YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

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**The *Haftara* for Shabbat Shuva**

There are multiple traditions regarding the precise content of the *haftara* for Shabbat Shuva, beginning with this passage from the book of *Hoshea*:

O Israel, return, go back to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your own sinfulness. Take words of remorse with you and return to the Lord; say to Him, "Forgive all of our sins; accept our goodness – instead of calves we offer You our words of prayer. Assyria will not save us; no more will we ride upon horses; never again will we say, 'You are our god' to the work of our hands, for only in You will the orphan find mercy." I will mend their rebellion with gracious love, for I have turned My anger away from them. I will be as dew to Israel; he will bloom like a lily and set down roots as deep as the trees of Lebanon. His branches will spread wide; his splendor will be as the olive tree, and his fragrance as the trees of Lebanon. They who return will dwell beneath his shade; they will revive once again as grain and flower like vines; their acclaim will linger as the scent of the wine of Lebanon. Efrayim will say, "What need do I have of these idols?" And I will answer him; I will look after him. I will be as a cypress tree, lush and leafy; you will find in Me your source of fruit. He who is wise will fathom these words; the insightful will grasp them, for the ways of the Lord are just, and the righteous will walk in them, but sinners will stumble over them. (*Hoshea* 14:2-10)

The ancient Italian rite continues:

Then the Lord raises His voice before His troops – for His camp is vast, and mighty are the ones who carry out His words. For great and terrifying is the day of the Lord – who could withstand it? Even now, so says the Lord, return to Me wholeheartedly, with fasting, weeping, and grief. Rend your hearts, not your clothing, and come back to the Lord your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness; He may well relent and forswear the evil. Who knows? Maybe He will reconsider and relent and leave behind blessings; offer grain offerings and libations to the Lord, your God. (*Yoel* 2:11-14)

Some skip these four verses and begin at verse 15, like the Ashkenazi custom:

Blow a ram's horn in Zion, sanctify a fast day, convene an assembly, gather the people, sanctify the masses, convene the old, and gather the children and infants. Let the groom come from his room and the bride from her wedding chamber. Let the priests, attendants of the Lord, weep between the hallway and the altar. Let them say: "Have compassion, O Lord, upon Your people, and do not allow Your possession to become a reproach – ruled by nations." Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?" Then the Lord will be fiercely zealous toward His land, and He will have mercy upon His nation. He will reply and say to His nation: So I will send to you grain, and sweet wine, and young oil. You will be sated with it. I will no longer allow you to become a reproach among the nations. I will drive the northerner away from you – I will banish them to a dry and desolate land; their vanguard to the east sea, their rearguard to the west sea. Their foul smell will ascend, their stench will rise, for they have done terrible things. Fear not, earth. Rejoice! Be glad! For the Lord has done great things. Fear not, animals of My fields, for the desert pasture is green with grass; the tree has borne fruit: the fig and vine have blossomed. Rejoice and be glad in the Lord, your God, children of Zion. For He has given you the first rain out of generosity. He will rain down for you the first and last rain in the first. The granaries will fill with grain, and the press will overflow with sweet wine and young oil. I will repay you for all the seasons consumed by the locusts, the springing-locusts, the finisher-locusts, and the chewer-locusts – My great army, which I sent among you. You will eat, eat and be sated, and you will praise the name of the Lord, your God, who has done wonders for you, for My nation will never be ashamed. You will know that I am among Israel, and I am the Lord, your God; there is no other. My nation will never be ashamed. (*Yoel* 2:15-27)

The Sephardim conclude the *haftara* with:

Is there any God like You who forgives iniquities, who looks beyond the sins of the remnant of His own people, who does not hold onto His wrath forever because He desires kindness? He will again have compassion for us; He will subdue our iniquities and hurl all of our sins into the deepest of seas. You will show truth to Yaakov, kindness to Avraham, as You swore to our fathers in the earliest days. (*Mikha* 7:18-20)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and the Ten Days of Repentance**

And on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we always read as the *haftara* "Return"… When there is a Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, we read [*Parashat*] *Ha'azinu*, and read as the *haftara* "And David said" (II *Shmuel* 22:1). Some say… when [*Parashat*] *Vayelekh* is between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we read as the *haftara* "Seek out the Lord while he is to be found" (*Yeshayahu* 55:6), and on the Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, when we read [*Parashat*] *Ha'azinu*, we read as the *haftara* "Return."

