YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The *Haftara* for *Parashat Ki Tavo***

**(The Sixth of the Seven *Haftarot* of Consolation)**

Rise, give light, for your light has come: the glory of the Lord shines over you, for darkness may cover the earth, and clouds shroud nations, but over you, the Lord will be shining, His glory manifest over you; nations will walk toward your light, and kings into the brilliance you shine forth. Raise your eyes; look around and see: all of them gathered in, and come to you; your sons have come from far away, your daughters as if clinging to nursemaids' hips. Then you will see and shine; your heart will fill with awe and open wide, for the ocean's abundance will turn to you; the wealth of nations will come to you; herds of camels will cover your land, young camels from Midyan and Eifa, all having come to you from Sheba, carrying gold and frankincense and tidings of the Lord's praise. All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered in to you; the rams of Nevayot will be in your service. Offered on My altar, they will be desired; I shall glorify the House of My glory. Who are these sailing like clouds, like doves come back to their roosting cote? It is Me the distant islands wait for; ships of Tarshish come the first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel: He has glorified you. The children of strangers will build your walls; their kings will be in your service, for in My fury I beat you, but, desiring you now, I show you mercy, and your gates will be always open, day and night, never closed, as the wealth of nations is brought in to you, their kings led to you, for the nations and kingdoms that do not serve you will be lost, nations desolate, destroyed. Lebanon's glory will come to you: junipers, cypress trees, and box trees together, to lend the place of My Sanctuary splendor; I shall glorify the place of My footstool. The children of those who once oppressed you will come before you prostrate, bowing themselves to the soles of your feet; all who once denounced you, they will call you The Lord's City, Zion of Israel's Holy One. Where once you were forsaken, hated, never even passed through, I have made you everlasting majesty, the joy of generations. You shall suckle the milk of nations, suckle at kings' breasts, and know that I am the Lord, your rescue, your redeemer, the Mighty One of Yaakov. Where once there was bronze, I shall bring gold, and where there was iron, silver. Where once there was wood, I shall bring bronze, and where there was stone, now iron. I shall make peace your commander, your ruling class: righteousness. No more will violence be heard of in your land, nor plunder or destruction in your borders. You shall name your walls Rescue, and your gates, Praise. No more, by day, will the sun be your light, nor the moon's radiance shine for you, for the Lord will be your light forever; your God will be your glory. Your sun will set no longer, nor your moon be gathered in, for the Lord is your light forever; the days of your mourning are done. Your people, all of them righteous, will inherit the land forever, the shoots of My planting, works of My hands, spreading branches in glory. The little son will become a thousand strong, the youngest child a mighty nation; I am the Lord: when the time is right, in a flash I will bring it all to be. (*Yeshayahu* 60:1-22)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Redemption from Yeshayahu's Perspective**

The redemption described in the *haftarot* taken from the book of *Yeshayahu* was addressed at length in our study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Ekev*, and in brief in our study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Shoftim*. In both places, I noted that the primary source for this discussion is found in chapter 60 – which is our current *haftara*. We see in it that Yeshayahu envisions Israel's future deliverance as the exact opposite of Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

The redemption from Egypt was forced upon the Egyptians against their will and was accompanied by the ten plagues and God's vengeance at the Sea of Suf, as well as the beginning of the eternal war against Amalek and military conquests – first in the lands of Sihon and Og, and afterwards in the land of Canaan. The only ones who made peace with the people of Israel and supported them were the Givonites, and even the alliance with them was accompanied by a declaration that rejected them and turned them into hewers of wood and collectors of water. Yitro and Rachav are isolated points of light demonstrating a different approach, one of acceptance of the people of Israel by the nations.

Is war built into redemption in such a way that it cannot be achieved without it?

` King Shlomo was the first, perhaps the only one, to try a different way of connecting Israel, as God's people, with the other nations of the world in a framework of peace and friendship, out of a desire to influence them to accept the path of God. He had misgivings about the approach, however, which are well-formulated in his *Shir Ha-shirim*, and his success was in fact limited and even brought about serious failures – such as his foreign wives, who came into Shlomo’s life largely due to his alliances with other nations and who introduced the building of houses of idol worship around Jerusalem. We do not find a clear continuation of Shlomo's approach at any point during the First Temple Period.

