YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT VAYIGASH**

**“So That They Are One in Your Hand”**

The word of the Lord came to me, saying: "And you, Man, take a branch and write on it, 'For Yehuda and the children of Israel associated with him.' Then take one branch and write on it, 'For Yosef – the branch of Efrayim – and all of the House of Israel associated with him.' Bring them together to make one branch, so that they are one in your hand. When your people say to you, 'Tell us, what do these mean to you?' say to them: So says the Lord God: See, I am going to take the branch of Yosef, which is in the hand of Efrayim, and the tribes of Israel who are associated with him, and join them with him, with the branch of Yehuda; I will make them into one branch, and they will be one in My hand. Let these branches that you write upon be in your hand before their eyes. Speak to them: So says the Lord God: See that I am taking the children of Israel from among the nations that they went to; I will gather them from all around, and I will bring them to their land. I will make them into one nation in the land, in the mountains of Israel; one king will be king for all of them, and they will no longer be two nations; they will no longer be split into two kingdoms. They will no longer be defiled by their idols or by their detestable things and all their transgressions; I will deliver them from all the dwelling places where they have sinned; I will purify them, and they will be My people, and I will be their God. My servant David will be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all, and they will follow My laws, and they will keep My statutes and perform them. They will live on the land that I gave to My servant Yaakov, where your ancestors lived. They will live upon it, they and their children and their children’s children, for eternity, and David My servant will be their prince for eternity. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. I will place them securely there, I will make them ever more numerous; I will place My Sanctuary among them for eternity. My presence will be upon them; I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy when My Sanctuary is among them for all eternity." (*Yechezkel* 37:15-28)

**I. Background**

The first half of the book of *Yechezkel*, until chapter 24, contains dire prophecies dealing with the religious and moral deterioration of the kingdom of Yehuda during the days of Tzidkiyahu, the last king of Yehuda, and the destruction that will come in its wake. In the next part of the book, chapters 25-32, Yechezkel delivers prophecies of wrath against the neighboring nations – Egypt, Tyre and Sidon, Amon and Moav, Edom and the Philistines – who rejoiced over Israel's misfortunes and broke their promises of support. In chapter 33, the prophet is informed of the destruction of Jerusalem, and in chapter 34, precisely at the time of that terrible calamity, Yechezkel shifts to prophecies of redemption that describe the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple and continue until the end of the book.

At the beginning of our chapter (37), we find the famous prophecy of dry bones: the bones scattered across the valley arise in the prophet's vision and become people again, portraying the resurrection to be enjoyed by the nation that will rise from the dust and gather from their exile to their designated land, the land of God.

Our prophecy – the joining of the tree of Yosef to the tree of Yehuda – comes immediately after the prophecy of the dry bones. This juxtaposition suggests that the dry bones represent the ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel, who were exiled almost a hundred and fifty years before the destruction of Jerusalem and who were, in the days of Yechezkel, like dry and scattered bones. Unlike those exiled in the time of Yehoyakhin – who were sent to Babylonia and established organized Jewish communities there (primarily in the city of Nehardea), perpetuating the heritage of the Torah and of the nation and looking forward together to the promised return to Zion – the exiles of the Ten Tribes apparently had difficulty establishing communities with any conscious expectation of a return to Zion, and they assimilated into the nations. The Gemara discusses whether we should be concerned for the possibility that Gentiles in the cities to which the ten tribes had been exiled may actually be the descendants of Jews:

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "And he put them in Chalach and in Chavor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (II *Melakhim* 18:11). Chalach is Chilazon, and Chavor is Chadyav; the river Gozan is Ginzak; and the cities of the Medes are Chamdan and its neighboring towns… There is a tradition that the women of that generation became barren. There are some who say [that Rav Yehuda said]: When I mentioned the matter in the presence of Shmuel, he said to me: They did not move from there until they had declared them to be complete idolaters; as it is stated: "They have dealt treacherously against the Lord, for they have begotten strange children" (*Hoshea* 5:7). (*Yevamot* 16b-17a)

From the Gemara's conclusion, it would seem that the descendants of the ten tribes are not even Jewish: the Jewish men married non-Jewish women and their children are non-Jews, and the Jewish women were sterilized and did not have children; even if they did give birth, their children no longer had any Jewish consciousness, and they were judged as complete Gentiles.

Nevertheless, Yechezkel foretells that those remnants of Jews will in the future return to their Judaism and to their land, and thus the great miracle will take place – the miracle of resurrection of the dead, of far-scattered exiles returning to their people and to their land.

**II. The Prophecy in our *Haftara***

Our prophecy describes the tribes of Israel, grouped under the banner of "Yosef – the branch of Efrayim – and all the House of Israel associated with him," and their joining at the time of the redemption with the tribe of Yehuda and its associates (Binyamin, Shimon, most of the tribe of Levi, and many others who had abandoned the kingdom of Efrayim and moved to Jerusalem before the destruction of Shomron).