Rema: The common practice is in accordance with the first opinion. (*Shulchan Arukh* OC 428:8)

A possibility is noted (and ultimately rejected) that on the Shabbat of the Ten Days of Repentance, we might read the *haftara* that is read on public fast days, "Seek out the Lord while He is to be found; call to Him now, when He is close" (*Yeshayahu* 55:6), because these verses were interpreted as relating to the Ten Days of Repentance:

But surely it is written: "Seek out the Lord when He is to be found” … Rabba bar Avuha said: These are the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. (*Rosh Hashana* 18a)

According to the accepted *halakha*, however, we always read the *haftara* of "Return" – the passage from the book of *Hoshea* recorded above – on this Shabbat. The connection between the first two verses of the *haftara* and the idea of repentance speaks for itself.

The connection between repentance and the main section of the *haftara* (the second section, which opens with "Blow a ram's horn in Zion"), taken from the book of *Yoel*, is not so clear. Some *Rishonim* see it as more of a request for rain in anticipation of Sukkot, rather than related to the Ten Days of Repentance. However, it does mention the blowing of a ram's horn (as on Rosh Hashana), fasting (as on Yom Kippur), and public prayer for God's mercy upon His people, all of which are connected to the High Holidays. The section that mentions repentance specifically, i.e., the first section taken from the book of *Yoel* ("Then the Lord raises His voice before His troops" – *Yoel* 2:12-14) is missing from the custom of most Ashkenazi synagogues, and is read in only some of them. We will deal with that matter below.

The section taken from the book of *Mikha* is known as "the 13 Divine attributes of *Mikha*." These attributes correspond to the 13 attributes of mercy that we know from the Torah, and deal with asking God for mercy in preparation for Yom Kippur, the day of mercy. It is common practice to read these verses on Yom Kippur as well, at the conclusion of the book of *Yona*.

**II. O Israel, Return**

O Israel, return, go back to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your own sinfulness. Take words of remorse with you and return to the Lord; say to Him, "Forgive all of our sins; accept our goodness – instead of calves we offer You our words of prayer." (*Hoshea* 14:2-3)

This is the closing prophecy of the book of *Hoshea*. According to *Chazal*, originally this prophecy was supposed to open the book:

"Reuven returned to the pit" (*Bereishit* 37:39) – and where was he?… Rabbi Eliezer said: He was in his sackcloth and fast… The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Never before has a person sinned before Me and performed repentance, and you have opened with repentance first! By your life, your descendant will stand up and open with repentance first! Who is that? That is Hoshea: "O Israel, return to the Lord." (*Bereishit Rabba Vayeshev* 84)

Many prophets spoke of repentance, but Hoshea was unique in that he opened his prophecy with it, with his statement: "O Israel, return." It is possible that what led *Chazal* to this interpretation was the double opening of the book of *Hoshea*:

When the Lord first spoke to Hoshea, the Lord said to Hoshea, "Go, take for yourself a whoring woman and have children of a whore, for the land is whoring itself away from the Lord. (*Hoshea* 1:2)

As with other instances of double openings, *Chazal* understood the opening words, "When the Lord first spoke to Hoshea," as alluding to a prophecy that is not mentioned at the beginning of the book – namely, the prophecy of "O Israel, return."

Let us imagine, according to this, the beginning of Hoshea's prophecy: The prophet takes a well-known harlot, Gomer the daughter of Divlayim, and betroths her before all the people. The tabloids of the Shomron are full of juicy articles about the interesting pursuits of God's prophet, and the gossipmongers observe the strange union with shining eyes. God's faithful are angry and ashamed, and like the *midrash* above, the public preachers are probably linking Hoshea the prophet with the founder of his tribe – Reuven – though very differently. They might have expounded: "'Reuven went and lay with his father's concubine, Bilha' – The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You opened with an act of fornication; so too the son of your son, Hoshea, will marry a harlot." The prophet stands under the wedding canopy, takes out a ring, walks over to the excited bride, and suddenly he turns to the people and says: "O Israel, return, go back to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your own sinfulness." The people now well understand the significance of Hoshea's taking a harlot. This is a living parable that expresses God's willingness to return to the people of Israel, who had betrayed Him like a woman who betrays her husband, like a harlot, provided that the people return to Him. The exposition about Reuven, the prophet Hoshea's ancestor, suddenly transforms into the exposition proposed in *Bereishit Rabba*.

