YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The Haftara for the Second Day of Rosh Hashana**

This is what the Lord said: The people who escaped the sword found favor in the wilderness – Israel, on the way to its place of rest. From afar the Lord appeared to me: I have loved you with an everlasting love and thereby drew you close with loving-kindness. I will again rebuild you, and you shall remain rebuilt, maiden Israel. You will again adorn yourself with timbrels and go out to dance a dance of merrymakers. You will again plant vineyards on the hills of Shomron. Planters will plant and enjoy the fruit. Indeed, there is a day when sentinels shall call out over the Efrayim hills: "Come, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God." For this is what the Lord said: Sing joyously for Yaakov and shout publicly to the nations. Give voice, give praise, and say, "Lord, deliver Your people, the remnant of Israel." I am about to bring them from the northern land and gather them from the ends of the earth. The blind and the lame among them, the pregnant woman together with one who has just given birth. A great assembly will return here. They will come weeping, and with compassion I shall lead them. I will guide them along streams of water on a level path upon which they will not stumble, for I have become a Father to Israel, and Efrayim is My firstborn. Nations, hear the word of the Lord, and tell it to the distant isles. Say, "He who has scattered Israel will gather him and will watch over him as a shepherd does his flock." For the Lord has released Yaakov and has rescued him from the hands of one mightier than him. They will come and sing on the heights of Zion and will stream toward the Lord's goodness, because of the grain and the new wine and olive oil, and because of the young sheep and cattle. Their lives will be like a well-watered garden; they will no longer languish ever again. Then maidens shall rejoice in dance, young men and old together. I shall turn their grief into joy; I shall console them and gladden them in their grief. I shall give the priests their fill of fatness, and My people shall be satiated with My goodness, declares the Lord. This is what the Lord said: A sound is heard in Rama: wailing, bitter weeping. It is Rachel, weeping for her children. She refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. This is what the Lord said: Restrain your voice from crying and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your labor, declares the Lord, and they will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children will return to their own country. I have indeed heard Efrayim moaning for himself: "You have disciplined me and I accepted the discipline, like an untamed calf. Bring me back and I shall return, for You are the Lord, my God. After I turned back, I was remorseful, and after I became aware, I struck myself upon my thigh. I was ashamed and even humiliated, for I carry the disgrace of my youth." Is Efrayim not a precious son to me, a delightful child? Whenever I speak of him, I remember him all the more. Therefore I long for him inwardly. I will show him great compassion, declares the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 31:1-20)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. Connecting the *Haftara*, the Torah Reading, and the Day**

On Rosh Hashana, we read "On the seventh month" (*Bamidbar* 29:1-6), and for the *haftara*, "Is Efrayim a darling son to me" (*Yirmeyahu* 31:1-19).

And there are those who say we read "And the Lord remembered Sara" (*Bereishit* 21), and for the *haftara*, the story of Chana.

Nowadays, when there are two days – on the first day, [we follow the ruling of] “those who say,” and on the next day, "And God tried Avraham" (*Bereishit* 22), with "Is Efrayim not a precious son to me" for the *haftara*. (*Megilla* 31a)

We find a passage from the end of our *haftara* in the *Zikhronot* blessing in *Musaf* of Rosh Hashana:

Is Efrayim not a precious son to me, a delightful child? Whenever I speak of him, I remember him all the more. Therefore I long for him inwardly. I will show him great compassion, declares the Lord.

It may be possible to find another connection as well: The Gemara (*Rosh Hashana* 10b) says that Sara, Rachel, and Chana were all remembered on Rosh Hashana. The first day connected Sara, who gives birth to Yitzchak in the Torah reading, to Chana, who gives birth to Shmuel in the *haftara*. The *haftara* for the second day does not mention Rachel giving birth to her son, but describes her weeping for him (after her death), like a bereaved mother, because of what has happened to him over the generations. Perhaps there is room to compare her to Sara in the day’s Torah reading: though Sara does not appear in the section describing the *Akeida*, her shadow, as a mother who may lose her son, hovers over the entire chapter.