Yeshayahu is the great prophet who envisions a correction to Shlomo's approach, a way of integrating the nations into the redemption of Israel that centers on the House of God and stems from its future influence on all of humanity:

The vision of Yeshayahu son of Amotz for Yehuda and Jerusalem: This will be in days to come: The mountain of the Lord's House will be rooted firm, the highest of mountains, raised high above all hills, and all the nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come, saying: "Come, let us go up to the mount of the Lord, to the House of Yaakov's God; He will teach us of His ways; we will walk in His pathways," for teaching will come forth from Zion, from Jerusalem, the Lord's word. He will judge among nations and arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not raise sword against nation; no more will they learn to make war. (*Yeshayahu* 2:1-4)[[2]](#footnote-2)

The same idea is expressed in Yeshayahu's visions of redemption, especially in our chapter – in stark contrast to the redemption from Egypt, which took place in haste:

This time you will not leave in haste, you will not leave in flight. The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel your rear guard behind. (*Yeshayahu* 52:12)

When the Israelites left Egypt, their haste was largely due to the opposition between God and Egypt:

The Egyptians too urged the people to make haste and leave the land. "All of us will die," they said. The people took their dough before it could rise, carrying it on their shoulders in kneading pans wrapped in their clothing. (*Shemot* 12:33-34)

Unhurried redemption, in contrast, will come by virtue of peace with the nations, who will agree and wish to assist the people of Israel in their redemption in the land of God, as portrayed in our *haftara.*

The prophecy opens with a description that brings to mind the eve of the deliverance from Egypt, during the plague of the three days of darkness, when all the people of Israel had light in their homes. This is also the case in the prophecy of our *haftara* about the future redemption in the days of the return to Zion:

For darkness may cover the earth, and clouds shroud nations, but over you, the Lord will be shining, His glory manifest over you. (60:2)

Indeed, the darkness in Egypt caused Pharaoh to agree to allow the people of Israel to leave and worship God, but Pharaoh utterly rejected the possibility that he would assist them in their journey to do so:

"Then give us sacrifices and burnt offerings to present to the Lord our God," said Moshe. "Our livestock must go with us. Not a hoof can be left behind. We must take them to serve the Lord our God, for until we arrive, we will not know what we must use to serve the Lord." But the Lord strengthened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not agree to send the people forth. "Leave my presence," said Pharaoh. "Take care never to see my face again, because on the day you do, that day you will die!" (*Shemot* 10:25-28)

In contrast, the nations described in our prophecy will agree and even want to help the Israelites at the time of their redemption. As I commented in the context of the *haftara* for *Parashat Ekev*, this prophecy was largely fulfilled at the time of Ezra's ascent to the land of Israel at the time of the return to Zion:

"From Artachshasta, king of kings, to Ezra the priest… And now, I hereby issue an edict that any man in my kingdom who is of the nation of Israel or its priests or Levites who is ready to go to Jerusalem, may go there with you. Whereas, by the order of the king and his seven ministers, you are hereby sent to supervise Yehuda and Jerusalem, in accordance with the law of your God which you uphold. And to transport the silver and gold donated by the king and his ministers to the God of Israel whose Temple is in Jerusalem, along with any silver and gold you may acquire anywhere in the province of Babylonia, as well as the donations of the people and the priests to the House of their God in Jerusalem… The vessels you are hereby entrusted with for the service of the House of your God must be brought undamaged to the God of Jerusalem. Whatever else is needed for the House of your God, that which you are responsible to provide, may be charged to the king’s coffers. I, King Artachshasta, have issued an edict to all Keepers of the Treasures in the province beyond the River, ordering them to diligently grant every request of Ezra, the priest, scribe of the law of the God of the heavens… All that is required by the law of the God of the heavens shall be provided assiduously for the House of the God of the heavens, so that His rage does not lash out upon the realm of the king and his sons. We also inform you that no priest, Levite, singer, gatekeeper, Natin, or any other person employed at the House of this God shall be subject to the payment of tributes, head taxes, or property taxes. And you, Ezra, use the wisdom of your God to appoint judges and magistrates who will dispense judgment to all the people in the province beyond the River, men with knowledge of the laws of your God; you shall provide instruction to those who do not know them. Anyone who fails to obey the laws of your God and the laws of the king shall be sentenced promptly to death, corporal punishment, fine, or imprisonment."[[3]](#footnote-3)

Blessed is the Lord, God of our ancestors, for turning the king's heart toward the cause of beautifying the House of the Lord in Jerusalem. And for showing me kindness in the eyes of the king and his ministers and all his valiant officers. So, by the grace of the Lord my God, I gathered courage and assembled leaders from Israel to ascend to the land with me." (*Ezra* 7:12-19)