Why was the prophecy pushed off to the end of the book of *Hoshea* when the book was edited? Perhaps in order to end the book on a positive note rather than with the preceding prophecy, which ends: "Shomron will be held guilty, for she has rebelled against her God; she will fall by the sword, her young smashed to pieces, her women with child ripped apart" (*Hoshea* 14:1).

Let us go back to Hoshea's call. The prophet demands not only repentance, but also prayer: "Take words of remorse with you… instead of calves we offer You our words of prayer." He demands of the people that they turn to God, who forgives sin: "Forgive all of our sins; accept our goodness [= our prayers, not our sacrifices]."

The prayer they must offer includes the declaration: "Assyria will not save us; no more will we ride upon horses; never again will we say, 'You are our god' to the work of our hands" (v. 4). We must commit to never again turn to Assyria and Egypt for help ("no more will we ride upon horses"), as so many times before; nor will we turn again to the golden calves, which are human-made and are not God.

God will be appeased and He will answer the prayer that Israel will direct to Him:

I will mend their rebellion with gracious love, for I have turned My anger away from them. (5)

**III. The Song of Lebanon**

I will be as dew to Israel; he will bloom like a lily and set down roots as deep as the trees of Lebanon.

His branches will spread wide; his splendor will be as the olive tree, and his fragrance as the trees of Lebanon.

They who return will dwell beneath his shade; they will revive once again as grain and flower like vines; their acclaim will linger as the scent of the wine of Lebanon. (*Hoshea* 14:6-8)

This song of Lebanon continues God’s words.

Why specifically "Lebanon"?

It is possible that *Chazal* already had difficulty with this, and therefore saw "Lebanon" in our prophecy as a designation for the Temple:

"Their acclaim will linger as the scent of the wine of Lebanon."…

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught: Why is its name called Lebanon? Because it whitens [*malbin*] Israel's sins like snow. This is what is stated: "Though your sins may be like scarlet, they will grow whiter than snow" (*Yeshayahu* 1:18) …

The Rabbis say: Because of "My eyes and My heart [*libi*]will be there for all time" (I *Melakhim* 9:3). (*Vayikra Rabba* 1, 2)

Rabban Shimon ben Yochai sees "Lebanon" as the Temple at the moment on Yom Kippur when lots are cast and decide between the goat sacrificed to God and the goat sent to Azazel; the goat sent to Azazel atones for all the sins of Israel and turns the red thread white, like the snow that whitens[[1]](#footnote-1) the high mountains of Lebanon. The Sages see "Lebanon" as an allusion to the Temple as the heart of Israel.

Scripture indeed links the northern land of Lebanon to the Temple:

Great is the Lord, of highest praise in the city of our God, His holy mountain, beautiful in its heights, the delight of all the earth, Mount Zion, **the slopes of Tzafon** [= the north], city of the great King. (*Tehillim* 48:2-3)

Like the dew of Chermon that flows down the mountains of Zion. There the Lord bestows His blessing, life for evermore. (*Tehillim* 133:3)

A more straightforward explanation might be that the Temple is referred to as "Lebanon" because it was primarily constructed out of cedarwood from Lebanon. Shlomo's hall of justice, which was adjacent to the Temple and was also built out of the cedars of Lebanon, was called the "House of the Lebanon Forest" (I *Melakhim* 7:2, and elsewhere).

Regarding our prophecy: Hoshea directs the people that their prayer should include the words "Never again will we say, 'You are our god' to the work of our hands" – meaning, when they return to God, the people of the kingdom of Shomron will abandon the calves established by Yorovam ben Nevat and will come once again to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is possible that he is prophesying here about the reign of Hoshea son of Ela, who was king in Shomron during Chizkiyahu’s reign in Yehuda, and who removed the guards that prevented pilgrimage to Jerusalem, allowing the people of his kingdom to offer the Paschal sacrifice in the Temple:

Yet some people from Asher, Menashe, and Zevulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem… So a multitude of people gathered to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the second month – a massive crowd. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:11-13)

Unfortunately, we cannot say that the prophet Hoshea's repentance campaign was particularly successful. The people of Shomron were exiled, time and time again, to the distant regions of Assyria.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**IV. Yoel's Prophecy – "Then the Lord Raises His Voice before His Troops"**

