YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in memory of HaRav HaGaon R. Chaim Heller zt"l,  
whose yahrzeit falls on the 14th of Nissan,  
by Vivian S. Singer.

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

At that time, the Lord said to Yehoshua, "Make yourselves knives of flint and circumcise the Israelites a second time." So Yehoshua made knives of flint and circumcised the Israelites at the Hill of Foreskins. This is why Yehoshua circumcised them: all the men who left Egypt – all the males fit for battle – had died in the wilderness during the journey, as they came away from Egypt. And while all the men who left there had been circumcised, all those who were born in the wilderness during the journey away from Egypt had not been circumcised. For forty years the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness until those among the nation who had left Egypt fit for battle had perished. They disobeyed the voice of the Lord, and the Lord swore not to show them the land He had sworn to our ancestors that He would give us – a land flowing with milk and honey. Yehoshua circumcised those children that He raised in their stead, for they still had their foreskins, not having been circumcised during the journey. When the whole nation's circumcision was over, they remained in place in the camp until they recovered. The Lord said to Yehoshua, "Today, I have rolled the shame of Egypt away from you." He has named that place Gilgal, as it is known to this day. The Israelites encamped at Gilgal and performed the Passover sacrifice on the fourteenth day of the month at dusk on the plains of Yericho. On the day after the Passover sacrifice, they ate of the yield of the land – unleavened bread and roasted grain – that very day. The manna stopped falling the day after they had eaten from the yield of the land. The Israelites never had manna again; from that year on they ate from the crops of the land of Canaan. When Yehoshua was near Yericho, he looked up and suddenly saw a man standing opposite him, drawn sword in hand. Yehoshua approached him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" He said, "No, for I am the commander of the Lord's hosts. Now I have come!" Yehoshua flung his face to the ground and prostrated himself, asking him, "What does my lord bid his servant?" The commander of the Lord's hosts said to Yehoshua, "Remove the shoes from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Yehoshua did so. Yericho was barred and bolted against the Israelites; no one came out, and no one went in. (*Yehoshua* 5:2-6:1)

Sefardim conclude the *haftara* with:

The Lord was with Yehoshua, and his fame rang out across the land. (*Yehoshua* 6:27)

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

The connection between the *haftara* and the first day of Pesach speaks for itself. The *haftara* describes the first Passover sacrifice offered by the people of Israel in the Land of Israel, together with Yehoshua. This was the third Passover sacrifice ever offered: The first was in Egypt,, before the plague of the firstborns and the exodus; the second Passover sacrifice was brought in the second year (*Bamidbar* 9); from that time on, it was not brought, as will be explained below, until they entered the land four days before Pesach. The Passover sacrifice was then renewed and it was performed for the third time.

**II. Circumcision**

We learn from our chapter that starting from the second year after Israel's exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel refrained from observing the *mitzva* of circumcision until God's command, immediately after they emerged from the Jordan River, to undergo circumcision in preparation for the offering of the Passover sacrifice. Let us explain: The Rambam maintains that during the exile in Egypt, the people of Israel (apart from the tribe of Levi) stopped observing the mitzva of circumcision:

Circumcision took place in Egypt, as it is stated (*Shemot* 12:48): "No uncircumcised person shall partake of it." Moshe our teacher circumcised [the people]. For with the exception of the tribe of Levi, the entire [people] neglected the covenant of circumcision in Egypt. Regarding this, it is stated (*Devarim* 33:9): "They upheld Your covenant." (Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a* 13:2)

If the men of Israel had not undergone circumcision in Egypt, they could not have offered the Passover sacrifice before leaving, as the Torah conditions the Passover sacrifice on circumcision:

If a stranger lives among you and wishes to offer a Passover sacrifice to the Lord, every male in his household must be circumcised. Then he may join in observing it and be like a native born. But no uncircumcised man may eat of it. There shall be one and the same law for the native born and the stranger who lives among you. All the Israelites did exactly as the Lord had commanded Moshe and Aharon. (*Shemot* 12:48-50)

The covenant of circumcision is an expression of the covenant God made with our forefathers – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov – and the covenant of the Passover sacrifice expresses the covenant He made with Moshe and the people of Israel in Egypt. Conditioning the Passover sacrifice on circumcision creates a connection between the covenant made with the forefathers and the new revelation of God – at the burning bush, and afterwards in Egypt. The new covenant is connected to the earlier one; it does not replace it. The connection between the two covenants also finds expression in the following verse:

And God heard their groaning, and remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak, and with Yaakov. (*Shemot* 2:24)

Here, the injustice done to the Israelites in Egypt, and the need to redeem them from there because of it, is joined to God's covenant with our forefathers.

