YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The Haftara for the Seventh Day of Pesach**

David uttered these words of song to the Lord on the day that the Lord saved him from the hands of all his enemies and from the hand of Sha'ul. He said: The Lord is my Rock and my fortress, my own rescuer; my God is the Rock of my refuge, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my haven, my refuge, my savior who delivers me from violence. Praise! When I call on the Lord, I am saved from my enemies. For when waves of death assailed me, deadly torrents engulfed me, the cords of Sheol entangled me, snares of death confronted me, in my distress I called on the Lord; I called out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry rang in His ears. Then the earth shook and shuddered; the foundations of heaven trembled; they shuddered from His wrath. Smoke issued from His nostrils; devouring flames flared from His mouth; from Him gleaming coals blazed forth. He bent the heavens and descended, dense cloud beneath His feet; He mounted a cherub and flew, appearing on wings of wind. He surrounded Himself with a shelter of darkness, of heavy storm clouds dense with rain. From the brilliant glow of His presence blazed fiery coals. The Lord thundered from the heavens; the Most High raised His voice; He shot arrows to scatter them, lightning bolts to rout them. The ocean bed was exposed, the foundations of the world laid bare by the onslaught of the Lord, by the blast of His breath. From on high He reached down and took me; He drew me out of the mighty waters. He saved me from my fierce enemy, from foes too strong for me. They confronted me on my direst day, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out to freedom; He rescued me because He delighted in me. The Lord rewarded me as I deserved; as my hands were clean, He repaid me, for I kept the ways of the Lord and did not betray my God, for all His laws are before me; I will not turn away from His statutes. I am blameless to Him and keep myself from sin. So the Lord repaid me as I deserved, as I was pure in His sight. You deal loyally with those who are loyal, to the blameless warrior You show Yourself blameless; You are pure with those who are pure, but with the crooked, You are shrewd. You bring salvation to a humble people; You cast Your eyes down on the haughty. For You are my lamp, Lord; the Lord lights up my darkness. With You I can rush a ridge; with my God I can leap over a wall. God's ways are blameless; the Lord’s words are pure; He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him. For who is a god besides the Lord; who is a Rock besides our God? God is my powerful stronghold; He frees my way so it is sound. He makes my legs like a deer's and stands me on the heights. He trains my hands for battle so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You gave me the shield of Your victory; Your battle cry stirred me with power. You made my steps broad and firm; my feet never faltered. I pursued my enemy to destroy them, never turning back until they perished. I cut them down and crushed them, and they did not rise; they fell beneath my feet. You girded me with power for battle and sunk my adversaries far beneath me; You made my enemies turn tail before me; my foes, too, I destroyed. They looked wildly about, but there was no savior – called out to the Lord, but He did not answer them – while I ground them up like dust of the earth; I crushed and pounded them like street-mud. You rescued me from civil strife; you kept me as the head of nations; peoples I never knew of serve me. Foreign peoples come cringing before me; they merely hear me and obey; foreign peoples lose heart and come trembling out of their forts. The Lord lives! Blessed is my Rock; exalted is God, Rock of my rescue! God who grants vengeance to me, who subjugates people under me, my redeemer from my enemies, You raise me above those who rise against me; You save me from violent men. So I praise You, Lord, among the nations, and sing to Your name. He is a tower of victory for His king and shows loyalty to His anointed, to David and his seed forever. (II *Shmuel* 22:1-51)

**I. The Connection Between the Haftara and the Seventh Day of Pesach**

Our *haftara* is David's song about being rescued by God from his enemies, and in this sense it is similar to the Song of the Sea, which is at the center of the Torah portion read on the seventh day of Pesach. Those who follow the customs of the Gaon of Vilna read David’s song as it appears in *Tehillim* 18, with slight differences from the version in *Shmuel* that serves as the *haftara*, as the *shir shel yom* (song of the day).

At first glance, it would seem that another biblical song is more similar to the Song of the Sea – that of Devora, which describes Sisera's chariots being washed away in the waters of the Kishon like the chariots of Pharoah that sank in the Sea of Suf. But this song was already "taken" as the *haftara* for *Parashat Beshalach,* in which the parting of the Sea of Suf and the Song of the Sea are recorded.

