YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

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In loving memory of my parents
Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger *z"l*
- Benzion Lowinger

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**“And Saviors Shall Go Up to Mount Zion to Judge the Mountains of Esav”**

This is Ovadya's vision: So says the Lord God to Edom – we have heard tidings from the Lord: and an envoy has been sent among the nations, "Come, let us rise up in battle against her." Look, I have made you small among nations; you are utterly scorned. The arrogance of your heart deceived you, you who dwell in the cliff's niches, your lofty abode, saying in your heart, "Who could bring me down to earth?" But even if you rise as high as an eagle, if you make your nest among the stars, I shall bring you down from there, declares the Lord. If thieves come upon you, bandits in the night, do they not take only their fill? If grape gatherers come upon you, do they not leave gleanings? Yet how has Esav been ransacked, his hidden treasures laid bare. Your allies all have forced you to the borders; those with whom you had made peace all deceived you, defeated you. Those with whom you broke your bread laid a snare for you, bereft of awareness. Behold, on that day, says the Lord, I will purge Edom of wise men, the mountains of Esav of awareness. Your warriors will be frightened, Teiman, for the mountains of Esav will be unmanned by slaughter. For the violence you wrought against your brother Yaakov shame will cover you, and you will be cut off forever. The day you stood aside, the day strangers took captive his forces, and foreigners entered his gates, casting lots for Jerusalem – you too were like one of them. Do not gloat over the day of your brother's destruction, the day he becomes a stranger. Do not rejoice over the children of Yehuda on the day of their destruction. Do not open your mouth on the day of trouble. Do not enter My people’s gate on the day of their ruin. Do not gloat over its misfortune on the day of its ruin. Do not extend your hands to take its wealth on the day of his ruin. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut down his refugees. Do not surrender his survivors on the day of trouble. For the day of the Lord draws near for all the nations. What you have done shall be done to you; what you have wrought will return upon your head. What you drank on My holy mountain, all the nations will always drink. They will drink and they will swallow, and they will be as if they never were. There will be a remnant on Mount Zion, and it will be holy, and the House of Yaakov will possess their inheritance. The House of Yaakov will be fire, the House of Yosef, flame; the House of Esav, straw. They will blaze among them and consume them, and there will be no survivors of the House of Esav, for the Lord has spoken. They will take possession of the Negev, along with the mountains of Esav, and the Shefela, from the Philistines. And they will take possession of the land of Efrayim and the land of Shomron; and Binyamin, along with the Gilad – they, the exiled force of the children of Israel who are among the Canaanites as far as Tzarfat and the exiled of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will take possession of the cities of the Negev. And saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esav, and dominion shall be the Lord's. (*Ovadya* 1:1-21)

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

The second part of *Parashat Vayishlach* deals primarily with the history of Esav, the father of Edom, inasmuch as he is a member of the family of the patriarchs. The bulk of Esav's history is in Mount Se'ir: Esav went there even before Yaakov returned to Canaan from his exile with Lavan the Aramaean, and many years after Yaakov's return, Esav abandoned the land of Canaan for good and settled in Mount Se'ir, which rises to the east of the Arava wadi, from the Dead Sea southward.

Esav is also mentioned at the beginning of our *parasha*, when he has a heart-to-heart meeting with Yaakov. Esav comes to the meeting from Edom in the south, while Yaakov comes from Charan in the north.

The *parasha* leaves us with a question mark regarding the relationship between the Esav of *Parashat Toldot*, who planned to kill Yaakov after his father's death because he had stolen his blessings, and the Esav in our *parasha,* who runs toward Yaakov, embraces him, falls on his neck, and kisses him. There is also a prominent gap in our *parasha* between Esav, who offers his brother Yaakov assistance and protection, and Yaakov, who tries his best to get away from Esav and separate himself from him.

