YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The Haftara for the First Day of Sukkot**

Behold, a day of the Lord is coming; your spoil will be divided up in your midst. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem in war: the city will be taken, the houses will be plundered, and the women will be raped; half of the city will go into exile, but the remainder of the people will not be cut off from the city. The Lord will go out, and He will fight against these nations as He has fought on days of battle. On that day, His feet will stand upon the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives will split through its middle – into a great valley – from east to west. Half the mountain will shift northward and half southward. And you will flee from this Valley of the Mountains, for the Valley of the Mountains will reach as far as Atzal; you will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uziya, the king of Yehuda, and the Lord will come – my God, and all the holy ones with You. This is what will be: on that day, there will be neither bright light nor thick darkness. This is what will be: there will be a day known to the Lord; it will be neither day nor night, but at evening time there will be light. This is what will be: on that day, living waters will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea; in summer and winter it will be so. Then the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day, the Lord shall be One and His name One. Then the land will be smoothed out like a plain from Geva to Rimon, until the area south of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem will be lifted up in her place. From the Gate of Binyamin to the site of the First Gate and to the Corner Gate, from the Tower of Chananel to the king’s winery, they will inhabit her. There will be no more devastation, and Jerusalem will live in safety. This will be the plague that the Lord will bring upon all the peoples who fought against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot away as they stand on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. This is what will be: on that day, the turmoil the Lord brings on them will be great, and each man will seize another by the arm and raise his fist against his neighbor's fist. And Yehuda too will fight in Jerusalem, and the wealth of all the surrounding nations, great quantities of gold, silver, and clothing, will be gathered in. There will be a plague just like this plague on the horses, the mules, the camels, and the donkeys, and on every animal in those camps. This is what will be: all those remaining from all the nations who came up against Jerusalem will go up year after year to bow down to the King, Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles [Sukkot]. This is what will be: the families of the land who do not go up to Jerusalem and bow down to the King, Lord of Hosts, rain shall not fall for them. If the family of Egypt does not go up, does not come, it shall not be upon them. This will be the plague that the Lord will bring upon the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. Such will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations who do not come up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. On that day, even the bells of the horses will be inscribed "sacred to the Lord," and the pots in the House of the Lord will be like basins before the Altar. This is what will be: every pot in Jerusalem and in Yehuda will be sacred to the Lord of Hosts, and all those who come to sacrifice will take them and will cook in them. On that day, there will be no more need for traders in the House of the Lord of Hosts. (*Zekharya* 14:1-21)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and Sukkot**

The connection between the closing verses of the *haftara* and the festival of Sukkot is clear: the prophet describes all the nations celebrating Sukkot in the House of the Lord, including those nations who had been enemies of Jerusalem and had suffered great defeat there. The *haftara* also points to the connection between Sukkot and the coming year's rainfall, as reflected in our prayers on Hoshana Rabba and Shemini Atzeret.

Our *haftara* also describes God’s salvation of Jerusalem and the bringing of the nations who had fought against it to make peace with it, for it is He who "spreads a *sukka* of peace over Jerusalem,” as we say in our prayers.

The festival of Sukkot is also described in our *haftara* as a response to the great threat and existential fear that came from the nations’ war against Jerusalem and the earthquake that would come in its wake. In a certain sense, this is similar to the way the calming festival of Sukkot follows the Days of Judgment and the Day of Mercy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**II. "Half of the City… But the Remainer of the People"**

The city will be taken, the houses will be plundered, and the women will be raped; half of the city will go into exile, but the remainder of the people will not be cut off from the city. The Lord will go out, and He will fight against these nations as He has fought on days of battle. (14:2-3)

The prophet speaks of a great disaster that will occur in Jerusalem, on the one hand, and of the great salvation to be brought about by God, on the other. Half of the city's population will perish in the disaster, and the other half will be saved. The prophecy does not distinguish between different types of people (wicked and righteous, etc.), and the reader is left with a lack of clarity. It seems logically that God's anger and the need to punish the city would lead to its *complete* destruction, while His desire to save it should save it completely. How can we explain the division into two halves?

