*, *hitoreri*)," "I will greatly rejoice (*sos asis*)," "Comfort, comfort (*nachamu*, *nachamu*)," "I even I am (*anokhi anokhi*)He that comforts you." (*Pesikta Rabbati* 33)

Each of the five doublings mentioned here is a basis for one of the seven *haftarot* of consolation.

At the beginning of this series, we discussed at length the uniqueness of the prophecies of consolation from *Yeshayahu* 40 until the end of the book (where all of the above are found), and it is worthwhile to examine what I wrote there as background for understanding our *haftara*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**II. Does Redemption Depend on Repentance?**

This is a very broad issue, and was addressed in detail in our study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Para*, one of the four *parashiyot* read during the month of Adar.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here, I will include just a brief comment relevant to our *haftara*:

Rav said: All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Shmuel said: It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning. (*Sanhedrin* 97b)

Rav conditions redemption on repentance and good deeds that the people of Israel must do. Shmuel sees Israel’s redemption and return to their land as a matter of course, even without the merits of repentance and good deeds. Exile, according to him, is a punishment for bad deeds; once the people of Israel have received their punishment, they will return to their land, like a convicted criminal who is released after serving his full term of imprisonment even if he has not repented. We can find support for each side of this dispute in the words of the prophets. Yeshayahu's declaration in our prophecy is similar to the position of Shmuel, that having received their punishment is enough to achieve Israel’s redemption, even without repentance and good deeds:

Speak to Jerusalem's heart and call out to her that her term is served, her guilt appeased, that she has received at the Lord's hand twice over for all her sins. (40:1-2)

**III. A Voice Calls Out**

A voice calls out: "Clear the Lord's way in the desert: smooth across the arid plain a road for our God." Every valley will be raised, each hill and mountain leveled; the twisted road will be made straight; the mountain ranges, open land. (40:3-4)

Unlike the common expression based on this verse, "a voice calls out in the desert," used today in reference to an important call that no one will listen to, the punctuation of the verse indicates that it is the road which is “in the desert”: A voice calls out and proclaims that a road must be cleared in the desert, and in the arid plain, for God – who accompanies the people of Israel on their path to redemption.[[4]](#footnote-4) It stands to reason that the idea of a "desert" path is borrowed from the path of the exodus from Egypt, which crossed the Sinai desert and the plains of the Negev. *Chazal* describe this path, apparently based on the verses here, as a path whose mountains and valleys were levelled before their advance, in order to spare those proceeding to their redemption (and especially the weaker among them) the trouble of having to climb up and down:

"And the Lord went before them by day" – There were seven clouds: "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud," "And Your cloud stands over them," "And in a pillar of cloud," "And when the cloud tarried," "And when the cloud was taken up," "But if the cloud was not taken up," "For the cloud of the Lord was upon the Tabernacle." Thus, there were seven clouds: one on each of their four sides, one above and one below, and one that went before them. Every low area it raised, and every high area it leveled, as it is stated: "Every valley will be raised, each hill and mountain leveled; the twisted road will be made straight; the mountain ranges, open land." (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael Beshalach*)

Any reader who understands these verses in their plain sense, and this may indeed have been the prophet's intention when he uttered them, imagines a miraculous earthquake that levels the mountains and raises the valleys on the road of redemption to Jerusalem. The redemption appears as miraculous as a Temple descending from heaven:

And if you object that it (=the Temple) is not built at night, that applies to a building built by man. But the Temple of the future that we await will be revealed and come down from heaven [already] built and perfected, as it is stated: "The sanctuary, O Lord, which You have established." (Rashi, *Sukka* 41a; see also *Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu* 28 and *Bereishit Rabbati*, *Vayetze*, s.v. *ein zeh*)

Over the course of the generations, however, we have merited a different interpretation of this prophecy: we see ourselves entering Jerusalem from all four directions by way of bridges and tunnels, which level the mountains and raise the valleys in a natural way and straighten the path to the site of our Temple, just as Yeshayahu prophesied.

**IV. The Word of God and the Deeds of Man**

A voice speaks: "Call out!" I say, "What shall I call?" All life is nothing more than grass, and all its love, green shoots upon the land. And grass dries up; shoots wither, when the Lord's breath blows over them and yes – this people is but grass. Grass dries up, and shoots will wither, but the word of our God stands firm; always. (40:6-8)

Based on the words of the *Rishonim* (Rashi, Radak, and others), one can understand these verses as saying that the prophet is instructed to call out, he asks what is it that he is supposed to call out, and he is answered that he must call out: "All life is nothing more than grass, etc."

However, I prefer the basic approach of the *Acharonim* (Alshikh, Malbim, and one possibility in the words of Abravanel), though I will follow a different path regarding the details. The voice that the prophet hears commands him to call out the message of redemption described above. The prophet spreads out his hands in despair before the voice and asks: "What shall I call? All life is nothing more than grass, and all its love, green shoots upon the land." The message of redemption finds the people unprepared for redemption and with no desire to be redeemed; they are like grass and green shoots, whose bloom is temporary and which quickly wither. The people's loyalty to the message of their redemption is no more, and they are close to assimilating into the lands of their exile. The voice answers and tells the prophet that even though the people's desire for redemption has dried up and withered, the redemption, which is the word of the Lord, will always stand firm.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Man's limited and temporary power, which is like grass and green shoots when compared to the great and eternal power of God, also finds expression in *Tehillim* and in *Iyov* (perhaps Yeshayatook his imagery from there*)*. We will suffice with a single example:

For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday that has passed, like a brief watch in the night. You sweep them away like a fleeting dream; in the morning they are like **grass** newly grown – in the morning it **sprouts** and flourishes; by evening it withers and dries up. (*Tehillim* 90:4-6)

Man's short years stand in contrast to God's long day. The psalmist, Moshe (for this psalm is "a prayer of Moshe"), asks God to return to His people (after the sin of the calf), rather than expect them to return to Him, because of their short lifetimes.