The same question mark hovers over our *haftara*:the prophet's fury with Esav and Edom is unequivocal, as he declares: "For the violence you wrought against your brother Yaakov shame will cover you, and you will be cut off forever" (v.10), yet he expects Edom to treat the people of Israel as his brothers, and demands:

Do not gloat over the day of your brother's destruction, the day he becomes a stranger. Do not rejoice over the children of Yehuda on the day of their destruction. Do not open your mouth on the day of trouble. (v.12)

Our *parasha* expects the nations that arose from Yaakov and from Esav to treat each other as brothers, but the reality described in our *haftara* is completely different.

**II. The Time of the Prophecy and the Events Described In It**

The first questions we must ask are: When did the prophet Ovadya live, and about which period did he deliver the prophecy in our chapter (the only chapter in his book)? Many of the traditional commentators (Rashi, Radak, Abravanel, and others) followed the *midrash* (*Sanhedrin* 39b) that identifies the prophet Ovadya with Ovadyahu, the disciple of the prophet Eliyahu who was in charge of Achav's palace and saved a hundred prophets from Izevel:

Achav summoned Ovadyahu, who was in charge of the palace – Ovadyahu had deep reverence for the Lord; when Izevel was annihilating the prophets of the Lord, Ovadyahu had taken one hundred prophets and hidden them, fifty men to a cave, and provided them with food and water. "Go about the land to every spring and every wadi," Achav said to Ovadyahu. "Perhaps we will find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so that our animals will not be annihilated." They divided up the land between them for exploration; Achav set out alone in one direction, while Ovadyahu set out alone in another. As Ovadyahu was on the road, he was suddenly met by Eliyahu. He recognized him at once and fell on his face. "Is that you, my lord Eliyahu?" he said. "It is I," he said to him. "Go and tell your lord: Eliyahu is here." (I *Melakhim* 3-8)

According to Rashi, Ovadya's prophecy deals with Edom's grave sin against Israel during the time of the destruction of the First Temple in the days of Nevukhadnetzar. Radak and the Abravanel went further and explained that the main point of the prophecy addresses the grave sins of the Roman empire, which *Chazal* identified with Edom, and continues until the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and afterwards. These commentators were not bothered by the large gap between the time of the prophet and the time of the prophecy, neither here nor regarding many other prophecies.

The "modern" commentators, on the other hand, interpreted the prophecy based on a clear premise that the prophet prophesied about his own time; according to this assumption, we cannot say that the prophecy is about the Roman empire, for prophecy ceased a long time before its rise. These commentators prefer the approach of Rashi, who understood the prophecy against the background of the destruction of the First Temple, but they agree with the Ibn Ezra that there is no connection between Ovadyahu, who served in the government of Achav, and the prophet Ovadya, who lived about three hundred years later.

The prophecy deals with the despicable role assumed by the kingdom of Edom during the destruction of Jerusalem: helping the soldiers of Nevuzaradan, the Babylonian general, capture Jewish fugitives and hand them over to him:

Do not enter My people’s gate on the day of their ruin. Do not gloat over its misfortune on the day of its ruin. Do not extend your hands to take its wealth on the day of his ruin. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut down his refugees. Do not surrender his survivors on the day of trouble. (vs.13-14)

Presumably, this business of handing over the fugitives was part of the occupation of the Edomites and other nations, selling the fugitives as slaves. It is also possible that by virtue of the Edomites' cooperation with Nevuchadnetzar, they were granted permission to settle in the Negev, the Hebron mountains, and the area of Jerusalem after the destruction. The deal was doubly despicable because the king of Edom was one of the kings who had entered into a defense alliance with Tzidkiyahu – the king of Yehuda who was beaten by Nevukhadnetzar – with the aim of rebelling together against the Babylonian king:

This is what the Lord said to me: "Make yourself the reins and bars of a yoke, and place them upon your neck, and send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moav, the king of the Amonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, and by way of the emissaries who come to Jerusalem, to Tzidkiyahu, king of Yehuda… The nation and kingdom that will not serve him – Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon – and will not submit its neck to the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will visit sword, famine, and pestilence upon that nation, declares the Lord, until I finish them off by his hands. (*Yirmeyahu* 27:2-8)

Yet Edom betrayed their alliance with Yehuda, rejoiced in their downfall, and cooperated with Nevukhadnetzar. Yirmeyahu lamented this situation and demanded God's vengeance:

Rejoice, be merry, daughter Edom, sitting there in the land of Utz. The cup will come to you in turn; you will get drunk and be laid bare. Your offenses are done with, daughter Zion; He will exile you no more. Your offenses are noted, daughter Edom; your sins have been exposed. (*Eikha* 4:21-22)

Many prophets came out with unusual harshness against Edom. The Psalmist as well recognized the treacherous complicity of the Edomites in the destruction of Jerusalem:

Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. They said, "Tear it down; tear it down to its very foundations!" (*Tehillim* 137:7)

Yirmeyahu also has a prophecy (in Chapter 39 of his book) very similar to the prophecy of Ovadya in our *haftara.* Both prophecies contain a demand for revenge against Edom for their actions, and both prophets describe the protected and apparently safe place where Edom resides, in the niches of the cliffs. These descriptions accord well with the cities of Edom high up on Mount Se'ir, and especially their capitals – the city of Batzra and the city of Sela.

**III. Edom’s Punishment**

In the years following the destruction of Jerusalem, Edom was destroyed, thus fulfilling the prophecies of revenge of Yirmeyahu and Ovadya. The circumstances of the event are not entirely clear, and there are two hypotheses regarding it.

Toward the end of the 19th century, an inscription containing the chronicle of Nabonidus, king of Babylon, was discovered in the city of Sela, which was the capital of Edom. The chronicle describes Nabonidus's conquests in Edom and the conquest of the city of Sela itself. This conquest took place about thirty to forty years after the destruction of the Temple, but it is not entirely clear whether the Edomites were still living in their capital and in their country during this period. There is historical evidence that the Nabateans, along with other Arab tribes, emerged from the southeast and conquered the kingdom of Edom in the very year of the destruction of the Temple. According to this, Nabonidus conquered the cities of Edom from them, and not from the Edomites. If we accept the assumption that the Nabatean tribes fulfilled the prophecy of revenge, their action takes on greater significance from a historical-prophetic point of view. The Nabateans were the allies of the Edomites and their partners in the rich trade that took place between the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean countries through Edom and its surroundings. Yet, despite the friendship and partnership between them, ultimately the Nabateans and the Arabs conquered Edom, and the refugees of Edom migrated to the Hebron mountains and even farther north. This betrayal of the Edomites was a fitting retribution for the Edomites' betrayal of their Jewish brothers, and it is mentioned clearly in our prophecy:

Your allies all have forced you to the borders; those with whom you had made peace all deceived you, defeated you. Those with whom you broke your bread laid a snare for you, bereft of awareness. (v.7)

It should further be noted that God's vengeance on Edom continued in the days of Yochanan Hyrcanus the Hasmonean (at the end of the second century B.C.E.), who conquered Edom and forced circumcision and conversion on all its inhabitants.

This way of understanding the prophecy, as a request for revenge against Edom for their complicity in the destruction of Jerusalem in the days of Nebukhadnetzar, is the preferred approach of the "modern" commentators to *Ovadya.* They disagree with Rashi only about the time of the prophet Ovadya himself. In their opinion, he prophesied about his own time, the days of the destruction, whereas Rashi followed *Chazal*’s view that he lived in the days of Achav and Eliyahu, preceding the destruction by about three hundred years.