There seem to be two ways to understand the words of the prophet. One way is to distinguish on our own between the righteous and the wicked. We find a similar phenomenon regarding the exodus from Egypt, when *Chazal* take pains in their *midrashim* to inform us that not all of the Israelites left Egypt; many of them died during the plague of darkness or the plague of the firstborns:[[3]](#footnote-3)

"Then the people bowed down and prostrated themselves" (*Shemot* 12:27). To what did they bow down? Since it is stated: "The Israelites left Egypt armed for battle [c*hamushim*]" (*Shemot* 13:18) – one out of five [c*hamisha*]… When did they die? During the three days of darkness, as it is stated: "No one could see anyone else" (*Shemot* 10:23), for they were burying their dead, and they offered thanksgiving and praise that the enemies did not see and rejoice in their fall. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Pischa*, *parasha* 12)

The Israelites in Egypt, who were immersed in idolatry and other sins, were still divided into two groups: those who managed to rise to faith in God and in Moshe, and to offer the Paschal sacrifice in the sight of the Egyptians; and those who failed to do so. Only those who stood the test of faith were redeemed. We learn from this that God's desire to redeem Israel and fulfill His oath to their forefathers is not enough; the people of Israel needed to freely choose to move themselves towards redemption.

This was also the case in the days of Chizkiyahu, when Jerusalem was under the siege laid by Sancheriv, king of Assyria. *Chazal* divide the leaders of Jerusalem into two factions: Chizkiyahu's faction, which believed in Yeshayahu's prophecy and insisted on defending Jerusalem and awaiting God's salvation; and the faction of Shevna, who was in charge of the house – which broke down and cooperated with the king of Assyria and did not merit redemption. This is how the prophet Yoel describes the division:

Afterward, this is what will be: I will pour My spirit out over humankind: your sons and your daughters will speak prophecy, your elders will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. In those days, even over the slaves and bondswomen I will pour My spirit out. I will turn the skies and land into omens: blood and fire and plumes of smoke. The sun will go dark, the moon bloody, before the coming great and terrifying day of the Lord. And all those who call on the name of the Lord will escape, for there will be a remnant on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem as the Lord has said; even among the survivors called by the Lord there will be a remnant. (*Yoel* 3:1-5)

Redemption will come, but only those who call on the name of God will merit it. It is God's desire to redeem all of Israel, but redemption by its very nature depends on free choice and faith in the face of trials, even in a difficult time. Thus, only the believers who call on the name of God will be redeemed. According to this, Zekharya is indirectly calling upon the residents of Jerusalem to believe in redemption and to do everything they can in order to be worthy of inclusion in the faction of the redeemed, and not, God forbid, in the faction of those who will perish in the disaster of the war.

However, as was stated above, it is difficult to find a hint in the verses to this division of the city between believers and non-believers. Therefore, we can also suggest a second approach.

At first glance, the division seems almost random, reminiscent of the salvation of those who survived the plague in the days of David, after seventy thousand people died in it. The division reminds us also of Sancheriv's siege – not the factions of Chizkiyahu and of Shevna, but the destruction of the cities of Yehuda, including the great city of Lakhish, and the great salvation that God brought to Jerusalem. It brings to mind primarily the exile of Yehoyakhin, with the craftsmen and smiths, to Babylon, and the additional chance at redemption that was given to Tzidkiyahu and the remnant of the people of Jerusalem, as stated in Yirmeyahu's prophecy about Yehoyakhin ("Konyahu") as opposed to Tzidkiyahu ("Our Righteous One"):

Is he a disgraced and broken idol, this man Konyahu? Is he an unwanted vessel? Why have he and his seed been cast out and flung into a land that they did not know? (*Yirmeyahu* 22:8)

Days are soon approaching, declares the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous scion for David. He will reign as king and prosper and dispense justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Yehuda will be saved, and Israel will dwell in safety. And this is the name by which the Lord will call him: Our Righteous One. (*Yirmeyahu* 23:5-6)

From the verses themselves, no clear difference emerges between the righteousness or wickedness of the Yehoyakhin exiles versus the survivors of Jerusalem. It seems that instead, there was a conflict here between two important values: the need for justice and the punishment of the sinful inhabitants of Jerusalem, on the one hand, and God's desire to protect Jerusalem, His city, and the remnant of His people, on the other. The two values found expression in the half of the city that went into exile and in the remainder who were not cut off from the city but were given another opportunity to correct their actions. Unfortunately, this opportunity was not taken; the people remaining in Jerusalem were even more corrupt than before, and in the end, all of Jerusalem was destroyed.