**II. The Background to the Prophecy**

The prophecy in our *haftara* is part of an independent section within the book – the scroll of prophecies of consolation, which begins in chapter 29 and ends in chapter 33. The collection of prophecies of consolation in *Yirmeyahu* is not uniform, and includes prophecies of consolation for different issues and in different times.

In our prophecy, Rachel weeps for her children. According to one *midrash*, Yosef ran to Rachel's grave and prostrated himself over it after the Midianites bought him as a slave in order to sell him to Egypt. Rachel then complained to God about what was happening to her son, who had been born after so many prayers and so much sorrow. It is difficult to reconcile this *midrash* with the Biblical realia, for the Midianites and Ishmaelites who appear in the story of Yosef came down from Gilead to the Dotan valley, and presumably continued along the caravan route to the road leading to the land of the Philistines, near the Mediterranean shore, and from there to Egypt. Rachel's grave is far from this road.

I also find it difficult to accept the well-known explanation that Rachel wept for the exiles of the destruction of the First Temple, since the great majority of them were not her children. What is more, the verse that concludes the prophecy deals with the revival of the tribe of Efrayim, descendants of Rachel, which suggests that it was for them that she wept.

It seems therefore that the prophecy deals with the return of the ten tribes about a hundred years after the Assyrian exile, in the eighteenth year of King Yoshiyahu, when he sent Yirmeyahu to return the tribes of Efrayim to his kingdom around Jerusalem, as Rabbi Yochanan said in the Gemara:

Yirmeyahu restored them and Yoshiyahu son of Amon reigned over them. (*Arakhin* 33a)

During the years when the ten tribes were exiled, they did not count Sabbatical and Jubilee years at all, and therefore when Yirmeyahu restored them and the Jubilee year was observed, they had to go back and start the count [anew]. (*Tosafot*, *Arakhin* 12b, s.v. *hanakh*).]

This return of the ten tribes is spelled out in chapter 3 of *Yirmeyahu*:

The Lord said to me: "Wayward Israel was more justified than treacherous Yehuda. Go, proclaim these words to the north, and say: Return, wayward Israel – declares the Lord. I will not frown upon you, for I am compassionate, declares the Lord; I will not bear a grudge forever…

Return, wayward children, declares the Lord, for I am your Master. I will take you, one from a city, two from a family, and I will bring you back to Zion…

In those days the House of Yehuda will join the House of Israel. They will come together from the north to the land that I bequeathed to your ancestors.” (*Yirmeyahu* 3:11-18)

Our *haftara* is a prophecy of consolation in anticipation of this return. The next section will show how this approach can be proven from additional verses.

**III. The Return to the Territory of Efrayim**

You will again plant vineyards on the hills of Shomron. Planters will plant and enjoy the fruit. Indeed, there is a day when sentinels shall call out over the Efrayim hills: "Come, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God"… (4-5)

I am about to bring them from the northern land and gather them from the ends of the earth. The blind and the lame among them, the pregnant woman together with one who has just given birth. A great assembly will return here. They will come weeping, and with compassion I shall lead them. I will guide them along streams of water on a level path upon which they will not stumble, for I have become a Father to Israel, and Efrayim is My firstborn… (7-8)

They will come and sing on the heights of Zion and will stream toward the Lord's goodness… (11)

I have indeed heard Efrayim moaning for himself: "You have disciplined me and I accepted the discipline, like an untamed calf. Bring me back and I shall return, for You are the Lord, my God. After I turned back, I was remorseful, and after I became aware, I struck myself upon my thigh. I was ashamed and even humiliated, for I carry the disgrace of my youth." Is Efrayim not a precious son to me, a delightful child? Whenever I speak of him, I remember him all the more. Therefore I long for him inwardly. I will show him great compassion, declares the Lord. (17-19)

