YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Themes and ideas in the haftara

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This haftara series is dedicated in memory of

our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak

(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,

by her family.

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General Introduction

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The *shiurim* appearing in this series will consist of an analysis of the weekly *haftara.* We will try to address each *haftara* in and of itself, both with respect to its content and with respect to its connection to the *parasha.* But before we begin to deal with the *haftarot* themselves, let us open with an introductory *shiur* dealing with the nature and the authority of the enactment to read a *haftara*, so that we may understand the purpose of the weekly reading of the *haftara* in the synagogue.

The practice of reading the *haftara* is known to us already from the days of *Chazal* and the laws that govern it are discussed in detail in tractate *Megila*, in boththe Mishna and the Gemara*. Chazal*, however, do not expand upon the nature and character of the enactment. Nevertheless, two fundamental factors emerge from the talmudic sources: 1) the connection between the *haftara* and the Torah reading; 2) the impact of the holidays and the calendar on the choosing of the *haftara.* An examination of these two factors will help us understand the meaning of the *haftarot.*

###### Appendix or independent

The first point that must be clarified is whether reading the *haftara* is part of the enactment of reading the Torah and appended to it, or alternatively an independent enactment. The *Rishonim* disagree on this issue. R. Yeshaya of Trani, the *Rid* (Italy, 13th century), cites in his *Sefer ha-Makhri'a* (no. 31) the position of Rabbenu Tam that reading the *haftara* stems from the enactment of Ezra*.*[1] Inasmuch as the Gemara in *Bava Kama* (82a) lists in detail all of Ezra's enactments, but makes no mention of an enactment relating to the *haftarot* (nor is the enactment of the *haftarot* included among Ezra's enactments anywhere else in the Talmud), we must understand that Rabbenu Tam reached his conclusion regarding the *haftarot* from the fact that Ezra instituted public Torah reading (as is stated there in the Gemara). This is based on the assumption that reading the *haftara* is included in the enactment of Torah reading and constitutes an essential part of it. On the other hand, R. Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, the Rashbatz (north Africa, beginning of the 15th century) raises this same possibility in his *Responsa Tashbetz* (vol. I, no. 131), but he rejects it: "We read the *haftara* only in honor of the prophets. It is not an obligatory enactment like reading the Torah, for Moshe enacted Torah reading for Israel, and Ezra enacted [that it be read with] three people." The Rambam clearly disagrees with Rabbenu Tam's argument as cited by the Rid, both on the factual level regarding the identity of the party who enacted the practice, and on the essential level of the relationship between the Torah reading and the *haftara.* Whereas Rabbenu Tam sees the *haftara* as joined to the Torah reading as is a flame to a wick, the Tashbetz distinguishes between them with respect to the nature of the obligation as well as its meaning. According to him, not only was the *haftara* not included in the original enactment of the Torah reading, but even after it was independently instituted at a later date, it was not invested with the same level of obligation as was the Torah reading, nor was it made a part of it, and therefore the two are governed by distinct sets of laws.

###### Educational or experiential

In order to understand the nature of the enactment of the *haftara* reading, let us turn to the model of Torah reading. There are two fundamental approaches to the enactment of reading the Torah:

1. The educational approach.

2. The experiential approach.

Let us briefly present these two approaches. The first approach sees the educational objective as the purpose of public Torah reading, and the enactment as coming to establish weekly public Torah study. At the core of the enactment lies the *mitzva* of Torah study, and the enactment guarantees a minimal amount of regular Torah study on the part of the congregation. The second approach, on the other hand, sees public Torah reading as an experiential ceremony that is meant to demonstrate for the congregation the connection between the Jewish people and the Torah and the Giver of the Torah, but its objective is not educational. A famous and impressive formulation of this principle is found in the words of the Rambam in connection with the *mitzva* of *hakhel*, and serves as the prototype of this approach. The Rambam defines the objective of the *mitzva* of *hakhel* (*Hilkhot* *Chagiga* 3:1) as follows: "To read in their ears from the Torah those sections that goad them in the commandments and strengthen their hands in the true religion." In light of this, he says (*ibid*. *halakha* 6) that even one for whom there will be no educational benefit, whether on account of a lack of knowledge, or because of a surfeit of knowledge, is nevertheless obligated to hear that Torah reading, because it constitutes a once-in-seven-years experiential reenactment of the revelation at Mount Sinai. He writes there as follows:

Proselytes who do not understand are obligated to prepare their hearts and listen with their ears with dread and fear, joy and trembling, as on the day that [the Torah] was given at Sinai. Even great Sages who know the entire Torah are obligated to listen with exceedingly great concentration. Anyone who is unable to hear must direct his heart toward this reading, for Scripture only established it to strengthen true religion and fear, as if one were commanded about it now and heard it from the mouth of the Almighty, the king serving as an agent to deliver the words of God.

The proponents of the second approach view the words of the Rambam not only as a reflection of the objective of the king's once-in-seven-years Torah reading during the *Hakhel* assembly, but also as the key to understanding the enactment of weekly Torah reading. The principle underlying the Torah *mitzva* constitutes an archetype, by way of which we can understand the rabbinic enactment of weekly Torah reading.

These two fundamental approaches to the enactment of public Torah reading find extensive expression in the details of the laws and disputes concerning public Torah reading. Some of the laws and some of the opinions of the *posekim* with respect to Torah reading emphasize educational elements, while other laws and opinions reflect the experiential principle. This can easily be demonstrated through numerous examples, but since our interest here lies in the *haftarot* and not in the Torah reading, we shall suffice with one or two examples to illustrate the matter.

#### Two-year cycle or three-Year cycle for public torah reading

As we all know, during the period of *Chazal* two different cycles of public Torah reading coexisted. One custom was triennial, dividing the Torah into small units and completing the Torah reading once every three years, whereas the second custom was like the common custom today, finishing the Torah once every year. If we try to understand the fundamental difference that underlies these distinct practices, it seems that the three-year cycle that was customary in Eretz Israel focused on the educational principle, whereas the second practice gave preference to the existential statement over the educational benefit. Pure educational considerations would easily lead us to the conclusion that we should choose a longer cycle that would allow us to divide the Torah into shorter learning units that can reasonably be studied over the course of *Shabbat*. This is the logic underlying the three-year cycle that is very easygoing on the student. Whoever seriously fulfills the *mitzva* of "twice the Torah and once the Aramaic translation" knows how difficult it is to read the long units of the weekly *parashiyot* in the proper manner, and will certainly understand the logic of Eretz Israel to divide up the Torah into smaller units. In contrast, the desire to finish the Torah once a year that lies at the basis of our custom is rooted in the existential principle of establishing a connection to the entirety of the Torah each and every year. The yearly connection to the Torah is preferable from the experiential perspective, even if it creates difficulties for the student.

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#### Reading the Torah in a foreign Language

One of the clearest expressions of the question of the nature of public Torah reading arises in the works of the later *posekim* who discuss whether the Torah must be read in Hebrew or whether it can be read in another language. Obviously, if we understand that the guiding principle behind the enactment is the educational benefit to be derived from the reading, it should be possible to read the Torah in any language. For what is most important is the understanding, and the content may be transferred to the student in any language. Moreover, there is a general principle that Torah study may be conducted in any language. If, however, we are dealing with a ceremony reminiscent of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it is clearly necessary to use Hebrew, as it is stated in the Mishna in *Sota* regarding the *mitzva* of *Hakhel* (7:2: "These are recited in Hebrew…").