In our prophecy, then, Zekharya describes, perhaps based on what happened at the time of the destruction of the First Temple, a similar future situation that will answer both the need to punish the sinful city and God's love and desire to protect it with His own hands. The people of Israel have often found themselves in similar situations; there is a striking similarity between Zekharya's prophecy and the fate of Jerusalem in the Israeli War of Independence, when half the city was destroyed together with many of its residents, and half the city, West Jerusalem, was saved by the hand of God. In that case as well, it is beyond us why some merited salvation and the others, to our sorrow, did not.

Zekharya said similar things in the previous chapter, before our prophecy:

This is what will be all over the land – the Lord has spoken – two thirds of the population will be cut down; they will die. One third will remain. I will pass that third through fire and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as one tests gold. He will call in My name, and I will answer him. I will say, "He is My nation," and he will say, "The Lord is my God." (*Zekharya* 13:8-9)

**III. The Earthquake – The Negative Results**

On that day, His feet will stand upon the Mount of Olives which faces Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives will split through its middle – into a great valley – from east to west. Half the mountain will shift northward and half southward. And you will flee from this Valley of the Mountains, for the Valley of the Mountains will reach as far as Atzal; you will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uziya, the king of Yehuda. (14:4-5)

` The earthquake is not necessarily part of God's war with the nations fighting against Jerusalem. It expresses the very appearance of God. In similar fashion, Mikha said:

For behold the Lord – He is coming out of His place; He will go down and tread upon the highest places of the earth. The mountains dissolve beneath Him, and the valleys split open like wax melting before fire, like waters surging down a steep slope. (*Mikha* 1:3-4)

The very act of God treading on the earth in His "big shoes," as it were, causes the earth to shake, the mountains to melt, and the valleys to split open. Perhaps something similar happened at Mount Sinai, when God descended on the mountain in fire. Among the voices, the lightning, the great fire, the smoke, the heavy cloud, and the trembling of the mountain, there is also a command:

Set a boundary for the people around the mountain; tell them to take care not to ascend to it, nor even touch its edge. Anyone who touches the mountain must be put to death. No hand shall touch him: he shall be stoned or shot with arrows; beast or man, he shall not live. When the ram's horn sounds a long blast – only then may they go up on the mountain. (*Shemot* 19:12-13)

It may be that there was a danger in ascending the mountain because of heavy stones that spewed forth from within and above it ("he shall be stoned") because of its trembling, on account of the *Shekhina* that descended upon it, and that any person or animal on it would fly to their death from the shock waves of the quake ("or shot").

Where will the Mount of Olives split? The prophet does not specify, but there is a "seam" on the mountains (near the bridge crossing the Kidron stream) that divides it into two parts. This seam resulted from an earthquake that occurred in the Syrian-African fault in the Jordan River, a fault that causes constant displacement. It is possible that the walls of Jericho fell because of it in a shock that then continued all the way to Beit Choron and included the large stones that were cast on the armies of Adonitzedek, King of Jerusalem, and his allies, the enemies of Yehoshua. Perhaps, according to Zekharya's vision, the Mount of Olives will split at this seam, and a river will issue forth between the two parts of the mountain that goes from west to east, to the Dead Sea, and through it fresh living water will flow from Jerusalem to the eastern sea. According to the description in our *haftara*, the fissure will also be towards the west, and will lead water, perhaps through Nachal Refaim, to Nachal Sorek and to the western sea, the Mediterranean.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Because the fissure goes from west to east, through the Mount of Olives, I am inclined to interpret "*ve-nastem gei harai*" (“And you will flee from this Valley of the Mountains” in the above translation) not in the sense of fleeing, but in the sense of blockage, as it was understood by Targum Yonatan and Rashi. Today, a stream descends from the area of Armon Ha-Netziv north to Nachal Kidron. Its Arabic name is "Wadi Yasil," perhaps preserving the name Atzal.[[5]](#footnote-5) This ravine will be closed due to the movement of the earth during the earthquake and the breach of the river from the Mount of Olives, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will flee to it as they did during the earthquake in the days of Uziyahu, king of Yehuda.

The earthquake in the days of Uziyahu, which is conventionally identified with the earthquake in 749 BCE, year 36 of Uziyahu's reign, affected the entire country; its fingerprints are found even in Tel Chatzor in the Galilee. Its effects are described primarily in the book of *Amos* (Amos began to prophesy two years before the earthquake); a description is also given there of its centers in the sea, which caused severe flooding along the coast. Jerusalem and the Temple were damaged, and Yotam son of Uziyahu engaged in their restoration. Yeshayahu also (in chapter 6) describes the pillars of the Temple as being shaken by this earthquake, which from a prophetic perspective expressed the removal of the *Shekhina* from the Temple, apparently in the wake of the incense burnt by Uziyahu and what followed.

