YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The Haftara for Parashat Bechukotai**

The Lord is my strength and my might, my refuge in a day of trouble. To You the nations will come from the ends of the earth, and they will say: "Our ancestors inherited nothing but falsehood, futility, and things of no use. Can a human make gods for himself when they are not gods?" Therefore, I am about to make them know; this time I will make them know of My power and My strength, and they shall come to know that My name is the Lord.

Yehuda's sin is written with an iron pen with a diamond point, engraved upon the tablets of their hearts and upon the corners of your altars. As they yearn for their children, so do they for their altars and their sacred trees beside verdant trees upon the high hills. Mountain dweller – because of the sin of your high places in all your territories, I will turn your wealth and all your treasures into booty upon the field. You will forfeit, by your own fault, the heritage which I have given you. I will make you a slave to your enemies in a land that you never knew, for you kindled a fire in My nostrils which shall blaze forever. This is what the Lord said: Cursed is he who trusts in man, who makes flesh his strength and who turns his heart away from the Lord. He will be like a shrub in the desert, never witnessing prosperity. He will dwell scorched in the wilderness, a salty, uninhabited land. Blessed is the person who trusts in the Lord. The Lord will be his protector. He will be like a tree planted beside the water, its roots spreading along the stream. It need not be concerned when heat comes, for its leaves will remain verdant. It need not worry in a year of drought, for it will never cease to produce fruit. More devious is the heart than all else, and it is hopelessly sick. Who can know it? I, the Lord, search out the heart and examine inner thoughts so as to treat each person according to his ways, according to the fruits of his actions. Like the bird that hatches what she did not lay, so is he who accumulated his wealth unjustly. After half of his days, his fortune will leave him, and in the end he will be proven a fool. Like the throne of glory, elevated from the beginning, so is the place of our Temple. The hope of Israel is the Lord. All who forsake You will be humiliated. Those who stray from Me will be written in the earth, for they have forsaken Hashem, the source of living waters. Heal me, Lord, so that I may be healed. Save me so that I may be saved, for it is You whom I praise. (*Yirmeyahu* 16:19-17:14)

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

The verses, "Cursed is he who trusts in man," and on the flip side, "Blessed is the person who trusts in the Lord," parallel the reward promised in our *parasha* "if you follow My decrees," and the punishment "if you spurn My decrees." These verses in the *haftara*,and their meaning for the prophecy, will be discussed below.

Our prophecy is part of Yirmeyahu's scroll of rebuke from the days of Yehoyakim, which also accords with the rebuke in our *parasha.* Other *haftarot* are also taken from this scroll of rebuke, such as the *haftara* for *Parashat Tzav* and the *haftara* for Tisha be-Av.

**II. The Prophecy of Calamity**

The Lord is my strength and my might, my refuge in a day of trouble. To You the nations will come from the ends of the earth, and they will say: "Our ancestors inherited nothing but falsehood, futility, and things of no use. Can a human make gods for himself when they are not gods?" Therefore, I am about to make them know; this time I will make them know of My power and My strength, and they shall come to know that My name is the Lord.

Yehuda's sin is written with an iron pen with a diamond point, engraved upon the tablets of their hearts and upon the corners of your altars. As they yearn for their children, so do they for their altars and their sacred trees beside verdant trees upon the high hills. Mountain dweller – because of the sin of your high places in all your territories, I will turn your wealth and all your treasures into booty upon the field. You will forfeit, by your own fault, the heritage which I have given you. I will make you a slave to your enemies in a land that you never knew, for you kindled a fire in My nostrils which shall blaze forever. (16:19-17:4)

This prophecy, as mentioned, is from the days of Yehoyakim son of Yoshiyahu (as will be explained below), who "did evil in the eyes of God, like all that his ancestors [Menashe and Amon] did” (II *Melakhim* 23:37). He restored the altars of Tofet in the Valley of Ben Hinom for the worship of the Molekh, built altars to the *Ba'alim*, behaved tyrannically and dishonestly with his people, and spilled the blood of many of them, including the prophet of God.

Yirmeyahu opens his prophecy with the praise of God, who protects us in the day of trouble; all the peoples will one day acknowledge His greatness and His lordship over all the nations. Given this, the prophet asks his people, why are they drawn to the gods of the nations, who will eventually be eliminated from the world? He accuses his people of yearning for their altars the way that people yearn for their children. This is not just a literary image; they even prefer the altars to their children, and sacrifice their children on the altars.

The punishment that he promises them speaks for itself.

**III. The Cursed Man and the Blessed Man**

This is what the Lord said: Cursed is he who trusts in man, who makes flesh his strength and who turns his heart away from the Lord. He will be like a shrub in the desert, never witnessing prosperity. He will dwell scorched in the wilderness, a salty, uninhabited land.

Blessed is the person who trusts in the Lord. The Lord will be his protector. He will be like a tree planted beside the water, its roots spreading along the stream. It need not be concerned when heat comes, for its leaves will remain verdant. It need not worry in a year of drought, for it will never cease to produce fruit.