Then the Lord raises His voice before His troops – for His camp is vast, and mighty are the ones who carry out His words. For great and terrifying is the day of the Lord – who could withstand it? Even now, so says the Lord, return to Me wholeheartedly, with fasting, weeping, and grief. Rend your hearts, not your clothing, and come back to the Lord your God. **For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness; He may well relent and forswear the evil. Who knows? Maybe He will reconsider and relent** and leave behind blessings; offer grain offerings and libations to the Lord, your God. (*Yoel* 2:11-14)

This passage contains the primary verses in our *haftara* that deal with repentance. The attributes of God in these verses are identical to those listed in the book of *Yona*,which is read on Yom Kippur:

Let every man turn back from his cruel practices, from the violence that stains his hands. **Who knows? Perhaps God, too, will turn back and relent,** will turn back from His burning rage before we are all lost. And God saw their actions – that they had turned away from their cruel practices – and God relented from the evil He had spoken of bringing upon them, and brought it not… because I knew that You are a **gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting from evil.** (*Yona* 3:8-4:2)[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Mishna describes reading the verses about repentance in the books of *Yoel* and *Yona* on fast days:[[4]](#footnote-4)

What is the order [of service] for fast days? The ark is taken out to the open space of the city, and wood ashes are placed on the ark, on the head of the Nasi, and on the head of the Av Beit Din. Everyone else puts ashes on his own head. The elder among them addresses them with words of admonition [to repentance]: Our brethren, Scripture does not say of the people of Nineveh, "And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting," but "And God saw their actions – that they had turned away from their cruel practices" (*Yona* 3:10). And in the Prophets it is stated: "Rend your hearts, not your clothing" (*Yoel* 2:13). (*Taanit* 2:1)

Reading these verses in the *haftara* for Shabbat Shuva, in accordance with the rite known as "the ancient Italian rite," has long been the practice in our Yeshiva and in the community of Alon Shevut. However, these verses are omitted in most Ashkenazi communities, in accordance with the view of the Maharil, who greatly influenced the Ashkenazi rite:

The *haftara* of Shabbat Shuva is from *Trei Asar*, the end of *Hoshea*. That prophet is finished, and then we skip to the prophecy of Yoel, beginning with "Blow a ram's horn in Zion, sanctify a fast day," until "My nation will never be ashamed." It seems that this is because the [passageof] *shuva* at the end of *Hoshea* is only nine verses, and we do not read from the Prophets less than twenty-one verses. Therefore, we must fill in from the prophecy of Yoel, as I have explained. (Maharil, *Sefer ha-Minhagim*, *Hilkhot Aseret Yemei Teshuva* 3)

It seems from the Maharil's words that he did not attach great importance to the verses from *Yoel*, seeing them merely as a supplement to the verses of *Hoshea* which, in his opinion, constitute the main part of the *haftara*. However, this passage stands at the heart of the demand for repentance.

It seems that a number of important *Rishonim* preceded the Maharil in the opinion that the part of the *haftara* that is taken from the book of *Yoel* begins with "Blow a ram's horn in Zion." For example, Rashi writes:

When we read it as the *haftara*, we read: "O Israel, return" (*Hoshea* 14) and "Blow a ram's horn in Zion" (above, *Yoel* 2:15) and "the Lord raises His voice before His troops" (ibid. 11). (*Siddur Rashi*, 404)

However, Rashi's words make it clear that he is actually referring to a different verse in *Yoel*:

Blow a ram’s horn in Zion; sound a horn on My holy mountain. Let all those who live on the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming; it is nigh. (*Yoel* 2:1)

This verse is found several verses *before* the verses beginning with "Then the Lord raises His voice before His troops," which continue the *haftara* according to *Siddur Rashi*.

Thus wrote Rabbi Simcha of Vitri, a disciple of Rashi:

And therefore it is correct to read "Return"[[5]](#footnote-5) after Yom Kippur, if a Shabbat falls after it, since its primary focus is rain, from "Then the Lord raises His voice before His troops" until "My nation will never be ashamed." (*Mahzor Vitri*, sec. 262)

And the *Tosafot*:

And "Return" is read between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, because it is written in it: "He will rain down for you the first and last rain," and so too: "Then the Lord raises His voice before His troops," which refers to water, and it is appropriate before Sukkot. This custom will never change, based on the *Pesikta.* So also explained Rabbeinu Tam. (*Megilla* 31b, s.v. *rosh chodesh*)