These verses mention Efrayim, who returns to its territory, and Shomron. Mention is also made of being a firstborn, and of the calf or bull which is the flag of the house of Yosef, its two horns representing Efrayim and Menashe:

His glory is that of a firstborn bull, his horns the grand horns of the wild ox; with them he gores the peoples, all, to the ends of the earth. These are the myriads of Efrayim, these the thousands of Menashe. (*Devarim* 33:17)

But the return that is mentioned is twofold: One return is from the northern land to the Land of Israel, to Shomron, to the territory of Efrayim. The second return is from the territory of Efrayim to the heights of Zion, to the Lord's goodness – that is, to Jerusalem, the site of His Temple. Efrayim will not return as an untamed calf to its calves in Beit-El and in Dan, but rather to the site of God's *Shekhina* in Jerusalem; in our case, to the city of Yoshiyahu's reign.

It is important to mention the obvious: as in the book of the prophet Hoshea and in many other places in the Bible, the prophecy is referring to all ten tribes by the collective name, "Efrayim.” As subordinates to Efrayim, which is the main tribe, they too trace their lineage here to Rachel.

It should also be mentioned that Yirmeyahu's restoration of the ten tribes to Yoshiyahu's kingdom was partial; most members of these tribes apparently remained in exile. Some of those remaining in exile returned to the Land of Israel with the declaration of Koresh, and perhaps also with Ezra, while others remained in exile, as indicated by the Gemara:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav Asi: If at the present time a gentile betroths [a Jewish woman], we are concerned [that it may be a valid] betrothal, since it may be that he is of the ten tribes. But, surely, anything separated [from a heterogeneous group] is regarded as having been separated from the majority [thus, we should assume he is indeed a gentile]!

[Rav Asi's statement refers] to places where they [the ten tribes] have settled; for Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "[And the king of Assyria exiled Israel to Assyria] and transferred them to Chalach, the Chavor, the Gozan River, and the cities of Media” (I *Melakhim* 18:11) – Chalach is Chilazon, and Chavor is Chadyav; the river Gozan is Ginzak, and “the cities of Media” are Chamdan and its neighboring towns; others say, Nihar and its neighboring towns. (*Yevamot* 16b-17a)

Will those who remained in exile return? The *Tannaim* disagree:

The ten tribes will not return [to the Land of Israel], for it is stated: "The Lord… and threw them into another land, as we now see them [lit. as this day]" (*Devarim* 29:27) – just as the day goes and does not return, so they too went and will not return. These are the words of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Eliezer said: "As this day" – just as the day darkens and then becomes light again, so the ten tribes, even as it went dark for them, so will it become light for them. (*Sanhedrin* 10:3)

Despite the beauty of Rabbi Eliezer's position, the conclusion of the above Gemara discussion seems to accord with the view of Rabbi Akiva:

Others read: When I mentioned the matter in the presence of Shmuel, he said to me: They did not move from there until they had declared them [those whose status as possibly from the ten tribes was debated] to be absolute gentiles. (*Yevamot* 17a)

**IV. Rachel Weeps for Her Children – The Destruction of Shilo**

This is what the Lord said: A sound is heard in Rama: wailing, bitter weeping. It is Rachel, weeping for her children. She refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. This is what the Lord said: Restrain your voice from crying and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your labor, declares the Lord, and they will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children will return to their own country. (31:14-16)

We have addressed the connection between Rachel's weeping over the exile of the ten tribes and the return of those tribes during the days of Yirmeyahu and Yoshiyahu. It is possible that the prophecy regarding Rachel's weeping was an ancient one, and that Yirmeyahu applied that ancient and well-known prophecy in speaking about his own generation.