More devious is the heart than all else, and it is hopelessly sick. Who can know it? I, the Lord, search out the heart and examine inner thoughts so as to treat each person according to his ways, according to the fruits of his actions. (17:5-10)

The prophet compares one who trusts in God to a tree planted beside the water. The psalmist of *Tehillim* uses the same image when he describes a person who occupies himself with the Torah:

Happy is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, who does not stand on the path of sinners, who does not sit among the jeering cynics – instead, the Lord's teaching is all his desire, and he contemplates that teaching day and night. He is like a tree planted on streams of water yielding fruit in its season, its leaves never withering – all it produces thrives. (*Tehillim* 1:1-3)

Is there a connection between one who occupies himself with Torah and one who trusts in God? Perhaps we can answer this question through a third place where a tree appears in a similar description:

Beside the stream, rising on both banks, every kind of food tree shall grow, whose leaves will never wither and whose fruit will never fail; it will bring forth new fruit every month because its waters emanate from the Sanctuary. Its fruit shall yield food, and its leaves, medicine. (*Yechezkel* 47:12)

The prophet Yechezkel describes a tree that is irrigated by water emanating from the Temple, which therefore blooms and yields fruit constantly. The Temple holds two items of note in the Holy of Holies: the *luchot*, tablets of testimony, along with the book of the Torah; and together with them, a container of manna. He for whom God's teaching is his desire, and who contemplates that teaching day and night, drinks from the water of the Temple through the tablets of the testimony and the book of the Torah. He who trusts in God drinks from the water of the Temple through the bottle of manna – which expresses man’s dependence on food from heaven, but also his trust in God, in that he gathers only his own food and that of his family who are dependent upon him, and only for that one day.

It should be noted that Torah law obligates only two blessings: the blessing recited over Torah study, and the blessing over the bread we have eaten.

In my understanding, Yirmeyahu stated the verses about trusting God not as theoretical morality, but specifically about Yoshiyahu, the father of Yehoyakim. Yoshiyahu was unique with respect to his great trust in God:

There was none like him before him – a king who returned to the Lord with all his heart, all his soul, and all his might, following all the teaching of Moshe, and none like him ever arose after him. (II *Melakhim* 23:25)

The promise of abundant good must be explained, however, seeing as the prophet knows that Yoshiyahu was actually killed in the prime of his life (at the age of thirty-nine) in Meggido, at the hands of Pharaoh Nekho and his army. Perhaps the prophet's words here teach us about faith in the world to come and in Yoshiyahu's reward there.

In contrast, "Cursed is he who trusts in man" refers to Yehoyakim, Yoshiyahu’s son, in whose days the prophecy was delivered. Yehoyakim initially put his trust in Pharaoh Nekho, his father’s killer, promising to give him a large sum of money from Jerusalem so that Pharaoh would agree to make him king in place of his brother Yehoachaz.

Indeed, Yirmeyahu creates a contrast in many of his prophecies between the righteous Yoshiyahu and his son Yehoyakim, who does not follow his path. For example:

Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his lofts without justice; who works his fellow for no pay and never gives him his wages… Indeed, your father ate and drank, but he dispensed justice and righteousness; therefore, things went well for him. He took up the cause of the poor and the destitute with good results. That is the way to know Me, declares the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 22:13-16)

The expectation that Yehoyakim would follow in the ways of his father Yoshiyahu is also reflected in the prophecy of calamity discussed above. The abandonment of God, who is the only true God, for the vanities of the nations, appeared already in a prophecy delivered at the beginning of the days of Yoshiyahu. Let us compare:

The Lord is my strength and my might, my refuge in a day of trouble. To You the nations will come from the ends of the earth, and they will say: "Our ancestors inherited nothing but falsehood, futility, **and things of no use.** Can a human make gods for himself **when they are not gods?"**… The hope of Israel is the Lord. All who forsake You will be humiliated. Those who stray from Me will be written in the earth, for they have forsaken Hashem, **the source of living waters**.

In the days of Yoshiyahu, at the beginning of the religious upheaval and even before it gained momentum, the prophet said:

Has a people ever exchanged its gods, **and they are non-gods?** Yet my nation exchanged its glory for something **useless…** For My nation has performed two wrongs: they have forsaken Me, **the source of living waters**, to dig wells, broken wells that cannot hold water. (*Yirmeyahu* 2:11-13)

Yoshiyahu heard the voice of the prophet, and deepened the religious revolution and the return to God. Yehoyakim did the complete opposite.