Other *Rishonim* (*Sefer ha-Minhagot* of Rabbeinu Asher of Lunel, Abudraham, *Agur*) also indicate that the *haftara* includes the verses of "The Lord raises His voice before His troops," and we find the same in the early *midrashim* that deal with the *haftarot – Pesikta Rabbati* 40, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 25, *Yalkut Shimoni* 534.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**V. Blow a Ram's Horn in Zion**

The section of *Yoel* that is read in all Ashkenazi communities opens with a ram's horn and fasting, with prayer and public assembly – all of which are motifs that surround us during the Ten Days of Repentance:

Blow a ram's horn in Zion, sanctify a fast day, convene an assembly, gather the people, sanctify the masses, convene the old, and gather the children and infants. Let the groom come from his room and the bride from her wedding chamber. Let the priests, attendants of the Lord, weep between the hallway and the altar. Let them say: "Have compassion, O Lord, upon Your people, and do not allow Your possession to become a reproach – ruled by nations." Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?" (*Yoel* 2:15-17)

This passage describes the Temple during a crisis that includes severe drought, a terrible plague of locusts, and a human enemy threatening Jerusalem. The prophecy was probably delivered in the middle or at the end of the winter, when rain had not yet fallen, and it includes a response from God, who accepted the people's prayer:

Rejoice and be glad in the Lord, your God, children of Zion. For He has given you the first rain out of generosity. He will rain down for you the first and last rain in the first. (2:23)

Both the first rain and the last rain fell in the month of Nissan, the first month (and the end of winter). The rains that fell in that month were apparently very heavy; even if they could not save all of the grain, they filled the cisterns and provided drinking water and irrigation water for the irrigated gardens throughout the summer. The trees, the figs, the vines, and the olives were also saved:

The tree has borne fruit: the fig and vine have blossomed… The granaries will fill with grain, and the press will overflow with sweet wine and young oil. (22, 24)

The words of the prophet indicate that the grain was also saved, though it is difficult to understand in natural terms how this could have happened if the first rain fell in Nissan. Perhaps a miracle was performed, or else the prophet is referring to the grain of the coming years when he states, "The granaries will fill with grain."

The second threat, the plague of locusts, appears in the verses before the *haftara*:

It is a day of darkness and blinding black, a day of clouds and mist like dawn spread over the mountains. There will be a great and mighty nation, the likes of which has never been before nor will ever be again until the end of time. Before it, the consuming fire; after it, a burning flame. The land, like Eden, before it; after it, a barren desert. It leaves not one survivor. (*Yoel* 2:2-3)

And it is also mentioned in our *haftara*:

I will repay you for all the seasons consumed by the locusts, the springing-locusts, the finisher-locusts, and the chewer-locusts – My great army, which I sent among you. (25)

The third danger, the enemy rising up against Jerusalem, is evident from the prayer of the priests mentioned above.

These unprecedented tribulations led to a large gathering in the Temple, heartrending repentance, and public prayer with great despair before the altar of God.

God's immediate response to the people’s cries – sending rain and removing the locusts and the enemy – was a great prophetic achievement, which is not self-evident! It too may bring to mind a similarity to the book of *Yona*, in which God responded immediately to the repentance of the people of Nineveh. Here, in the book of *Yoel*, is described a great salvation for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which seems similar in magnitude to the salvation in the days of Chizkiyahu, when God's angel struck the Assyrian camp on the night of Pesach. Here too, as mentioned, the salvation arrived in the month of Nissan.

**VI. Historical Background**

I postponed dealing with this question until the end of our discussion because of the difficulty in determining the time of Yoel the prophet. Yoel is one of the few prophets about whom no information is given regarding the kings in whose days they prophesied. The severe calamities, the plague and the enemy who sold the people of Jerusalem into slavery in distant lands (see chapter 4) suggest that he prophesied in the days of an evil king, who pushed Israel away from God. We can only offer a theory, however, with no proven basis.

The author of *Seder Olam* writes that Yoel prophesied in the days of Menashe son of Chizkiyahu. There were prophets in the days of Menashe, as is stated explicitly in the books of *Melakhim* (II, 21) and *Divrei ha-Yamim* (II, 33), but they are not ascribed to his reign, apparently because he killed them.