**IV. Another Possibility – Edom’s Betrayal in the Days of Yehoram Son of Achav**

I am also inclined to the understanding that the prophets prophesied about events occurring in their own times, and not about things that would happen hundreds of years later. The notion of free choice that is enjoyed by every person and every people is a very important prophetic principle, and with it comes the principle of appropriate consequences for every person and every people:

At one moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom be uprooted, shattered, and destroyed. But should that nation turn back because of the evil that I pronounced upon it, I change My mind concerning the evil that I had planned to do to it. And at one moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom be built and planted. But if it does what is evil in My eyes, not heeding My voice, I change My mind about the good that I had thought to bestow upon it. (*Yirmeyahu* 18:7-10)

In my humble opinion, this principle makes it very difficult to accept the view that a prophet could proclaim the fate of a people for sins they have not yet committed, and will only commit hundreds of years from now.

Therefore, since naturally we would like to accept the words of *Chazal*, who identify Ovadya the prophet with Ovadyahu who was in charge of Achav's palace, we have to move the time of the prophecy to a time close to the days of Eliyahu and Achav.

This approach has another advantage: if we accept the claim that Ovadya lived during the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, it will be difficult to explain why similar, almost identical prophecies were delivered at the same time by two different prophets, Ovadya and Yirmeyahu (49). However, if Ovadya prophesied about three hundred years before Yirmeyahu, there is room to suggest that Yirmeyahu used the ancient prophecy of Ovadya in relation to the injustices committed by the Edomites in Jerusalem in his own time.

Consider, therefore, the *baraita* in *Seder Olam*, which attributes the prophecy of Ovadya to the period of Amatzya king of Yehuda:

"The vision of Ovadya" – When was this war? In the days of Amatzya – "And there was no king in Edom."[[1]](#footnote-1) And from the time that the Edomites fell in the days of Amatzya, they did not appoint a king in their place and did not raise their heads to this day. And from the time that the Edomites fell like the word of Elisha, they did not stand, but they woke up in the days of Achaz and fell. (*Seder Olam Rabba*, chapter 20)

I will try to describe the events of the middle of the First Temple period, as I see them. Asa and his son Yehoshafat were righteous kings of Yehuda, and for most of their days God helped them achieve success. They reigned for a long time, and brought the kingdom of Yehuda to great power and great wealth. For instance, in the days of Yehoshafat:

All the kingdoms of the lands surrounding Yehuda were struck with fear of the Lord, and none made war against Yehoshafat. Some of the Philistines offered gifts to Yehoshafat and silver as tribute; the Arabians brought him 7700 rams and 7700 he-goats. Yehoshafat steadily rose in greatness. He built fortresses and store towns in Yehuda. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 17:10-12)

Yehoram, Yehoshafat's son, married Atalya – the daughter of Omri, the king of Israel, who grew up in the house of his son Achav and followed in the footsteps of his wicked wife, Izevel. She dictated Yehoram's moral and spiritual world, and essentially, according to the prophetic principle mentioned above, also dictated the recompense that would be meted out by God to him and his people:

In his time Edom rebelled against Yehuda and appointed their own king… Edom has rebelled against Yehuda ever since; it was also then that Livna rebelled against his rule because he abandoned the Lord, God of his ancestors… A letter came to him from the prophet Eliyahu saying, "Thus says the Lord, God of your father David: Because you did not follow in the ways of your father Yehoshafat and in the ways of Asa, king of Yehuda, but followed in the ways of the kings of Israel and, like the house of Achav, led Yehuda and the people of Jerusalem astray, and because you killed your brothers from your father's house, who were better than you – the Lord is about to unleash a devastating plague among your people, your sons and wives, and all your possessions. And you yourself will suffer from severe sickness, from a bowel disease – until your bowels slip out from sheer sickness, day by day." And the Lord stirred against Yehoram the spirit of the Philistines and the Arabs who neighbored the Kushites. They marched up against Yehuda, invaded them, and captured all the possessions that were found around the royal palace, as well as his sons and wives. The only son that was left to him was Yehoachaz, his youngest son. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:8-17)

A difficult picture is painted before us of an invasion from the south, including the Philistines from the southwest and the Arabs and the Edomites from the southeast. Together they reach the king's palace in Jerusalem, and Yehoram's sons and the royal family are captured and sold into slavery in foreign countries. It can be assumed that many of the people of Jerusalem were sold into slavery together with them, in different countries. The disgrace and sorrow would have been unbearable.