God heard Moshe's plea, and the psalmist thanks Him for that:

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him, for He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust. Like grass (*ke-chatzir*) are the days of mortals, who spring up like wildflowers (*ke-tzitz ha-sadeh*); with a mere gust of wind they are gone, leaving no trace behind them, but the Lord's loyalty endures forever for those who fear Him, His righteousness for their children's children, for those who keep His covenant and remember to obey His laws. (*Tehillim* 103:14-18)

This will also be the case with the future redemption, described in our chapter in *Yeshayahu*. The initiative for the redemption will come from God Himself.

**V. He Who Rules with a Strong Hand and Tends to the Flocks**

Behold: the Lord your God coming in all His strength, His mighty arm ruling. Behold: with Him, His prize; His reward walks before Him; like a shepherd He pastures His flock, gathering the lambs into His arms, bearing them in His embrace, guiding His young. (40:10-11)

The prophet describes God as a strong ruler with a mighty arm. This description refers to the nations from among whom God will redeem the people of Israel, just as He acted with a strong hand and an outstretched arm in Egypt. When it comes to the people of Israel, He will shepherd them with a merciful arm and a merciful embrace, gently and tenderly. The tabernacle in the desert is also similar to a shepherd's tent, with its sheets of goat hair. This is the tent of God, who tends His nation with mercy and gathers them into their land. Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel also likened God to a shepherd – a shepherd who, unlike human shepherds, has compassion for His flock and does not exploit them for His own needs:

You ate the fat, you wore the wool, and you slaughtered the fattest, but you did not tend the sheep… Just as a shepherd cares for his flock when he is among his sheep who have dispersed, so will I care for My sheep. I will save them from all the places they have been scattered on a day of heavy cloud, thick fog… I Myself will tend My sheep: I will lay them down, declares the Lord God; I will seek the lost, I will recover the stray, I will bind the broken, I will strengthen the sick. (*Yechezkel* 34, scattered verses)

**VI. Divine Power in Creation and in Redemption**

Who was it who measured out the waters in His palm and gauged the skies by His handspan? Who measured in His fingers all the dust of earth; who weighed out the hills on His balance and the mountains upon a hand scale?… Raise your eyes skyward and see: Who created all these? Who summons their legions by number and calls each man by name? In His great might, His adamantine strength, not one of them is lost. (40:12, 26)

Many commentaries (primarily in Chasidic writings) draw comparisons between the ten plagues in Egypt and the ten statements with which God created the world. The prophets were much concerned with comparing God's (unlimited) power in creation to His power in Israel's redemption. For example:

He makes the earth by His power, establishes the world by His wisdom, and stretches out the heavens by His understanding. As He makes His voice heard, there is rumbling water in the heavens, and clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning bolts with the rain and brings out winds from His storehouses… Not like these is the portion of Yaakov, for He formed all things, and Israel is the tribe He possesses; Lord of Hosts is His name. You are a sledgehammer for Me, a weapon of war. With you I will shatter nations; with you I will destroy kingdoms. (*Yirmeyahu* 51:15-20)

Our prophecy deals with this as well:

And what will you liken to God; what image will you draw of Him? A smith molds a statue; the jeweler plates it with gold and fashions chains of silver for it. (18-19)

In other words: God's dimensions, unlike the dimensions of a statue, are unlimited – and so is His power to redeem Israel. But in our verses, the prophet introduces an emphasis on the precise measure and count of the elements of creation – the water, the sky, the dust, the stars, and the mountains and hills. His intent seems to be that the precise weighing of the elements of creation is similar to the weighing of Israel's sins against the bitter price they have paid for them in their exile – and that God's decision to redeem them when their punishment was complete and the time of redemption had come is well supported by this weighing.

**VII. Summary of the Prophecy**

The redemption described in this prophecy does not depend on repentance. The people of Israel received their punishment, and that is enough. He who measured out water in His palm and brought out stars by number also knows how to measure the severity of a sin and its punishment, and based on this calculation, He is determined to redeem His people.

The problem is that not only is there no repair or repentance on the part of the people, but they are also not ready for redemption; they act like the generation of Menashe or like people assimilated into exile, doing nothing to get out of it. Despite this, God is determined to redeem Israel, and His strength and power, which were revealed in creation, well testify to His ability to redeem them and to judge their oppressors for what they did to them. Along with the mighty arm of judgment, His gentleness and softness will also become apparent, when He leads His people like a shepherd and paves for them a straight, comfortable path towards the desired redemption.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all Biblical references are to the book of *Yeshayahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Full *shiur* at <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/neviim/sefer-yeshayahu/introduction-haftarot-book-yeshayahu>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Available at: <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/neviim/sefer-yechezkel/haftarat-para>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the above-mentioned introduction to the *haftarot* from the second half of the book of *Yeshayahu*, I suggested that these prophecies are from the time of Menashe and do not deal with the exile in Babylon at the time of the destruction or with the return from it. According to this suggestion, it is possible that the prophecy relates to the return of the ten tribes from their exile in Assyria, as actually happened (partially) at the beginning of Yoshiyahu's rule, and it is about this that the prophet states: "Every valley will be raised, each hill and mountain leveled." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In our language, such a redemption is referred to as "*it’aruta di-le'eila*," an "awakening from above." If we assume that this is a prophecy from the days of Menashe, it turns out that the people have despaired from the prophecies of revival in the days of Chizkiyahu, and now, at the low point of the days of Menashe, when God has come to redeem them, there is nobody prepared to listen to him; indeed "this people is but grass." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)