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 Esther Leah Cymbalista z"l
Niftera 7 B'Av 5766.
Dedicated by her family.

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In Loving Memory of
Jeffrey Paul Friedman *z"l*
August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012
לע"נ יהודה פנחס ז"ל בן הרב שרגא פייוועל נ"י
כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**The *Haftara* for Tisha Be-Av**

I will eradicate them thoroughly, declares the Lord. No grapes on the vine. No figs on the fig tree. Even the leaf is withered. That which I gave them will pass them by. For what purpose do we sit still? Assemble, and let us approach the fortress cities and sit silently there. The Lord our God has silenced us and given us poisonous water to drink, for we have sinned against the Lord. We hope for peace, but no good awaits us; for a time of healing, but instead – horror. From Dan the snorting of his horses can be heard. The entire land shudders from the neighing of his steeds. They have come and have devoured the land and its bounty, the city and its inhabitants. I am about to let loose upon you snakes, vipers against which there is no charm, and they will bite you, declares the Lord. Though I struggle to contain my torment, my heart is overwhelmed by woe. Behold the sound of my people's cry from a distant land. "Is the Lord no longer in Zion? Is her King no longer there?" "Why have they angered Me with their idols, with their alien vanities?" The harvest is over. The summer is gone, but we have not been saved. Because of the collapse of my precious people, I have collapsed. I am despondent. Desolation has possessed me. Is there no balm in Gilad? Is there no healer there? Why then has there not arisen a cure for my precious people? If only my head were water and my eye a fountain of tears, then I would weep day and night for the slain of my precious people. If only I were granted a wayfarer’s lodging in the wilderness, I would abandon my people and walk away from them, for they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. They have drawn their tongue; their bow is falsehood. Not for faithfulness have they become powerful in the land. From evil to evil they have advanced, but Me they did not know, declares the Lord. Let each man be on guard against his fellow, and let no one trust his own brother, for every brother acts deceitfully, and every friend spreads slander. Each man defrauds his fellow and speaks untruth; they have trained their tongues to speak lies. They weary themselves with perversions. You dwell in the midst of deceit. In deceit they have refused to know Me - declares the Lord. Therefore, thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am about to smelt them and test them, for what else can I do on behalf of My precious people? Their tongue is a sharpened arrow, speaking deceit. One speaks peaceably to another but secretly plots an ambush. Should I not hold them to account for these things? demands the Lord. For a nation such as this, should I not exact retribution? Over the mountains I will raise a cry and a wail, and over pastures in the wilderness I will lament. For they have been laid waste with not even a passerby. The sound of cattle is no longer to be heard. From the bird in the sky to the beast, all have wandered, all are gone. I will reduce Jerusalem to piles of rubble, a dwelling place for jackals. I will make the towns of Yehuda desolate, with no inhabitant. Who is the wise man who knows this? Let all to whom the Lord has spoken confirm it: Why has the land been destroyed, laid waste like a wilderness with no passerby? The Lord said: For they abandoned the teaching that I gave them. They did not heed Me, nor did they follow it. Instead they followed the waywardness of their hearts and the Baalim, as their fathers taught them. Therefore, thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: "I am about to feed this people wormwood and give them poisoned water to drink. I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their ancestors ever knew. I will send the sword after them until I finish them off." Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Consider, then summon dirge singers and let them come, and send for skilled women and let them come. Let them hurry and sound a wailing for us so that our eyes shed tears and our pupils drip water. For the sound of wailing has been heard in Zion: how we have been despoiled! We are put to shame, for we have left the land, and they have cast down our dwellings. Women, hear the word of the Lord, and let your ears absorb the word of His mouth. Teach your daughters wailing and one another lamentation. For death has climbed into our windows, arrived in our palaces, to cut down babes from the outdoors and youth from the town squares. "Speak!" Thus declares the Lord: The carcasses of men will fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves behind the reaper, with no one to gather them. Thus said the Lord: Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast of his might. Let not the wealthy boast of his wealth. Someone may boast only of his conscious knowledge of Me, for I the Lord act with lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness in the world. For it is these things that I desire, declares the Lord. )*Yirmeyahu* 8:13-9:23)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and Tisha Be-Av**

This *haftara* is mentioned in tractate *Megilla*, where Abaye describes the customary practice of reading it onTisha be-Av:

Abaye said: Nowadays the custom has been adopted of reading [from the Torah] "When you have had children," and for *haftara*, "I will eradicate them thoroughly." (*Megilla* 31b)

The *haftara* is filled with words and descriptions that bring to mind the day of lamentations and weeping, Tisha be-Av. Towards the end of the *haftara*, we find words such as "dirge," "wailing," "tears," and others. There are also many terms of lamentation at the beginning of the *haftara*, such as "torment," "woe," "tears," and "cry" – and so too in the middle: "cry," "wail," and "lament."