**IV. Yehoyakim’s Punishment**

Like the bird (*kore*) that hatches what she did not lay, so is he who accumulated his wealth unjustly. After half of his days, his fortune will leave him, and in the end he will be proven a fool. (17:11)

The *kore* (a large bird) sits on eggs that it did not lay, and thus steals the young – the offspring of another bird – and thus does he who becomes rich unjustly. Once again, it seems that the prophet is alluding to Yehoyakim, in whose days this prophecy was delivered, who gloriously renovated his palace at the expense of the people's plight:

Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his lofts without justice; who works his fellow for no pay and never gives him his wages. Who says, "I will build myself a house of grand dimensions, with spacious lofts." He makes himself windows covered with cedarwood, coated with precious paint. Do you presume to reign because you compete in cedarwood?… But your eyes and your heart are concerned with nothing but your own gain, with spilling the blood of the innocent, with cheating and oppression. (*Yirmeyahu* 22:13-17)

The prophet tells him: "After half of his days, his fortune will leave him." Indeed, Yehoyakim died at the age of thirty-five,[[1]](#footnote-1) half the number of years of "the span of our life is seventy years,"[[2]](#footnote-2) the years of King David.

The prophet also tells him: "and in the end he will be proven a fool [*naval*]." Perhaps the word *naval* should be understood as *neveila*, that is, a corpse that is cast aside and not buried. All this as is stated in the other prophecy cited above:

Therefore, this is what the Lord said concerning Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda: They will not eulogize him saying, "Woe, my brother, my sister." They will not eulogize him saying, "Woe master, woe majesty." Like the burial of a donkey will he be buried, then dragged and flung outside the gates of Jerusalem. (*Yirmeyahu* 22:18-19)[[3]](#footnote-3)

**V. The Hope of Israel is the Lord**

The hope of Israel is the Lord. All who forsake You will be humiliated… for they have forsaken Hashem, the source of living waters. (17:13)

The word "*mikveh*," according to its plain sense, means a source of hope. Thus, one who leaves God will be humiliated (*yevosh*) – in the sense of disappointment (which relates to embarrassment [*busha*]). Metaphorically, *mikveh* is a source of living waters, and one who abandons Godwill dry up (*yityabesh*) because of a lack of water.

Rabbi Akiva expounded this verse:

This was expounded by Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya: "From all your sins before the Lord shall you be clean" – for transgressions between man and God, Yom Kippur procures atonement, but for transgressions between man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not procure atonement until he has pacified his fellow.

Rabbi Akiva said: Happy are you, Israel! Who is it before whom you become clean? And who is that makes you clean? Your Father who is in heaven, as it is stated: "And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean." And it is further stated: "The hope (*mikveh*) of Israel is the Lord" – just as the *mikveh* – fountain – renders clean the unclean, so does the Holy One, blessed be He, render Israel clean. (*Yoma* 8:9)

Here too, God is likened to a *mikveh* – not for the purpose of drinking, but for the purpose of purification, like the purification of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya differ in their interpretative punctuation of the verse in the Torah:

On this day, atonement shall be made for you to purify you; of all your sins you shall be purified before the Lord. (*Vayikra* 16:30)

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria punctuated the verse as follows: On this day, atonement shall be made for you, to purify you of all your sins before the Lord – you shall be purified. This implies that atonement shall be made only for your sins before the Lord, between man and God, but not for your sins before other people, until you have pacified the other person. According to him, the word *titaharu*, "you shall be purified," stands alone, and it brings to mind[[4]](#footnote-4) the division of the verse in the description of the Temple service we recite during *Musaf* of Yom Kippur:

This is what he said: O Lord, Your people, the house of Israel, have transgressed and sinned against You. O Lord, forgive the sins, iniquities, and transgressions, which Your people, the house of Israel, have committed in Your sight, as it is written in the Torah of Your servant Moshe: "On this day, atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins before the Lord" –

When the priests and the people, who were standing in the Temple court, heard God's glorious and revered name clearly expressed by the High Priest with holiness and purity, they fell on their knees, prostrated themselves and worshipped; they fell upon their faces and responded: Blessed be the name of His glorious majesty forever and ever.

He prolonged the intoning of the Divine name until the worshipers completed the response, whereupon he finished the verse by saying to them: "You shall be purified."

But Rabbi Akiva punctuated the verse as did the Masoretes: On this day, atonement shall be made for you to purify you; of all your sins you shall be purified before the Lord. The people of Israel are purified of all their sins specifically before the Lord: God is the "*mikveh* who renders clean the unclean," based on what is stated in our *haftara*: "The *mikveh* of Israel is the Lord."

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. "Yehoyakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and for eleven years he reigned in Jerusalem" (II *Melakhim* 23:36). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Tehillim* 90:10. *Chazal* expounded similarly: "Rabbi Yochanan said: Doeg and Achitofel did not live out half their days. It has been taught likewise: 'Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days' (*Tehillim* 55:24). Doeg's entire lifetime amounted to only thirty-four years, and Ahitofel's to thirty-three" (*Sanhedrin* 106b). It is said about them: "They shall not live out half their days," and our prophecy states: "After half of his days, his fortune will leave him" – i.e., thirty-five years. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And similarly in *Chazal*: "Rabbi Perida's grandfather found a skull thrown down at the gates of Jerusalem… He said: This must be Yehoyakim's skull, of whom it is written: 'Like the burial of a donkey will he be buried, then dragged and flung outside the gates of Jerusalem'" (*Sanhedrin* 82a). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Not necessarily! See Raban, *Yoma* 37a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)