Nechemia's return to the land of Israel a few years later was also accompanied by a directive from King Artachshasta to his government agents, instructing them to help Nechemia. All this joins with the declaration of Koresh, which began the return to Zion back in the days of Zerubavel and Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak:

"Thus says Koresh, king of Persia: The Lord, God of the heavens, has granted me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build Him a House in Jerusalem, in Yehuda. Whoever is among you from all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, in Yehuda, and build the House of the Lord, God of Israel, who is the God in Jerusalem – and may his God be with him. As for anyone left behind in the place where he lives, his townsmen shall aid him with silver, gold, supplies, and beasts of burden, as well as gifts for the House of God in Jerusalem"… King Koresh took out the vessels of the House of the Lord that Nevukhadnetzar had removed from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. Koresh, king of Persia, had them taken out by Mitredat, keeper of the treasures, who counted them for Sheshbatzar, prince of Yehuda. (*Ezra* 1:2-9)

As in the days of the return to Zion, so too in our prophecy, the efforts of the nations are not only for the benefit of the people of Israel returning to their land but also for the honor of the Temple, which will be a light to all the nations:

Lebanon's glory will come to you: junipers, cypress trees, and box trees together, to lend the place of My Sanctuary splendor; I shall glorify the place of My footstool. (60:13)

It is not clear from the prophecy what will bring the nations to honor Israel – to grant them all good things and to desire their redemption. Regarding the exodus from Egypt, the Torah emphasizes that God hardened the hearts of Egypt and the heart of Pharaoh so they would not agree to set the Israelites free. Similar things were said also about the people of Canaan who fought to the death against Israel:

But Sichon, king of Cheshbon, refused to let us pass through, for the Lord your God had hardened his spirit and made his heart defiant in order to give him over into your hands, as He has now done. (*Devarim* 2:30)

Except for the Hivites who lived in Givon, no city made peace with the Israelites, who conquered all in battle. For the Lord determined that their enemies' hearts would be obdurate when waging war against Israel, so that Israel might destroy them without mercy – so that they might annihilate them as the Lord had commanded Moshe. (*Yehoshua* 11:19-20)

Perhaps Yeshayahu, following on these ideas, is proclaiming that God, who can harden the hearts of the nations to fight Israel, can also set in their hearts love for Israel and a desire to help them. This may also be hinted at in the story of Bilam, who came to curse Israel but ultimately blessed them, perhaps even willingly.

**Human Potential to Influence Foreign Relations**

At the same time, it is possible to imagine a "natural" political reality that would bring the nations to help Israel, perhaps like the one that existed in the days of the return to Zion: Esther and Mordekhai had risen through the ranks of the Persian government in the days of Achashverosh, and could to a great extent dictate Persian policy in the days of his son Artachshasta in the direction of the return to Zion. Let us remember that even in the Babylonian government, which began as a regime that was very hostile to Israel, Daniel, Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya rose to prominence and could seek favor for their people, and presumably did so.

We can compare their good deeds in these situations to those of another Jew, who rose through the ranks of the Roman government during the period that it ruled over the land of Israel: Tiberius Julius Alexander, the nephew of Philo of Alexandria, who was the procurator in Judea about twenty-four years before the destruction. Not only did he not help his people, but on the eve of the destruction, being the governor of Egypt, he brutally slaughtered about fifty thousand of its Jews, who had rebelled against Roman rule.

How great can the influence of a Jew be on a foreign government in whose hands lies the fate of Israel; and how great is the power of that Jew's free choice between cruelty and kindness.

In our days, we might mention Sir Moses Montefiore, the Sheriff of London, who used his power for the benefit of Jews around the world in general and for the benefit of the residents of Jerusalem in particular. Louis Brandeis, similarly, a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States and a personal friend of President Woodrow Wilson, influenced him to support the Balfour Declaration. And in sharp contrast – Leon Trotsky and his Jewish friends at the highest echelons of the Soviet government, who did nothing for the benefit of their people.

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Our prophecy begins and ends with one message: God will be an eternal light for His people Israel. This light not only enables the power of sight, but constitutes salvation and comfort for an anguished people whose years of exile are coming to an end, and who are returning at last to the land of their forefathers.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all Biblical references are to the book of *Yeshayahu.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We find a similar prophecy in *Mikha* 4, and compare also *Zekharya* 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elsewhere I suggested that Mordekhai and Esther, who remained at the highest levels of the government since the days of Achashverosh, who preceded Artachshasta, were likely the ones who influenced the latter's treatment of the people of Israel and God's Torah, and thus also this letter and its contents. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)