In the second year, while still at Mount Sinai, the people of Israel performed the Passover sacrifice. From this it follows that they were all circumcised at that point – including the boys born during the first year in the wilderness, for an uncircumcised son bars his father from offering the Passover sacrifice (see *Mekhilta Pisha* 15).

However, starting from the second year in the wilderness, the Israelites did not undergo circumcision, as is evident from our *haftara*, and thus they could not offer the Passover sacrifice.[[1]](#footnote-1) Why were they not circumcised? According to the Gemara (*Yevamot* 71b-72a), the north wind, which in the Sinai desert is a cooling wind that comes from the direction of the sea (similar to the west wind in Israel), did not blow for them. Without this wind, anyone undergoing circumcision would be in danger from the desert heat; therefore, they did not perform circumcisions, apparently for good reason. On the other hand, another *midrash* (*Sifrei Bamidbar* 67) understood the lack of circumcisions in the wilderness to Israel's discredit, and indeed, the Gemara’s explanation is puzzling: During the thirty-eight years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness, could they not have found a few days during which they could observe the *mitzva* of circumcision? Was the danger from the absence of the north wind greater than the danger of waiting until after they entered the land – thus undergoing circumcision with the enemy watching from their city walls, able to take advantage of them during the three days of pain and illness that would follow (as Shimon and Levi did to the people of Shekhem)?

It seems that we are forced to say that both the fact that a north wind did not blow the entire time that they were in the wilderness, and the fact that the Israelites were unable to find a suitable time to be circumcised, are related to the breaking of the covenant through the sin of the spies, mentioned in our *haftara* – to the fact that the Israelites rejected the land of their forefathers, and to the fact that God informed them they would not enter the land but would die in the wilderness. The covenant of circumcision and the covenant of the Passover sacrifice were "frozen" for an entire generation; the people who left Egypt spent the rest of their lives in the wilderness, reprimanded by God, and their entire task was to educate their children not to repeat their mistake.

Now, after the death of Moshe and under the leadership of Yehoshua, this double covenant – of circumcision and of the Passover sacrifice – was renewed at the gate through which they entered the Land, and by the grace of God, Israel's enemies did not attack them during the period of their ailment. Those who underwent circumcision recuperated, and were ready for the long and tiring war of conquering the land from the hands of the Canaanites.

**III. The Difference Between Circumcision and Uncovering the Corona**

Make yourselves knives of flint and circumcise the Israelites a second time. (*Yehoshua* 5:2)

The simple understanding is that a mass circumcision ceremony was necessary, similar to the one arranged by Moshe before the offering of the Passover sacrifice in Egypt. But reading the verse as it is suggests that even those who were circumcised were also required to undergo circumcision a "second time." Is this possible?

The act of circumcision performed upon a newborn infant is divided into two: cutting the hard foreskin (*mila*), and cutting the thin membrane below it and pulling it back to uncover the corona (*peri'a*). Cutting the thin membrane is essential, as the Mishna states (*Shabbat* 19:6): "If one circumcises, but does not uncover [the corona], it is as though he has not circumcised."

In explaining the verse from our *haftara*, the Gemara asserts that Avraham was commanded only about *mila*, whereas Yehoshua was commanded about *peri'a* as well. Therefore, he “circumcised the people of Israel a second time,” that is to say, he cut the inner membrane and uncovered the corona:

Rabba bar Yitzchak said in the name of Rav: The commandment of uncovering the corona at circumcision was not given to our forefather Avraham, as it is stated: "At that time, the Lord said to Yehoshua, 'Make yourselves knives of flint [and circumcise the Israelites a second time].'" (*Yevamot* 71b)[[2]](#footnote-2)

