YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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In memory of Fred Stone *z"l*, Yakov ben Yitzchak,
whose *yahrzeit* is on the 25th of Tammuz:
beloved father, grandfather and great grandfather.

By Ellen and Stanley Stone and Family

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,
whose *yahrzeit* is 21 Tammuz. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.

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**The *Haftara* for the Second Shabbat of the Three Weeks**

Listen to the word of the Lord, House of Yaakov and all the tribes of the House of Israel. This is what the Lord said: What fault did your forefathers find with Me that they distanced themselves from Me? They followed nothingness and became nothing. They did not say, "Where is the Lord who lifted us up from the land of Egypt, who guided us in the wilderness, a land of deserts and pits, an arid land, deathly dark, a land never traversed by man, where no one ever dwelt?" I brought you to a fertile land, to eat its fruits and bounty, but you came and defiled My land, and made My heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" The teachers of the Torah did not know Me. The shepherds betrayed Me. The prophets prophesied in the name of Baal. They pursued that which was useless. Therefore, I will continue to contend with them, declares the Lord. I will contend with their children's children. Cross over to the islands of the Kittites and observe. Send emissaries to Kedar and ponder well. See if anything like this ever happened before. Has a people ever exchanged its gods, and they are non-gods? Yet my nation exchanged its glory for something useless. Heavens, be astounded by this. Storm and become utterly desolate, declares the Lord. 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. Is Israel a slave? Is he born to a maidservant? Why has he become an object of plunder? Young lions roar at him. They voiced their cries. They laid waste to his land. His cities have been set afire, with no inhabitants. Even the men of Nof and Tachpanches crush your skull. This has been done to you because you deserted the Lord your God during the time He guided you upon the journey. Now of what use is it to you to approach Egypt to drink the waters of Shichor? Of what use is it to you to approach Assyria to drink the waters of the river? Your own evil will discipline you; your own waywardness will rebuke you. Know and see that your abandonment of the Lord your God has been bad and bitter. There is no fear of Me in you, says the Almighty, Lord of Hosts. I broke your yoke long ago. I tore your restraints asunder. You said, "I will never again transgress!" Yet on every high hilltop and under every leafy tree you recline like a harlot. I planted you as a choice grape: perfect and genuine seed. How did you change on Me into a weed? Rotten grapes of a strange vine! Although you scrub yourself with natron and heap soap on yourselves, your guilt is stained before Me, declares the Lord God. How can you say that you were never defiled? That you never followed the Baalim? Look back upon your path in the valley. Recognize what you did, like a young she-camel clinging to her wild ways. Like a wild donkey accustomed to the wilderness; inhaling wind as she pleases, her wailing cannot be silenced. Yet those who seek her need not be weary. In her month they will find her. Spare your foot from becoming bare and your throat from suffering thirst! But you said, "Never mind. No. I have loved strangers; it is them whom I will follow." Like the shame of a thief when he is found out, so will the House of Israel be shamed: They, their kings, their noblemen, their priests, and their prophets. They say to the tree, "You are my father!" And to the stone, "You gave birth to me!" They have turned their backs to me, not their faces, but in their time of trouble they say, "Arise and save us!" Where are the gods that you have crafted for yourself? Let them rise if they can save you in your time of trouble. For your gods, Yehuda, are as numerous as your cities. (*Yirmeyahu* 2:4-28)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ashkenazim conclude the *haftara* with:

By now, you should have called Me: "Father! You were my childhood companion!" (*Yirmeyahu* 3:4)

Sephardim conclude the *haftara* with:

If you, Israel, return to Me, declares the Lord, I will welcome your return. If you remove your abominations from My presence, you shall not suffer exile. You will utter oaths – exclaiming "as the Lord lives" truthfully, justly, and righteously – so that other nations will bless themselves by Him and come to take pride in Him. (*Yirmeyahu* 4:1-2)

**I. The Connection Between the Three weeks (and the *Parasha*) and the *Haftara***

In our study of the previous *haftara*, we dealt with the connection between that *haftara* and the period between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av. We noted that the first prophecies of Yirmeyahu, the prophet of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, were chosen to be read on the first two *Shabbatot* of that period.