In my humble opinion, this position is fraught with difficulties, one of which can be seen if we compare the following passages:

**The Lord roars from Zion; from Jerusalem He raises His voice.** The heavens and the earth tremble. But the Lord will be a shelter for His people, a stronghold for the children of Israel. (*Yoel* 4:16)

These are the words of Amos of the herdsmen of Tekoa, who prophesied regarding Israel during the days of Uziya, king of Yehuda, and Yorovam the son of Yoash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. He said: **The Lord roars from Zion; from Jerusalem He raises His voice:** The shepherds' pastures are in mourning, and the peak of the Carmel withers. (*Amos* 1:1-2)

In the order of the twelve prophets, Yoel and Amos are adjacent to each other. Yoel ends his prophecy with a particular expression, and Amos opens his prophecy with the very same expression. This seems to indicate a connection between the two prophets, and that Amos deliberately starts off from where Yoel concluded: Yoel delivered his prophecy to comfort Israel; Amos turns it into an expression of judgment and calamity due to their actions.

This understanding requires us to set Yoel chronologically before Amos, which means Yoel either preceded Uziyahu or prophesied during his days. This aligns with a position cited by the Radak:

Some say that this prophet prophesied in the days of Yehoram son of Achav that there would be a famine in the land, as it is stated: "For the Lord has decreed a seven-year famine in the land" (II *Melakhim* 8:1) – in the first four years there were the four types of locusts, and in the next three years the rain was stopped. (Radak, *Yoel* 1:1)

I would accept this position, with one reservation: Yehoram son of Achav was the king of Shomron, while our prophecy suggests that Yoel prophesied in Jerusalem. For most of the reign of Yehoram son of Achav, the king in Jerusalem was Yehoram son of Yehoshafat, and according to the above hypothesis, our prophecy was delivered either in his time, in the days of his son Achazyahu, or in the days of Atalya, who ruled after him.

Indeed, in the days of Yehoram son of Yehoshafat, the Philistines and the Arabs went up to war against Jerusalem and took captives, even from the royal family. This accords with what is stated in the fourth chapter of *Yoel* regarding God's revenge against these nations for the sale of the people of Jerusalem into slavery. The famine described in our prophecy may coincide with the famine in the days of the prophet Elisha, mentioned in the words of the Radak. And it is possible that God's answer, and His salvation, came at the beginning of the reign of Yehoash son of Achazyahu – which began with the death of Atalya, seven years after the death of Yehoram. At the beginning of his days, Jerusalem was ruled in practice by Yehoyada the High Priest, who was a righteous leader. Perhaps the salvation came after what is described in the book of *Melakhim*:

Then Yehoyada reinstated the covenant between the Lord, the king, and the people, to be the Lord's people; and between the king and the people. All the people of the land came to the temple of Baal and tore it down and shattered its altars and images through and through, and killed Matan, the priest of Baal, in front of the altars. The priest set watchmen over the House of the Lord. (II *Melakhim* 11:17-18)

**VII. Mikha's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy**

Who to God like you bears iniquity and transgresses on crime to the rest of his estate. All their sins are covered by the sea: Is there any God like You who forgives iniquities, who looks beyond the sins of the remnant of His own people, who does not hold onto His wrath forever because He desires kindness? He will again have compassion for us; He will subdue our iniquities and hurl all of our sins into the deepest of seas. You will show truth to Yaakov, kindness to Avraham, as You swore to our fathers in the earliest days. (*Mikha* 7:18-20)

The thirteen attributes of mercy speak for themselves. This mention of them comes at the end of the book of *Mikha*, when Assyria rules over Jerusalem despite Sancheriv's defeat at the city gates. The prophecy was apparently delivered in the days of Menashe son of Chizkiyahu, in whose time the two great kings of Assyria – Esar Chadonand Ashurbanipal – ruled over the Assyrian Empire. The prophet prophesied about the day of the fall of Assyria with a prayer that God would then have mercy on His people, with His thirteen attributes; we, too, mention these attributes as we approach Yom Kippur, the day of mercy.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See *Yeshayahu* 1:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I wrote about the fate of these exiles in the *shiur* on the *haftara* for the second day of Rosh Hashana. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although the translations (taken with permission from *The Koren Tanakh - Magerman Edition*, (c) Koren Publishers 2021) differ, the Hebrew words for the bolded phrases are identical. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is possible that both Yoel and Yona were disciples of the prophet Eliyahu, as discussed at length in my book, *Ha-Mikra'ot ha-Mitchadshim* (Alon Shevut 5775, p. 416, note 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Meaning, the full *haftara* that begins with “O Israel, return” in *Hoshea* and includes the passage from *Yoel*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The *midrashim* and the *Rishonim* are cited in full in my book, referenced in the previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)