The fundamental difference between the foreskin of *mila* and the membrane of *peri'a* is that the foreskin of *mila* is cut off and cast away – the infant is circumcised involuntarily, not by choice, and he will never be able to restore his foreskin. In contrast, the membrane of *peri'a* is folded back around his genital, and when the person grows up, he can pull it back so that it once again covers his member, thus canceling the *mitzva* of his circumcision of his own free choice. This phenomenon is referred to in the Mishna as "*moshekh be-orlato*." The Mishna in tractate *Avot* states that whoever pulls his foreskin has no share in the world-to-come. Such a phenomenon is known to us in two periods: during the days of the Greeks, the Hellenists did this due to their desire to immerse themselves in the foreign culture; and during the period of Hadrian's decrees, many did this in order to save themselves from death, but underwent circumcision once again after the (temporary) victory of Ben Kozba (Bar Kokhva):

One who is *mashukh* must be circumcised again. Rabbi Yehuda says: One who is *mashukh* is not circumcised again, because it is dangerous. They said to him: Many were circumcised during the days of Ben Kozba, and they had children and did not die. As it is stated (*Bereishit* 17:13): "He must surely be circumcised [*himol timol*] – even a hundred times. And it is stated (*Bereishit* 17:14): "He has broken My covenant" – to include the *mashukh*.(Tosefta, *Shabbat* 15:9)

To clarify again: the innovation in Yehoshua's circumcision was the inclusion of the free choice of the circumcised in the *mitzva* of circumcision that he fulfills.

**IV. The Passover Sacrifice and eating the New Grain**

The Israelites encamped at Gilgal and performed the Passover sacrifice on the fourteenth day of the month at dusk on the plains of Yericho. On the day after the Passover sacrifice, they ate of the yield of the land – unleavened bread and roasted grain – that very day. The manna stopped falling the day after they had eaten from the yield of the land. The Israelites never had manna again; from that year on they ate from the crops of the land of Canaan. (5:10-12)

These verses shed important light on the Torah's command:

Observe the month of Aviv by offering a Passover sacrifice to the Lord your God; for in the month of Aviv the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night. (*Devarim* 16:1)

From this *mitzva*, *Chazal* derived the need to calculate leap years, to make sure that the Passover sacrifice is always offered close to the time of "Aviv" – ripe barley. Barley must be brought as the *Omer* offering just after the Passover sacrifice, on the 16th of Nisan, after which the new grain may be eaten. The Torah also emphasizes the connection between the Passover sacrifice and "Aviv" in *Shemot* 13 and elsewhere. It thereby attaches the goal of the exodus from Egypt to the inheritance of the land in order to fulfill its commandments – in order to bring its offerings to God and in order to eat of its fruit and be sated by its good. (In other places, the Torah relates the goal of the exodus to the giving of the Torah.) This linkage is also reflected in the word (Aramaic in origin) that replaces the word "*tevu'a*" in our verse: instead of "*tevu'at ha-aretz*" – "*avur ha-aretz*," the yield of the land. The Passover sacrifice is brought "*ba-erev*," in "*Arvot Yericho*," and the people of Israel ate in its wake of "*avur ha-aretz*."

We also learn from our chapter that the grain of Canaan replaces the manna, the miraculous food that fell from heaven over the course of forty years. The grain of Canaan is the food that God continues to give us while we are in the land, just as He gave us the manna in the wilderness, and for this we thank Him – especially in *Birkat ha-Mazon*, in the second blessing.[[3]](#footnote-3)

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"The day after the Passover sacrifice," the day of eating the new grain, is the 16th of Nisan, when the *Omer* offering is brought (as described in *Vayikra* 23:10-15). If so, "Passover" is the 15th of Nisan. In contrast, in the verse: "They set out from Ramesses on the fifteenth of the first month. On the day after the Passover the Israelites went out defiantly…" (*Bamidbar* 33:3), the phrase "the day after the Passover" refers to the 15th of Nisan, and thus "Passover" is the 14th of Nisan.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It seems that the day of "Passover" is not a day of twenty-four hours, extending from nightfall to sunset the next day, but rather a day of twelve hours; it begins at noon of the 14th of Nisan, close to the offering of the Passover sacrifice, and concludes at midnight of the 15th of Nisan, at the end of the time of its eating.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is a "Day of God," which does not depend on the heavenly bodies. In the book of *Bamidbar*, the phrase "the day after the Passover" refers to the time of *offering* the Passover sacrifice, the 14th of Nisan. The verse in our *haftara* that begins with "they ate" refers to the time of *eating* the Passover sacrifice, the day after which they ate of the new grain. The time of the eating of the Passover sacrifice is the night of the 15th, and the people of Israel ate of the yield of the land on the 16th of Nisan.