We can also find a meaningful connection, after the fact, between our *haftara* and *Parashat Masei*. The beginning of *Parashat Masei* surveys the journeys of the people of Israel in the wilderness over the course of forty years. Rashi explains, in the name of the Midrash:

Why are these travels recorded here? In order to make known God’s kindnesses, that although He had decreed against them to make them move about and wander in the wilderness, you should not think that they wandered and moved about from one station to another station all the forty years, and had no rest, for you see that there are here only forty-two stations, minus… It follows that during the whole of the thirty-eight years, they made only twenty journeys. This is excerpted from the work of Rabbi Moshe [Ha-Darshan]. Rabbi Tanhuma gave another explanation of it: This may be likened to a king whose son was ill and whom he took to a distant place to cure him. When they returned home, the father began to enumerate all the stages, saying to him, "Here we slept, here we caught cold, here you had a headache, etc." (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 33:1).

As we will see below, the beginning of our *haftara* also describes God's acts of kindness toward the people of Israel when they wandered in the wilderness.

**II. Background**

As mentioned, our *haftara* is the second prophecy in the scroll of rebukes (chapters 1-20), which is the main book in *Yirmeyahu*, and there is reason to assume it was delivered at the beginning of his days of prophecy, around the 13th or 14th year of Yoshiyahu. It certainly belongs somewhere in the years 12-18 of Yoshiyahu's reign, which we will now discuss.

 Yoshiyahu's ancestors, Menashe and Amon, had degraded the kingdom of Yehuda to a spiritual low like no other:

He (= Menashe) rebuilt the high shrines that his father Chizkiyahu had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made a sacred tree as Achav, king of Israel, had done; he bowed down to all the heavenly hosts and served them. He even built altars in the House of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem, I will establish My name" – he built altars for all the heavenly hosts in both courtyards of the House of the Lord. He passed his son through the fire and practiced augury and divination and consulted ghosts and spirits; he did so much that was evil in the eyes of the Lord, angering Him. He placed the statue of Ashera that he had made in the very House of which the Lord said to David and his son Shlomo: "In this House, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will establish My name forever." (II *Melakhim* 21:3-7)

And what is more, Menashe shed so much innocent blood until Jerusalem was brimming from end to end; this was besides the sin of leading Yehuda to sin, doing what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. (II *Melakhim* 21:16)

He (= Amon) followed in all the ways that his father had followed, and he served the idols that his father had served and bowed down to them. (II *Melakhim* 21:21)

But he did not humble himself before the Lord…; instead, Amon incurred more and more guilt. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 33:23)

In the days of Menashe, God's prophets began to speak explicitly about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem:

So the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets: "Because Menashe, king of Yehuda, has committed these abominations – worse than all the Amorites did before him – and because he has led Yehuda to sin with his idol, thus says the Lord, God of Israel… and I will wipe out Jerusalem as a dish is wiped clean and turned upside down. I will abandon the remnant of My share and hand them over to their enemies, and they will become plunder and prey to all their enemies. (II *Melakhim* 21:10-14)

However, after Menashe and Amon came the righteous king Yoshiyahu, who initiated a religious revolution: he began to eradicate idolatry from the land, renovate the Temple, and return the worship of God to it.