**IV. The Earthquake – The Positive Results**

This is what will be: on that day, living waters will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea; in summer and winter it will be so. (14:8)

Then the land will be smoothed out like a plain from Geva to Rimon, until the area south of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem will be lifted up in her place. From the Gate of Binyamin to the site of the First Gate and to the Corner Gate, from the Tower of Chananel to the king’s winery, they will inhabit her. (14:10)

Besides the calamitous fleeing, which alludes to disasters in Jerusalem, Zekharya also describes positive aspects of the earthquake:

a. The flowing of living water from Jerusalem, apparently from the Temple (based on comparison with *Yoel* 4:18 and *Yechezkel* chapter 47), to the eastern and western seas, following the routes described above. (The vision of Jerusalem providing living water to the entire land, irrigating and promoting growth in the salty soil along the sea of Sedom, is also found as a vision of the end of days in the prophecies of the other prophets mentioned here, Yoel and Yehezkel.)

b. The entire area around Jerusalem will turn into a plain – from Geva and Rimon in the territory of Binyamin, north of Jerusalem, until "the area south of Jerusalem." Jerusalem itself will be lifted up to form a high mountain that stands out above all its surroundings. This is reminiscent of the prophecy of the end of days in *Yeshayahu*:

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. (*Yeshayahu* 2:2; see also *Mikha* 4:1)

Yechezkel envisions the future Jerusalem in a similar way in his vision of the Temple:

In visions of God He brought me to the land of Israel and set me down near a very high mountain upon which, to the south, was something like the structure of a city. (*Yechezkel* 40:2)

According to Yeshayahu (and Mikha), apparently, as long "as hills surround Jerusalem" and Mount Moriya is hidden from all sides by mountains higher than it, the nations will not ascend to the Mountain of God. But after the earthquake that Yeshayahu describes in that chapter, the Temple Mount will rise and be visible from all its surroundings, and then all the nations will come to it. Zekharya also sees the city rising above all its surroundings in the wake of an earthquake – and this is how all of the nations will go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Sukkot.

**V. The Light and the Kingdom of God**

This is what will be: there will be a day known to the Lord; it will be neither day nor night, but at evening time there will be light. (14:7)

Then the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day, the Lord shall be One and His name One. (14:9)

Zekharya appears to be describing a very far-off vision, which is also mentioned in *Yeshayahu*:

The light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the sun's light seven times the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord bandages the breaking of His people and heals up the gash from their beating. (*Yeshayahu* 30:26)

The vision involves a return to the light of the seven days of creation, or to the light of the first day, which was stored away and in whose place the sun shined on the fourth day. This light is described here as seven times stronger than the light of the sun, and thus its illumination of the moon will be stronger; the light of the moon will be as strong as the light of the sun today. There will therefore be light in the evening, and dark nights will be completely abolished. This vision seems strange: there is a great blessing in the night and in darkness, which enable sleep and rest. However, from the Bible's perspective, the night often serves as a hiding place for the wicked and for criminals, who carry out their deeds under the cover of darkness, or for predatory animals (who represent wickedness):

They rebel against the light! They do not know His ways; they have not held to His paths. The murderer rises in the evening; he slays the needy and impoverished like a robber in the night. The eye of the adulterer, too, waits till dusk, thinking, “No eye will glimpse me.” He hides his face. In the dark, they break into homes. By day, they seal themselves up; they are not fond of light. For them, daybreak is death-dark; they will know the terror of death-dark! (*Iyov* 24:13-17)

You cast darkness, night falls, and all the forest creatures stir. The young lions roar for prey; they seek their food from God. (*Tehillim* 104:20-21)

The abolition of night and darkness may, then, be a metaphor for the abolition of wickedness from the world. The vision of the return of the first day, the day of the creation of the light, is a vision of a return to the world as God willed it at the time of its creation. On that day, God will once again be king over the entire world; everyone will know that He is the one king and there is no other. This is also the aim of the *Malkhuyot* blessingthat is recited on Rosh Hashana – the first day, the day on which God created the light of the seven days, when, until that light was stored away, there was no night.