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The Rambam learned something important from our chapter that relates to the polemic with the Boethusians. The Torah states that the *omer* offering must be brought on "the day after the Sabbath" (*Vayikra* 23:11,15), which the Boethusians took to mean Sunday – rather than as we understand, that "the day after the Sabbath" means the day after the holiday observed on the 15th of Nisan, the first day of Pesach. The Rambam explains:

… Nevertheless, according to the Oral Tradition, [our Sages] derived that the intent is not the Sabbath, but the festival. And thus was understood at all times by the prophets and the Sanhedrin in every generation. They would have the *omer* waved on the sixteenth of Nisan whether it fell during the week or on Shabbat. [This interpretation is also reflected in the Written [Law](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1426382/jewish/Torah.htm) itself,] for it is written in the Torah (*Vayikra* 23:14): "Until that day, [until you bring this sacrifice to your God,] you shall eat no bread or roasted grain or ripe grain." And it is stated ([*Yehoshua* 5:11](https://www.chabad.org/15789#v11)): "On the day after the Passover sacrifice, they ate of the yield of the land – unleavened bread and roasted grain – that very day." And if one would presume that in that year, Pesach fell on the Shabbat, as these fools have supposed, why would Scripture make the license for them to eat new grain dependent on a factor that is not fundamental, nor the true cause, but mere coincidence? Instead, since [Scripture] made the matter dependent on "the day after the Passover," it is clear that the day after the Passover is the cause that permits new grain [to be eaten], and no attention is paid to the day of the week [on which it falls]. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Temidim u-Musafim* 7:11)

The Rambam does not argue with the Boethusians about the plain meaning of the verses, but rather about the importance of the tradition of the Oral Law, which was passed down from Moshe to Yehoshua and finds expression in our *haftara.*

**V. The Angel of God**

When Yehoshua was near Yericho, he looked up and suddenly saw a man standing opposite him, drawn sword in hand. Yehoshua approached him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" He said, "No, for I am the commander of the Lord's hosts. Now I have come!" Yehoshua flung his face to the ground and prostrated himself, asking him, "What does my lord bid his servant?" The commander of the Lord's hosts said to Yehoshua, "Remove the shoes from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Yehoshua did so. (5:13-15)

The "man" stood and blocked the entrance gate to Yericho (it was probably locked, as Yericho was "barred and bolted"), and apparently had a particularly impressive appearance. It seems that Yehoshua recognized that the man was an angel, but he did not know whether the angel standing at the Yericho gate was meant from time immemorial to protect the Canaanites and to fight him (perhaps he was like the angel who fought Yaakov when he crossed the Yabok, and was blocking the gate of Yericho), or whether he came now and was meant to support Yehoshua and fight his battle. The angel answers that he is the commander of the Lord's hosts who came to overthrow Yericho for Israel. He also says this place where the *Shekhina* now rests is a holy place, and therefore Yehoshua must take off his shoes – as Moshe was told when the *Shekhina* rested in the burning bush.

What does this incident teach us, other than Yehoshua's need to remove his shoes? *Chazal* see in these verses a hidden debate and a hint of criticism of Yehoshua:

"When Yehoshua was near Yericho, he looked up and suddenly saw a man standing opposite him."… He said to him: Yesterday you neglected the daily evening offering, and now you neglect Torah study! He said to him: For which one have you come? He said to him: "Now I have come." Immediately, "Yehoshua tarried that night in the midst of the valley [*ha-emek*]" (*Yehoshua* 8:9,13); Rabbi Yohanan said: This teaches that he tarried in the depths [*be-umka*] of *halakha*. (*Megilla* 3a-b)

The *midrash* seems to be based on the similarity between Moshe's removal of his shoes when he saw the burning bush and the parallel incident involving Yehoshua at the gate of Yericho. The bush was at Mount Sinai, the site of the giving of the Torah, and the next chapter contains additional points of similarity between the capture of Yericho and the giving of the Torah at Sinai. However, the Radak in his commentary objects to this *midrash*:

And there is a midrashic exposition of this that he came to frighten them about their neglect of Torah study… But this exposition is forced, because the hour of war is not the time for Torah study. And furthermore…. (Radak, *Yehoshua* 5:14)

The Radak raises a fundamental question: In a time of war, the role of the leader is to guide the people and prepare them for battle, not to tarry in the depths of *halakha*. What, then, is the angel's complaint against Yehoshua?