There are two important contradictions in the scriptural and midrashic accounts of Yoshiyahu’s religious revolution. The first relates to the time of the religious revolution: Did it happen in the twelfth year of Yoshiyahu, before the renovation of the Temple, or in the eighteenth year of his reign, following the renovation of the Temple and the discovery of the Torah scroll? The religious revolution described in the book of *Melakhim* begins with the discovery of the Torah scroll in the House of God in the eighteenth year of Yoshiyahu’s reign:

In the **eighteenth** year of King Yoshiyahu, the king sent the scribe Shafan son of Atzalyahu son of Meshulam to the House of the Lord with this message… Then Shafan the scribe told the king, "The priest Chilkiya gave me a scroll," and Shafan read it out before the king. When the king heard the words of the Torah scroll, he rent his clothes. (II *Melakhim* 22:3, 10-11)

On the other hand, according to the account in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, the religious revolution began six years *before* the renovation, in the twelfth year of Yoshiyahu:

In the eighth year of his reign, though he was still young, he began to seek out the God of his ancestor David; and in the **twelfth** year, he began to purge Yehuda and Jerusalem of the high shrines and sacred trees and idols and images. Under his supervision they smashed the altars of the Baalim, cut down the sun altars that were built above them, razed the sacred trees, the idols, and the images, ground them to dust, and scattered them over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 34:3-4)

In the **eighteenth** year of his reign, after purging the land and the House, he sent Shafan son of Atzalyahu, Maaseyahu the city governor, and Yoach son of Yoachaz, the herald, to repair the House of the Lord. (Ibid.34:8)

The second contradiction relates to the quality of Yoshiyahu's religious revolution. The book of *Melakhim* emphatically praises Yoshiyahu's efforts:

As for the necromancers, mediums, household gods, idols, and all the detestable things that had appeared in the land of Yehuda and Jerusalem, Yoshiyahu stamped them out, in order to uphold the words of the teaching written in the book that Chilkiyahu the priest had found in the House of the Lord. 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* 23:24-25)

On the other hand, the Sages and the commentators give Yoshiyahu's religious revolution a low grade. The Sages describe how people continued their idolatrous practices despite his actions:

Yoshiyahu's generation presented themselves as being righteous people, while they were in fact wicked. They made idolatrous images on the inside of their doors, half on one and half on the other, and when the idol destroyers came to check, the door was open and they did not see it. (Rashi, *Yirmeyahu* 3:10, based on *Eikha Rabba* 1, 53)

In other words, idol worship continued, though it went underground.

We must resolve these two contradictions with one answer: The religious revolution from the twelfth to the eighteenth year of Yoshiyahu's rule proceeded peacefully, and the people were able to hide their idols and continue to worship them after superficial checks conducted by Yoshiyahu's agents. After the discovery of the Torah scroll in the eighteenth year, followed by Chulda's harsh prophecy of the destruction, Yoshiyahu began the revolution again, this time in a more thorough fashion. He made a covenant in the Temple in which the people and the king pledged to worship God with all their hearts and souls, and he completely eradicated idol worship from the land. The book of *Divrei ha-Yamim*, which is the history of the kings of Yehuda, also mentions the partial religious revolution that began in the twelfth year; the book of *Melakhim*, however, which is a prophetic book, does not at all acknowledge this failed revolution, and only mentions the one that began in the eighteenth year after the discovery of the Torah scroll.

As noted above, the prophecy in our *haftara* was uttered in the interval between the twelfth and the eighteenth years of Yoshiyahu's rule, and this timing is reflected in the prophecy.

**III. God's Covenant with Israel in the Wilderness**

In my remarks concerning last week's *haftara*, I mentioned that the content of its last three verses really belongs to the prophecy in our *haftara*. Let us go back to them:

The word of the Lord came to me: "Go and proclaim to the people of Jerusalem: 'This is what the Lord has said: I recall on your behalf the devotion of your youth, your bridal love, when you followed Me into the wilderness, a land unseeded. Israel is a treasure to the Lord, His choice harvest. All who eat of it will be held to account. Evil will befall them, declares the Lord.'" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:1-3)

The prophet praises Israel's loyalty to God during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when they followed God in innocent faith, like a bride who follows her bridegroom. The Torah’s gloomy description of the wilderness intensifies the image of this period of loyalty:

Who led you through the vast and terrifying wilderness, an arid wasteland with venomous snakes and scorpions, who brought forth water from flint rock for you, and fed you manna in the wilderness, something your ancestors did not know, to humble and to test you. (*Devarim* 8:15-16)