However, upon closer examination, we find that there is indeed a great, important connection between the song of David in our *haftara* and the Song of the Sea.

David sees himself as the people of Israel, whom the Sea of Suf threatens to drown if they enter its waters to escape from the Egyptians:

For when waves of death assailed me, deadly torrents engulfed me, the cords of Sheol entangled me… (22:5-6)

He describes the miracle of the parting of the sea and walking on the dry ground beneath it:

The ocean bed was exposed, the foundations of the world laid bare by the onslaught of the Lord, by the blast of His breath. From on high He reached down and took me; He drew me out of the mighty waters. (16-17)

David likens God's salvation to the exposure of the bottom of the sea ("the ocean bed" and "the foundations of the world"), and thus God saves David from the metaphoric great waters that threaten to drown him, just as He had once saved the people of Israel from the waters of the Sea of Suf.

David even describes God's arrows – the lightnings – that have struck his enemies:

He shot arrows to scatter them, lightning bolts to rout them. (15)

` At the parting of the Sea of Suf, as well, the arrows of lightning bolts (in the pillar of fire) threw Israel's enemies into a panic:

During the last watch of the night, the Lord looked down at the Egyptian army from a column of fire and cloud and threw them into a panic. (*Shemot* 14:24)

Darkness and the cloud ("*sukkot*") were directed towards the Egyptians at the splitting of the Sea of Suf, and on the other side, light was directed towards Israel:

It came between the Egyptian and Israelite camps, as cloud and darkness for one, but lighting the night for the other, keeping the two apart all night. (*Shemot* 14:20)

So too in the song of David:

He surrounded Himself with a shelter [*sukkot*]of darkness, of heavy storm clouds dense with rain… For You are my lamp, Lord; the Lord lights up my darkness. (12, 29)

David also describes intense shockwaves at the very foundations of the universe, with fire, smoke, and cloud – as we can imagine for ourselves in the splitting of the Sea of Suf as well:

Then the earth shook and shuddered; the foundations of heaven trembled; they shuddered from His wrath. Smoke issued from His nostrils; devouring flames flared from His mouth; from Him gleaming coals blazed forth. He bent the heavens and descended, dense cloud beneath His feet. (8-10)

The Lord thundered from the heavens; the Most High raised His voice. (14)

**II. Lovingkindness and Justice in God’s Salvation**

The song relates to two different modes of divine governance regarding David, which should be differentiated. On one side, God governs the world by way of lovingkindness:

In my distress I called on the Lord; I called out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry rang in His ears. (22:7)

David cries out to God in his time of trouble, and God, who hears the cry of the oppressed, comes to his rescue – just as He heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt and on the shores of the Sea of Suf.

On the other side, however, is governance by way of justice:

The Lord rewarded me as I deserved; as my hands were clean, He repaid me, for I kept the ways of the Lord and did not betray my God, for all His laws are before me; I will not turn away from His statutes. I am blameless to Him and keep myself from sin. So the Lord repaid me as I deserved, as I was pure in His sight. (21-25)

God is blameless in His way, the word of God is pure, He is a shield to all who trust in Him. (31)

David notes that he merits God's salvation by virtue of his good deeds – through justice, not just due to God's lovingkindness. One wonders why David saw fit to praise himself so much for his actions; why didn't he attribute his salvation purely to God's lovingkindness? It may be that he wanted to highlight the importance of his refraining from harming Sha’ul when opportunities to do so presented themselves, in the cave in Ein Gedi (I *Shmuel* 24:6) and in Giv'at Ha-Chakhila (I *Shmuel* 26:9). Perhaps he wished to teach us the difference between God's salvation by way of the attribute of lovingkindness and His salvation by way of the attribute of justice – when the person is entitled to his salvation – as will be explained below.

**III. Human Action in the Process of Salvation**

As seen above, David’s song opens with a prayer to God describing salvation by way of His grace and mercy or because He finds favor with and delights in David:

In my distress I called on the Lord; I called out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry rang in His ears. (22:7)

But the Lord was my support. He brought me out to freedom; He rescued me because He delighted in me. (19-20)

As we have seen, this salvation was similar to the splitting of the Sea of Suf and the drowning of the Egyptians – salvation that was entirely in the hands of God. Here, man is nothing more than a reed that floats on the surface of the water until he is cast to a safe shore; he plays no part of his own in his salvation.