**tHE *HAFTARA* AS explanation of the Torah reading**

Let us now turn our attention to the *haftarot*. Here too it is possible to propose two similar avenues of thought. The *haftara* can be seen as coming to provide a deeper understanding of the weekly *parasha* by choosing a particular topic from among the issues discussed in the *parasha* and focusing upon it. The prophetic treatment of the issue clarifies what is stated in the *parasha*, expands and develops it, and/or fits it into a wider framework. In this way, we are invited to compare and/or contrast the two passages, to see additional contexts of the basic principle and the like, all this in order that we should reach a more profound understanding of the *parasha*. For example, the *haftara* of *Parashat Bereishit* discusses the significance of creation and the destiny of the world from a perspective that is different from the one in the *parasha*, and thus it completes the picture. The *haftara* of *Parashat Chayyei Sara* tells of David's old age and his need to choose among his children, and thus it adds to what is related about Avraham in the book of *Bereishit.* And the *haftara* of *Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei* allows us to compare and contrast the dedication of the *Mishkan* and the dedication of the *Mikdash*.

**The *Haftara* as part of the calendar**

This explanation, however, does not explain all the *haftarot*, for two components were taken into account when the *haftarot* were established. The first is the weekly *parasha*, and this fits in well with what was stated regarding the *haftara's* ability to deepen and widen our understanding of the Torah's text. There is, however, an additional factor, namely, the calendar. Unlike the Torah reading which is only minimally influenced by the calendar,[2] the *haftarot* are subject to massive influence of the calendar. We refer here not only to the holidays, to which are applied the law of "which you shall proclaim to be holy gatherings" (*Vayikra* 23:2) and Moshe's enactment to read the appropriate portion for each holiday,[3] so that on these days we read both from the Torah and from the Prophets sections pertaining to the day. Rather, we are talking also about the many *Shabbatot*, during which the Torah reading does not deviate from the regular order of the *parshiyot*, but the *haftara* changes. In addition to the days on which the public Torah reading consists of the regular weekly portion together with an additional reading, as on Rosh Chodesh or Chanuka, and the *haftara* focuses exclusively on the additional reading, throughout the summer months, starting with the 17th of Tammuz and until Yom Kippur, we do not read a *haftara* that is related to the weekly *parasha*, but to the calendar. So too the *haftara* of *Shabbat ha-Gadol,* which is connected not to the *parasha*, but to the time of year and to the event, and the *haftara* read on the eve of *Rosh Chodesh*, both illustrate the *haftara's* dependence on the calendar, and the preference given to this consideration over the connection to the *parasha*.

The principle itself was already established by the Gemara in *Megila* (31b): "Rav Huna said: When *Rosh Chodesh* *Av* falls out on *Shabbat*, we read as *haftara*: 'Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates: they are a trouble to Me' (*Yeshayahu* 1:14)." It finds its clearest expression, however, in the custom reflected in the *Pesikta* to read during the summer months three *haftarot* of calamity, seven of consolation, and two of penitence. This custom, which originated in the period of *Chazal* and continues to this very day, entirely shifts the *haftarot* from the track of the weekly *parshiyot* to the track of the calendar.

#### Sounding the spiritual position of prophecy

According to this, the essence of the *haftarot* is not to explain theTorah portion, but to direct the Jew once a week to the words of the prophets that relate to his existential situation. The purpose of the *haftara* is to sound the spiritual position of prophecy regarding matters that constitute the agenda of our lives. Therefore, during periods of the year when there are special spiritual needs, e.g., when we must relate to the destruction of the *Bet ha-Mikdash*, whether prior to the date of the destruction through rebuke and lamentation, or after it through consolation and penitence – or when we must relate to the holiday of Pesach, the *haftarot* are dedicated to these issues and ignore the Torah reading.

Truth be told, fundamentally speaking, nothing prevents us from dealing in the framework of the *haftarot* with other issues connected to human destiny, and there is no need to restrict ourselves to events connected to the calendar. Indeed, during the period of the *Rishonim*, it was customary to read a special *haftara* in the presence of a bridegroom ("I will greatly rejoice"; *Yeshayahu* 61:10) and set aside the regular *haftara* connected to the *parasha*.[4] On the face of it, the justification for this practice appears astonishing, for how can we set aside the regular *haftara* because of a coincidental private event. But if we see the *haftara* as a prophetic message directed at the events of our own lives, we can understand that this itself is a fulfillment of the obligation of *haftara*.