The prophet emphasizes that God remembers this loyalty and therefore protects Israel from all who would consume them. However, at the beginning of our *haftara*, he poses the question of why Israel does not remember God's faithfulness to them when he led them through the wilderness and protected them from the troubles of the wilderness – the desert marauders (Amalek), the wild beasts, the snakes, the thirst, and the hunger:

This is what the Lord said: What fault did your forefathers find with Me that they distanced themselves from Me? They followed nothingness and became nothing. They did not say, "Where is the Lord who lifted us up from the land of Egypt, who guided us in the wilderness, a land of deserts and pits, an arid land, deathly dark, a land never traversed by man, where no one ever dwelt?" (2:5-6)

The covenant of wandering in the wilderness is not given much emphasis in Scripture, but we celebrate the festival of Sukkot in its memory:

So that future generations may know that I had the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” (*Vayikra* 23:43)

The prophet adds to the covenant of wandering in the wilderness the bringing of the Israelites to the Land of Israel:

I brought you to a fertile land, to eat its fruits and bounty. (7)

Prophetic rebukes usually mention the punishments awaiting those who transgress the word of God, not His acts of lovingkindness toward them, as a reason for the people to correct their deeds. But in this case, there is a propitious time, with a king who worships God; disappointment with those who fail to cooperate with the king’s initiative leads the prophet to remind the people of God's kindnesses as a reason to return to Him. The conduct of the people and the leadership (except the king himself) expresses a two-generation impression that God has abandoned the land and His wayward people, and it is difficult now to turn the wheel back:

The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" The teachers of the Torah did not know Me. The shepherds betrayed Me. The prophets prophesied in the name of Baal. (8)

There are four layers of leadership: the priests, the Sanhedrin and Torah scholars, the political leaders, and the prophets, None of them cooperate with Yoshiyahu's religious revolution.

**IV. Yoshiyahu's Political Sin**

Is Israel a slave? Is he born to a maidservant? Why has he become an object of plunder? Young lions roar at him. They voiced their cries. They laid waste to his land. His cities have been set afire, with no inhabitants. Even the men of Nof and Tachpanches crush your skull. This has been done to you because you deserted the Lord your God during the time He guided you upon the journey. Now of what use is it to you to approach Egypt to drink the waters of Shichor? Of what use is it to you to approach Assyria to drink the waters of the river? Your own evil will discipline you; your own waywardness will rebuke you. Know and see that your abandonment of the Lord your God has been bad and bitter. There is no fear of Me in you, says the Almighty, Lord of Hosts. (2:14-19)

These verses describe Yehuda’s suffering because of the enemy who turns their land into a wasteland and sets fire to their empty cities. This description will return more strongly in chapter 4, in a similar style:

Raise a flag over Zion. Take flight; do not stand still. I am about to deliver evil from the north – a terrible destruction. The Lion has come up from his lair. The Destroyer of Nations has set forth. He has departed from his place in order to lay waste to your land. Your cities will become desolate, with no inhabitant. (*Yirmeyahu* 4:6-7)

Behold, He rises like the clouds, His chariots like the whirlwind; His steeds are swifter than eagles. Woe to us, for we have been despoiled. (*Yirmeyahu* 4:13)

Destruction upon destruction has transpired. The entire land has been despoiled. Suddenly, my tents have been despoiled; and so, in an instant, have my tent curtains. (*Yirmeyahu* 4:20)

The entire city flees from the sound of the horseman and the archer. They have gone to the thick forests; they climbed the cliffs. The entire city is abandoned; no man dwells there. (*Yirmeyahu* 4:29)

We do not know about any of the neighboring countries that they did this to Yoshiyahu's kingdom, but at the beginning of Yoshiyahu's time there came a Scythian invasion of the Land of Israel – an invasion of barbarian peoples from the far north (the Caspian Sea and its surroundings), who also invaded other countries in the Middle East and disappeared a few years later in the same way they had come. It seems from *Yirmeyahu* that in order to protect his country, Yoshiyahu accepted the help of the king of Egypt and entered into an alliance with him. An alliance with Egypt was never viewed favorably by the prophets; they saw it as a violation of the explicit prohibition to return the people to Egypt. Finding protection in Egypt’s shadow implied an erosion of the consciousness that God brought Israel out of servitude in Egypt so that they would serve God.