The joining together of different segments of the people is represented by the joining of the two branches that the prophet holds in his hand. The prophet's action could be interpreted as the work of a carpenter, who attaches two planks with glue, nails, a rope, or some other way – but I prefer to compare it to the work of a tree planter, who grafts a shoot from one tree onto the rootstock of another tree, so they continue to grow as one tree.[[1]](#footnote-1) We are familiar with grafting from the laws of *kil’ayim*, *orla*, and others; it involves punching a hole in the cut trunk of a strong, sturdy tree, and "planting" a soft branch of a more delicate tree, of a similar type, in that hole. The branch takes root in the sturdy trunk, and the result is a tree that combines the strengths of its two components: it is sturdy and resistant to the ravages of nature, and its fruits are beautiful, delicate, soft, and tasty, like the soft branch that was "planted" in the trunk.

The thick trunk that was cut, with the power of life but devoid of fruit, is a metaphor for the kingdom of Israel. The prophets named this kingdom after Efrayim, which was the strongest and most stubborn of the tribes and usually ruled over the kingdom. This kingdom was generally the stronger of the two, but it was also further away from holiness, from the Torah, and from *mitzvot*, due to its distance from Jerusalem and the Temple.

The delicate branch is the kingdom of Yehuda, which in its good days produced beautiful fruits by virtue of its connection to Jerusalem and the Temple, but whose roots were poor due to its small number of tribes.

In our generation, this parable is often utilized in connection with the return to Zion in our time, and with the grafting of "secular" Zionism, based to a certain extent on the stubborn and courageous "Judaism of the muscles," onto Torah Judaism and tradition – which at first was more delicate, weak, and even frightened, but which contains holiness and connection to the God of our ancestors and His teachings. It was apparently based on a similar idea that Rabbi Kook wrote his eulogy for Theodor Herzl – "The Lamentation in Jerusalem." He saw Herzl as sort of a secular "Messiah the son of Yosef" (similar to Achav), who was planted in the holy land; upon that basis will ascend the "Messiah son of David" (similar to Yoshiyahu), whose head reaches heaven and who occupies himself with Torah, holiness, and connection to our Father in heaven.

Another connection between Yosef and Yehuda in our prophecy is the double expression concerning the place of the *Shekhina*:

I will place My Sanctuary (*mikdashi*)among them for eternity. My presence (*mishkani*)will be upon them; I will be their God, and they will be My people. (37:26)

The *Mishkan* was located in the territory of Yosef, in Shilo, and it expresses Yosef's birthright, whereas the *Mikdash* expresses Yehuda and Binyamin and the city of Jerusalem that joined the two of them together.

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

Our *parasha* opens with the confrontation between Yosef and Yehuda, which has its roots in the selling of Yosef as a slave at Yehuda's initiative. In our *parasha*, in the argument about Benjamin's fate, Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, seems to have the upper hand. *Chazal*, however, presented the argument as a harsh confrontation between two powerful people, rather than a confrontation between a powerful ruler and a foreigner standing powerless before him:

Yehuda said to him: I will paint all the markets in Egypt with blood. Yosef said to him: You were painters all your days, for you painted your brother Yosef's coat with blood. (*Midrash Yelamdenu* *Bereishit* 176)

The confrontation, however, ends with reconciliation. Both from Yehuda's readiness to give up his life for Binyamin and from Yosef's revelation of his identity to his brothers, it appears that the image of their elderly father hovered over the reconciliation:

Your servants will have brought down the gray head of your servant, our father, in grief to Sheol. Your servant offered himself to my father as a guarantee for the boy. I said, "If I do not bring him back to you, I will have sinned against my father for all time"… For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I could not bear to see the misery that would overwhelm my father!" (*Bereishit* 44:31-34)

Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef. Is my father really still alive?" (*Bereishit* 45:3)

Many prophets saw the splitting of the kingdom between Yosef and Yehuda in the days of Yarovam and Rechavam as the root of the evil and destruction that eventually followed. In the generation of the split, the war between the tribes left about half a million people dead (see II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 13). As a result of the split, the two kingdoms each became smaller and weaker; their borders were reduced and they became the satellite states of foreign powers that grew in the region. The prophets described the redemption, in addition to the return to Zion, as a reunification of the tribes of Israel:

Efrayim will no more be jealous of Yehuda; Yehuda will bear toward Efrayim no more enmity. (*Yeshayahu* 11:13)

Then the children of Yehuda and the children of Israel will gather together; they will designate one leader and escape from the land, for the day of Yizre'el will be a great one. (*Hoshea* 2:2)

In those days, the house of Yehuda will go with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance. (*Yirmiyahu* 3:18)

This is also Yechezkel’s view in our *haftara*. According to him, the order of the redemption will be as follows: After the ingathering of the exiles and the return to Zion, the kingdom of Israel will be reestablished, the essence of which is the unification of Israel under one king. Only after that will purification come, along with abolition of idolatry, acceptance of God's Lordship, and observance of His laws and judgments. Then, Israel will merit eternal residence in the land, a covenant with God, and the building of the Temple. Thus, God's name will be sanctified in the eyes of all the Gentiles when they see His people Israel and His Temple that is built in their midst.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This is how the parable was interpreted by my revered teacher, Rav Chanan Portat (in his book, *Me'at min ha-Or*, Israel 5768, pp. 375-378). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)