Owing to the justice in the words of the Radak, we must explain that in sending Yehoshua and the people to study Torah, the angel was arguing that it was not then a time of war, and thus they had no reason to neglect their study. The angel claimed that he himself would conduct the war, with the help of the hosts of heaven, not Yehoshua and his army. This is the meaning of the command to remove his shoes: Yehoshua put on his shoes (combat boots!) in preparation for going out to war, and the order to take them off was his release from the task of fighting. Torah can be studied even without shoes.

Indeed, the war was fought by the hosts of heaven, under the command of the commander of God's army; the walls of Yericho were miraculously brought down at the end of seven days of Israel's blowing horns while walking behind the ark of God's covenant. Yehoshua's army entered the war only seven days later, and for the easiest part – after the walls of the city had already fallen.

The first city that fell into the hands of the Israelites, Yericho, was conquered by God and his army, not by the Israelites. That is why the city was now barred and bolted before them, and therefore all its plunder was subject to a ban and dedicated to God – not booty to be divided among the warriors. The circling of the walls of Yericho for seven days expressed the prohibition to enter it in the wake of the words of God's angel. The city was like Mount Sinai at the time when God's glory descended upon it at the giving of the Torah, where it is stated (*Shemot* 19:12-13) "Tell them to take care not to ascend it, nor even touch its edge… When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, only then may they go up on the mountain." Thus it is stated also about Yericho on the eve of its conquest:

As the ram's horn sounds… and the people will rise up, each man charging straight ahead. (*Yehoshua* 6:5)

God's conquest of Yericho came in the wake of the offering of the Passover sacrifice, just as God's war in Egypt, with the plague of the firstborns, came in the wake of the offering of the Passover sacrifice in Egypt.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This is explicitly stated in *Sifrei Bamidbar* 67, and in Rashi, *Bamidbar* 9:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Rishonim* there (*Tosafot*, Ramban, Rashba, and others) raise the question of how a prophet after Moshe could introduce a new *mitzva*. They propose that the innovation of *peri'a* occurred already in the days of Moshe – it was transmitted as a *halakha* given to Moshe at Sinai, or else Moshe was commanded about it before his death only with regard to the Israelites who would cross the Jordan – while Avraham, as stated, had not been commanded about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. a. As stated in our chapter, the manna stopped on the 16th of Nisan. From the Torah it would appear that the manna stopped for the first time when the people of Israel arrived in "the land where they could settle down," that is to say, when they left the wilderness and came to the lands of Edom and Moav on the east bank of the Jordan. They therefore asked the king of Edom, and afterwards Sichon the king of the Emorites, to provide them with food in return for payment; these kings refused, and so God sent down manna for His people a second time, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan – until they ate unleavened bread and roasted grain on the day after the Passover sacrifice, as described in our chapter. This is what is stated in the verse (*Shemot* 16:35): "The Israelites ate manna for forty years, **until they came** **to the land where they could settle** **down**. They ate manna **until they came to the border** of Canaan."

   b. According to Scripture, Esther's three-day fast in Shushan began on the 13th of Nisan and lasted until the 15th of Nisan. The next day, on the 16th of Nisan, Haman was hung on the tree. The *paytan* of the *Selichot* takes advantage of the "coincidental" similarity between "*ha-man*," "the manna," the food that was eaten in the wilderness, which ceased on the 16th of Nisan, and "*Haman*" the Agagite, who also "ceased" on the 16th of Nisan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Ibn Ezra (*Vayikra* 27:11) raised this question and expanded upon it. The *Tosafot* (*Kiddushin* 37b, s.v. *mi-macharat*) mention the question in the name of the Ibn Ezra, and propose two answers; see there. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In accordance with the position of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya (*Pesachim* 120b). According to Rabbi Akiva, the time to eat the Passover sacrifice is, by Torah law, until the morning. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)