Yoshiyahu paid for this sin when he was forced to break the covenant with Egypt at the battle of Megiddo and was killed there. In our *haftara*, in the verses cited above, Yirmeyahu harshly criticizes making a covenant with Egypt. So too below:

And you, despoiled one, what will you do? Will you wear scarlet and bedeck yourself with golden ornaments? Will you line your eyes with kohl? You will beautify yourself in vain. Your lovers have rejected you. They seek your death. (*Yirmeyahu* 4:30)

**V. The Shortcomings of Yoshiyahu's Revolution**

I broke your yoke long ago. I tore your restraints asunder. You said, "I will never again transgress!" Yet on every high hilltop and under every leafy tree you recline like a harlot… Although you scrub yourself with natron and heap soap on yourselves, your guilt is stained before Me, declares the Lord God. How can you say that you were never defiled? That you never followed the Baalim? Look back upon your path in the valley. Recognize what you did, like a young she-camel clinging to her wild ways… Like the shame of a thief when he is found out, so will the House of Israel be shamed: They, their kings, their noblemen, their priests, and their prophets. (2:20-26)

Here we return to the topic from the background section about the first years of Yirmeyahu's prophecy, in the years 12-18 of Yoshiyahu, when the religious revolution was underway but did not really eradicate idolatry from Yehuda. The yoke of the Assyrians was already broken, and their restraints were torn, with the death of Ashurbanipal; it was time to return to God, but the people of Israel continued their corruption on every hill and mountain top. Yoshiyahu tries to wash away the stain of idolatry “with natron and soap,” but the stain remains and continues to tarnish the nation. The people of Israel come to God claiming they are no longer polluted, since idolatry is being eradicated, but the prophet sends them to valley, a more concealed spot, and shows them their sins that continue even after the beginning of the revolution. Even if the sin went slightly underground, "like the shame of a thief when he is found out, so will the House of Israel be shamed." Their sin is hidden in their houses like stolen property in the house of a thief who pretends to be an upright person.

Yirmiyahu will continue these descriptions in the verses following our *haftara*:

Why do you contend with Me? You have all rebelled against Me, declares the Lord. (2:29)

The blood of the innocent poor can be found on your skirts, yet you did not find them tunneling into your home. Despite all of this you dare declare: "I am innocent; surely He has turned His anger away from me!" Be aware: I will judge you for saying, "I did not sin." (2:34-35)

If a man sent away his wife, and she walked away from him and married another man, would he return to her again? Such a land would be utterly defiled. You have strayed after many lovers, and yet you dare return to Me? demands the Lord. (3:1)

The people pretend they have returned to God, argue with Him, and demand help and reconciliation, but the prophet rebukes them: "Why do you contend with Me?" God did not find the crimes underground, for everything is revealed to Him. The people claim they have already cleansed themselves from their sins and God is no longer angry with them, but God will still judge them for claiming to have stopped sinning. The revolution seems to be going smoothly, but as was noted above, in its first six years, the people continue to sin.

At the height of the argument, Yirmeyahu says that perhaps there is no place at all for reconciliation and repentance, as in the case of a woman who is divorced and has already given her loyalty to another man. The lesson Yirmiyahu teaches in these prophecies will be learned with shock when the scroll of the Torah is found, when the prophetess Chulda will claim that everything is lost and destruction will come. Then Yirmeyahu, in a prophecy of consolation, will offer hope to the deep repentance that Yoshiyahu will attempt together with the people in Jerusalem.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all references are to the book of *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)