An interesting testimony that extends this principle to particular historical events is found in the *Abudraham*:

Rabbenu Sa'adya writes that on a *Shabbat* when a eulogy is delivered for a Torah sage, we read the *haftara* "Honor is departed from Israel" (I *Shemuel* 4:22). And I found in a responsum to a question of R. Shemuel bar Gershon, as follows: That which you were told that when the Rambam, of blessed memory, died, that the congregation assembled in the synagogue and read from the blessings and the curses, and read as the *haftara* "Moshe my servant is dead" (*Yehoshua* 1:2) – so too we have also heard…. But he heard that when Rabbenu Sherira the father of Rabbenu Hai died, they read on that *Shabbat* from the *parasha* (*Bamidbar* 27:16): "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh,", and they read the *haftara* (I *Melakhim* 2:1), "Now the days of David drew near that he should die." And instead of the verse "And Shelomo sat on the throne of David" (v. 12), they read, "And Hai sat on the throne of Sherira his father, and his kingdom was firmly established."[5]

What emerges from all that has been said is that when *Chazal* instituted the *haftara* reading, it was their intention to take an actual prophetic message and direct it toward our contemporary lives. Therefore, the *haftara* adapts itself to the annual calendar, reaching past the weekly Torah portions.

It is in this context that one must also understand the *haftara's* preoccupation with the weekly *parashiyot* on ordinary *Shabbatot*. It is not a learning project, but in the absence of a special time, man has an existential need to occupy himself with the issues mentioned in the Torah, in the sense of "daily offerings according to their order," and thus the *haftara* expands upon them.

**"twice the Torah and once the Aramaic translation" with respect to the *haftara***

In conclusion, let us mention that the *posekim* write that there is **no obligation**to read "twice the Torah and once the Aramaic translation" with respect to the *haftara*, a ruling which raises a question regarding the justification for this series of *shiurim*, which is arranged in the framework of weekly *parasha* study. The *posekim* immediately add, however, that **the custom** is to include the *haftara* in the rule of reading "twice the Torah and once the Aramaic translation."[6] The reason is clear. The rule of "twice the Torah and once the Aramaic translation" is primarily directed at the educational benefit, and thus they exempted the *haftarot* from this obligation. Obviously, however, the benefit of studying the words of the prophets in order to understand the meaning of their message for us is important, and therefore **it is customary** to include them in the framework of "twice the Torah and once the Aramaic translation." We too will set out in the footsteps of this custom, and from now on the *shiurim* will deal with the contents of the weekly *haftara*. "And the good Lord will assist us."

FOOTNOTES:

[1] In a parallel source found in one of the manuscripts of Rabbenu Tam's *Sefer Ha-yashar*, it is stated in a general manner that the reading of the *haftara* is "an enactment of the Sages." See *Sefer Ha-yashar*, novellae (ed. Schlesinger), no. 222, note 3.

[2] See *Megila* 31b regarding Ezra's enactment to read "the blessings and the curses" before Shavuot and Rosh ha-Shana; *Tosafot*, *ibid*. *s.v. kelalot*; and Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefila* 13:1.

[3] See *Megila* 32a, Ramban, *Vayikra* 23:2 (toward the end).

[4] The custom is extensively documented in the literature of the *Rishonim*, primarily in Ashkenaz, across the centuries. The matter is already discussed in the eleventh century in *Sefer ha-Ittim*, *Ma'ase ha-Geonim*, and the *Pardes*, and it is still mentioned in the *Shulchan Arukh* in the sixteenth century as a well-known custom.

[5] As may be seen, they view the Torah reading, and not only the *haftara*, as directed at man's existential state at that particular time. This, however, is not the forum to discuss the matter at greater length.

[6] See *Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chayyim* 285:7. The source for this may be found in the *Mordekhai*, end of *Megila*, and in the *Terumat ha-Deshen*, II, no. 101.

(Translated by David Strauss)