It is possible that the prophet Yoel was also one of Eliyahu's disciples and a member of that generation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Let us consider his prophecy:

I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Yehoshafat. There I will carry out judgment against them for the sake of My people – My possession Israel, whom they scattered among the nations – and for the sake of My land, which they divided among themselves. They cast lots for My nation, and handed over young boys for the hire of a harlot, and sold young girls for wine, and they drank. But what are you to Me, Tyre and Sidon, all the Philistine regions? Do you deign to retaliate against Me? And if you retaliate, how quickly and easily I will repay your deeds upon your head. You took My silver and gold and carried My precious things away to your temples. You sold the Judahites and Jerusalemites to the Ionians to cast them far from their borders. But I will rouse them from the place to which you sold them, and I will repay your deeds upon your head. I will sell your sons and daughters into the hands of the Judahites, who will sell them to the people of Sheba – a far-off nation. For the Lord has spoken. (*Yoel* 4:2-8)

Yoel describes the sale of the people of Jerusalem as slaves in distant slave markets. Here he blames the slave traders of Tyre, Sidon, and the Philistines, who sent them in ships to distant lands, but later he says:

Egypt will be desolate, Edom a barren desert, because of the violence they have perpetrated against Yehuda – because of the innocent blood they spilled in their land. But Yehuda will be forever settled, Jerusalem to the end of time. Even though I pardon, I will not pardon the spilling of their blood, for the Lord resides in Zion. (*Yoel* 4:19-21)

For our purposes: Edom as well is directly responsible for what was done to the people of Yehuda when they were sold into slavery in the days of Yehoram, and they too bear the blame.

Against this background, let us examine the end of Ovadya's prophecy:

They will take possession of the Negev, along with the mountains of Esav, and the Shefela, from the Philistines. And they will take possession of the land of Efrayim and the land of Shomron; and Binyamin, along with the Gilad – they, the exiled force of the children of Israel who are among the Canaanites as far as Tzarfat and the exiled of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will take possession of the cities of the Negev. And saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esav, and dominion shall be the Lord's. (vs. 19-21)

Ovadia foretells that the cities of the Negev and the mountains of Esav will fall into the hands of the Israelites who will come from Tzarfat and Sepharad. Tzarfat is "Tzarfat that belongs to Sidon" (mentioned in I *Melakhim* 17:9), and the Israelites were brought there by the "Canaanites," meaning traders – slave traders. The exile of the slaves reached Sepharad, apparently Sardis in Asia Minor (today’s Turkey).

God's vengeance on Edom for their actions in the days of Yehoram was carried out in practice in the days of Amatzya son of Yoash, king of Yehuda, two generations after Yehoram. It was an unbearably difficult revenge (and even hard to identify with):

Amatzyahu took courage and led his troops down to the Valley of Salt, and he struck down ten thousand of the men of Se'ir. And the men of Yehuda took another ten thousand captives alive; they brought them to the clifftop and threw them down from the clifftop; they were all dashed to pieces. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 25:11-12)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This verse from the book of I *Melakhim* (22:48) describes the rule of Amatzya, king of Yehuda, over Edom. Amatzya's war against Edom is described in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, and will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Radak (*Yoel* 1:1) writes that Yoel lived in the days of Yehoram. He is referring to Yehoram son of Achav, who was a contemporary of Yehoram son of Yehoshafat. However, the more accepted view is that Yoel lived in the days of Menashe son of Chizkiyahu. According to this view, he has no connection to the period we are discussing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)