It stands to reason that Rachel's weeping would have earlier been heard in the days of the destruction of Shilo, long-term seat of the *Mishkan* and a central city in the heart of the territory of Efrayim, surrounded by Menashe to the north and Binyamin to the south – all the children of Rachel. The Jewish people engaged in battle with the Philistines at Even ha-Ezer,[[2]](#footnote-2) on the border of the territory of Binyamin, and the war spread to Shilo and perhaps even further north. Likely, its many casualties (about fifty thousand people) were primarily descendants of Rachel. This is how the great destruction is described in the book of *Tehillim*:

He abandoned the Sanctuary of Shilo, the tent where He dwelled among humanity. He let His might fall captive, His beauty into enemy hands; He abandoned His people to the sword, so furious with His share was He. His young men were consumed by fire; His maidens had no wedding songs. His priests fell by the sword; their widows never lamented them. (*Tehillim* 78:60-64)

The assumption that the majority of those who perished were descendants of Rachel emerges from the following verses in *Tehillim*:

Shepherd of Israel, give ear; You who lead Yosef like a flock, You who are enthroned on the cherubim, shine forth. Before Efrayim, Binyamin, and Menashe, stir Your strength and come to save us. God, bring us back; let Your presence shine, that we may be saved. O Lord, God of Hosts, how long will You fume at Your people’s prayers? You have fed them tear-soaked bread and made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have set us in strife with our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. God of Hosts, bring us back; let Your presence shine so that we may be saved. You carried a vine out of Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The hills were covered by its shade, mighty cedars by its branches. Its boughs reached as far as the sea, its shoots as far as the river. Why have You broken through its walls so that any passerby can pluck its fruit? The wild forest boars gnaw at it; the field creatures graze at it. God of Hosts, come back; Look down from heaven and see; take note of this vine, this seedling Your right hand planted, this shoot You nurtured as Your own – now burnt by fire, chopped down, destroyed by the blast of Your presence. Let Your hand rest on the person at Your right hand, the person You nurtured as Your own. (*Tehillim* 80:2-18)

The psalm connects Efrayim, Binyamin, and Menashe with He who is "enthroned on the cherubim" – an allusion to the ark of the covenant, which fell into Philistine captivity during the war.[[3]](#footnote-3) It also mentions a vine that was taken out of Egypt – referring to Yosef, whom Yaakov compares to "a beautiful vine" *(Bereishit* 49:22-26)*.* The words *yamin* (right hand) and *ben* (son) appear twice, alluding to Binyamin.

The connection between the destruction of Shilo and Rachel herself, and her tragedy, emerges from the verses describing the destruction of Shilo, when Eli’s daughter-in-law in Shilo experiences a sudden and difficult labor:

Now his daughter-in-law, Pinchas's wife, was about to give birth. When she heard the news that God's Ark had been taken and that her father-in-law and husband had died, she crouched down to give birth, for her birth pangs overwhelmed her. As she lay dying, the women standing over her spoke to her. "Do not fear, for you have given birth to a son." But she neither answered nor cared. (I *Shmuel* 4:19-20)

The death of the wife of Pinchas in childbirth is quite reminiscent of Rachel’s death while giving birth to Ben-Oni, Binyamin.

**V. Rachel Weeps for Her Children – The Near-Complete Destruction of the Tribe of Binyamin**

It is impossible to ignore the connection between our *haftara* and an even earlier event – concerning which, in my opinion, the prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children was delivered for the first time. The prophet in our *haftara* states:

I will again rebuild you, and you shall remain rebuilt, maiden Israel. You will again adorn yourself with timbrels and go out to dance a dance of merrymakers. You will again plant vineyards on the hills of Shomron. Planters will plant and enjoy the fruit... (3-4)

Then maidens shall rejoice in dance, young men and old together. I shall turn their grief into joy; I shall console them and gladden them in their grief. (12)

The description of the vineyards of Shomron, and of the maidens dancing in them, brings to mind the account following the devastating war over the terrible incident of the concubine in Giva:

Then they said, "Look – the annual festival to the Lord is now being held at Shilo," which is north of Beit El, east of the highway leading from Beit El to Shekhem, and south of Levona. They instructed the Benjaminites as follows: "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards. When you see the girls of Shilo come out to dance, come out of the vineyards. Each of you should snatch a wife for himself from the daughters of Shilo, then head for the land of Binyamin." (*Shoftim* 21:19-21)

In the battle at Giva in the book of *Shoftim*,the tribe of Binyamin was almost completely destroyed – only six hundred people survived, all men; the women of the tribe were wiped out. The surviving men could not marry, because the other tribes had sworn at Mitzpa not to give their daughters in marriage to the men of the tribe of Binyamin. The tribe was faced with a choice between absolute destruction or intermarriage and secession from the people of Israel. At that time, according to the ancient prophecy, Rachel appeared before God and invoked her dedication and sacrifice at the time of Binyamin’s birth.

Let us recall the background and circumstances of that birth: An angel of God commanded Yaakov to leave Charan and return to his birthplace. Yaakov does nothing without first consulting with his wives. The main concern was that Rachel would oppose the plan because of her desire for another son, a desire she had declared explicitly when Yosef was born after great difficulties. There is nothing like a long journey on camels, running away from Lavan, a frightening encounter with Esav and his men, conflict in and around Shekhem, and continued wanderings to dampen her hopes for another son. Rachel went along with all this, however, so as not to prevent Yaakov from returning to the land of his ancestors. She also did not give up on her dream of having another son – but when the time came to give birth to him on the road, after all the troubles she had undergone during her pregnancy, she had a difficult labor and did not survive childbirth. However, her dream for another son did in fact come true!

Now, when Binyamin faced annihilation, Rachel came before God with her arguments, and He heard her voice. The solution of the maidens' dancing in the vineyards reestablished the tribe – and led to the first king of Israel.

It is possible that the unusual syntax in our prophecy, "she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone" (*al baneha ki einenu*), is an allusion to "Ben Oni," the name Rachel gave Binyamin at the time of her death.

Yirmeyahu saw Rachel's *third* claim against God, when the tribe of her son Efrayim and the rest of the tribes of Israel were almost destroyed in exile. By the merit of her prayer, he went to the distant Assyrian exile to return them to the Land of Israel.

**VI. Closing Lines**

In our long discussion about the fate of the tribes of Rachel, we almost forgot that we are reading this *haftara* on Judgment Day, when the books of the living and the dead are open before the King, who sits on His high and lofty throne.

Let us return to the essence of the day: The ten tribes, Efrayim and all of the house of Israel, were exiled after hundreds of years during which they sacrificed to golden calves, and even worse, to the Be’alim. Another hundred years then passed, during which time they were forgotten, drowning in a foreign culture, a foreign language, and probably also in marriages with foreign people. What was left of them as Jews? What was the value of what little remained to them of the legacy of their ancestors – from the days of the patriarchs, from the revelation at Mount Sinai, and from the memory of God's Temple in Jerusalem? Yet, suddenly, the prophet of destruction himself came and proclaimed: "From afar the Lord appeared to me: I have loved you with an everlasting love and thereby drew you close with loving-kindness" (31:2).

On Rosh Hashana, perhaps we too are like the children of Efrayim, after a whole year during which we may have forgotten and neglected our role and our duties towards God. A short time before the sounding of the *shofar*, we hear God's declaration: "I have loved you with an everlasting love," and His readiness to receive us if we only return to Him wholeheartedly, just as he was ready to receive the children of Efrayim and the ten tribes. We open the day's *haftara* with the words: "I have loved you with an everlasting love," and we end it, as mentioned:

Is Efrayim not a precious son to me, a delightful child? Whenever I speak of him, I remember him all the more. Therefore I long for him inwardly. I will show him great compassion, declares the Lord. (31:19)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless otherwise specified, all biblical references are to the book of *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Ed.) See I *Shmuel* 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Ed.) Ibid. vs. 4, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)