After describing this salvation, David recounts his good deeds, for which he is entitled to salvation, and describes how God responds in kind to man’s actions:

You deal loyally with those who are loyal, to the blameless warrior You show Yourself blameless; You are pure with those who are pure, but with the crooked, You are shrewd. You bring salvation to a humble people; You cast Your eyes down on the haughty. (26-28)

God's kindness to those who are loyal to Him finds expression in a different type of salvation:

With You I can rush a ridge; with my God I can leap over a wall. (30)

He makes my legs like a deer's and stands me on the heights. He trains my hands for battle so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. (34-35)

You made my steps broad and firm; my feet never faltered. I pursued my enemy to destroy them, never turning back until they perished. I cut them down and crushed them, and they did not rise; they fell beneath my feet. You girded me with power for battle and sunk my adversaries far beneath me; You made my enemies turn tail before me; my foes, too, I destroyed. (37-41)

I ground them up like dust of the earth; I crushed and pounded them like street-mud. (43)

God who grants vengeance to me, who subjugates people under me, my redeemer from my enemies, You raise me above those who rise against me; You save me from violent men. (48-49)

Here, the rescue is not passive: God imparts strength and courage to his hands and feet, and the party being saved, David, overcomes his enemies by his own strength. However, he does not forget that it is the Lord his God who gives him the power to be mighty [as in *Devarim* 8:18], and that had He not done so, David would not have been able to stand against his many enemies. This salvation reminds us of the *Al Ha-nissim* prayer that we recite on Chanuka about the salvation that God brought at the hands of the Maccabees, when He delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak and the many into the hands of the few. Had it not been for the Maccabees and their armies putting their lives on the line and attacking their enemies with force and strategy, they would have been defeated before their enemies. God put salvation in their hands, but owing to their righteousness, their salvation was not of the type of "*nahama de-kisufa*" (= bread of shame*,* food of charity), but rather salvation that integrated their own heroism.

Who, then, fought David's wars: David himself, or the Lord his God? It is possible that the answer to this question lies in some of the many pairs of "*keri u-khetiv"* in the song, where a word is written one way but read another way. These leave us with double possible meanings, such as: "He makes His legs [*raglav*] like a deer's" or "He makes my legs [*raglai*] like a deer's" (22:34); "He frees His way [*darko*] so it is sound" or "He frees my way [*darki*] so it is sound" (33); and "He magnifies [*magdil*] victory for His king" or "He is a tower [*migdol*]of victory for His king" (51; that is, the victories of the king increase on their own, at the hands of the king himself – David).

The possibility that the more righteous the king is, the more God will give him the strength to save himself, rather than providing salvation in the form of "*nahama de-kisufa*," finds expression in a midrashic exposition of a verse in our song:

Zivdi ben Levi opened… There were four kings; what one asked for, the others did not. These are: David, Asa, Yehoshafat, and Chizkiyahu. David said: "Let me pursue my enemy to destroy them." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I will do so. This is what is written: "David attacked them the next day from dawn until dusk" (I *Shmuel* 30:17).

Asa arose and said: I do not have the strength to kill them, but I will pursue them and You do so. He said to him: I will do so…

Yehoshafat arose and said: I do not have the strength to kill or even to pursue them, but I will recite a song and You do so. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I will do so…

Chizkiyahu arose and said: I do not have the strength to kill or pursue them, or even to recite a song, but I will sleep in my bed, and You do so. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I will do so… (*Eikha Rabba*, *petichta* 30)

The descent of the generations is evident from the order of the kings and their words. David, the best of them, merited that God gave his enemies into his hands and he pursued and defeated them. Asa merited to pursue his enemies only after God sent His angels to strike them at the beginning of the war. Yehoshafat only merited to recite a song after God did all the work for him, while Chizkiyahu did not even merit to recite a song.

The splitting of the Sea of Suf, about which we read in the Torah, was similar to what happened in the days of Yehoshafat: God did all the military work, and the people of Israel recited a song. In contrast, God gave David's enemies into his hands, and he both destroyed them and sang a song about it – the highest level of all.

(Translated by David Strauss)