**VI. God's War Against the Nations**

This will be the plague that the Lord will bring upon all the peoples who fought against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot away as they stand on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. This is what will be: on that day, the turmoil the Lord brings on them will be great, and each man will seize another by the arm and raise his fist against his neighbor's fist. And Yehuda too will fight in Jerusalem, and the wealth of all the surrounding nations, great quantities of gold, silver, and clothing, will be gathered in. There will be a plague just like this plague on the horses, the mules, the camels, and the donkeys, and on every animal in those camps. (14:12-15)

As mentioned, the earthquake comes only to express God's presence in the arena, though its effect on the nations fighting against Jerusalem can have considerable weight. The war will be waged with plague and severe disease, as well as with other means used in the Bible in several places[[6]](#footnote-6) – an internal conflict between the enemies of Jerusalem surrounding it, turning their common war against Israel into a war between themselves.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Yehuda will fight in Jerusalem against the enemies of Jerusalem, and even the inhabitants of Yehuda who are not residents of Jerusalem will acquire a share of the great booty that will fall into the hands of the defenders of the city.

**VII. The Sukkot of the Nations of the World**

This is what will be: all those remaining from all the nations who came up against Jerusalem will go up year after year to bow down to the King, Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. This is what will be: the families of the land who do not go up to Jerusalem and bow down to the King, Lord of Hosts, rain shall not fall for them. If the family of Egypt does not go up, does not come, it shall not be upon them. This will be the plague that the Lord will bring upon the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. Such will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations who do not come up to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. (14:16-19)

The words of *Chazal* contain several hints that the festival of Sukkot transcends the private sphere of the people of Israel and is directed toward the nations of the world. For instance, with regard to the seventy bulls offered over the course of the festival:

Rabbi Elazar said: To what do these seventy bulls correspond? The seventy nations. (*Sukka* 55b)

The rain for which we pray on Sukkot is meant to give life to the entire world, as Zekharya prophesied in his prophecy. Even Egypt, which seems not to need rain (since it is filled with water “as in a vegetable garden” – *Devarim* 11:10), will be forced to come and ask for rain.

While the festival of Pesach marks God's war against the nations of the world who have subjugated Israel, on the festival of Sukkot, a tabernacle of peace is erected. On this festival, Shlomo dedicated the First Temple with the intent that it would be a house of prayer for all the nations:

Should the foreigner too, not of Your people Israel, come from a distant land for the sake of Your name, having heard of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm; should he come and pray at this House, listen from Your heavenly abode and fulfill all that the foreigner calls out to You. For then all the peoples of the land will know Your name and revere you as Your people Israel does; for then they will know that it is Your name that is proclaimed over this House. (I *Melakhim* 8: 41-43)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Biblical references are to the book of *Zekharya*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. So too during the Yom Kippur War, Yom Kippur and the next four days were unbearably difficult. Thursday, the first day of Sukkot, was the day the IDF began its counter-attack into Syrian territory, and Sunday, the third day of Chol ha-Moed Sukkot, was the day the battlegrounds changed on the Egyptian front, with the destruction of about 250 Egyptian tanks. A day and a half later, the crossing of the Suez canal began. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This possibility is well supported by the number of firstborns, which was relatively small in relation to the size of the people of Israel. In my opinion, the number of firstborns (*Bamidbar* 3) was about a tenth of what it should have been. The plague of the firstborns can explain this. According to this, we can assume that not all of the Israelites, and not even a majority of them, offered the Paschal sacrifice, and thus many died in the plague of the firstborns. I wrote about this in detail in my book, *Ki Karov Eilekha* on the book of *Bamidbar* (pp. 42-43). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Today, the watershed line, from which water can be transported both to the Dead Sea and to the Mediterranean, is located above the Begin Center in Jerusalem. On the one side, the water flows through the Ben Hinnom valley to Nachal Kidron, and from there to the Dead Sea. On the other side, the water flows to Nachal Refaim, by way of the old train tracks, to Nachal Sorek. A rupture following an earthquake could put the Temple in the center of the watershed line, from where water could flow to the two seas mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My revered teacher, Rav Chanan Porat, referred to himself in his poems in his book, *Me'at Min ha-Or*, by the pen name Gai ben Atzal. He was referring to our prophecy, and saw in the valley that reached Atzal a place of refuge and safe haven on the terrifying day of the Lord. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare, for example, with II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 20:22-24. There, too, mention is made of the gathering of a great amount of booty, as in the prophecy of our *haftara*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This can be compared to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between two of the most evil people ever, Hitler and Stalin, on the eve of World War II, which during Operation Barbarossa turned into a war of enmity like no other, an enmity that saved the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)