In between, Yirmeyahu delivers a harsh moral rebuke, reminiscent of the Rambam's words about times of trouble and fasting:

There are days when the entire Jewish people fast because of the calamities that occurred to them then, to arouse [their] hearts and initiate [them in] the paths of repentance. This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors, which resembles our present conduct and therefore brought these calamities upon them and upon us. By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve [our conduct], as it is stated: "And they will confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors" (*Vayikra* 26:40)…

On Tisha be-Av, five tragedies occurred… (Rambam, *Hilkhot Taaniyot* 5:1-3)

A further connection is in the description at the beginning of the *haftara* of the time of Av – the days of fruits ripening, when the people are starving and without a harvest. A great enemy is coming from the north and small enemies ("snakes and vipers") are everywhere, and everything is full of idols and alien vanities, with innumerable corpses.

**II. "If Only"**

The *haftara* mentions two rhetorical requests:

**If only** my head were water and my eye [*eini*]a fountain of tears, then I would weep day and night for the slain of my precious people. **If only** I were granted a wayfarer’s lodging in the wilderness, I would abandon my people and walk away from them, for they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. (8:23 – 9:1)

The first petitioner ('If only my head were water") is the prophet, whose tears have dried up so that he cannot weep any more. The word *eini* (my *ayin*)refers to the organ of sight, the eye, but can also mean a spring (*ma'ayan*). The human eye is a spring – a spring of tears. Here, the prophet's spring of tears has dried up after extensive weeping over the various calamities happening in the land.

The second petitioner ("If only I were granted a wayfarer's lodging") seems to be God, responding to the prophet’s descriptions of calamity. God describes the sin and expresses a desire to leave His people, who are adulterers and traitors, and return to the wilderness – perhaps to the bush in which the *Shekhina* rested while the people were enslaved in the Egyptian exile.

In the sectarian days of the Second Temple, many (especially the Essenes) understood these verses as teaching they must abandon Jerusalem, which was for them "a band of traitors," and go to the wilderness (of Judea) in order to live a life there of Torah, prayer, and morality. The criticism of them is that they hid themselves away in their caves and gave up too soon (almost two hundred years before the destruction) on the struggle for the repair of society and the repair of Jerusalem. The Pharisaic Sages did the opposite. In our *haftara*, as well, God says, "If only I were granted a wayfarer's lodging," but He will not abandon His people until the chances of repair are fully exhausted.

**III. The Sin of Slander and Deceit**

Let each man be on guard against his fellow, and let no one trust his own brother, for every brother acts deceitfully, and every friend spreads slander. (9:3)

The prohibition to spread slander is stated explicitly in the Torah:

Do not go around spreading slander [*lo telekh rakhil]* among your people. Do not stand by while your neighbor's life is in danger; I am the Lord. (*Vayikra* 19:16)

*Rekhilut* means tale-bearing.[[2]](#footnote-2) The tale-bearing usually discussed by halakhic authorities involves telling a person who was wronged about the person who wronged him. This type of tale-bearing results in the victim hating the person who caused him harm. But the second half of the verse indicates that the Torah is dealing with more serious cases of tale-bearing, which are liable to lead to the shedding of the blood of the person about whom the tales were told. Yechezkel said similarly in his prophecy:

Slanderers have been among you so as to spill blood. (*Yechezkel* 22:9)

The *rekhilut* discussed by the Torah and the prophets involves informing the king or some other ruler that a certain person is not loyal to them. If the king is despotic or strict, the person who was informed upon is liable to suffer torture or even death – as are the members of his family. This seems to be what Yirmeyahu means in our prophecy, as evident from the images he uses:

They have drawn their tongue; their bow is falsehood… (2)

Their tongue is a sharpened arrow, speaking deceit. One speaks peaceably to another but secretly plots an ambush. (7)

The lips resemble a bow (especially when they smile, so to speak, at their victim – for the owner of the lips "speaks peaceably to another"), and the tongue sticking out through them resembles an arrow that is shot from the bow. When slander is being spread, the lips and tongue serve as weapons with which to kill their victim.

Based on its context, this prophecy was probably uttered in the days of Yehoyakim. Yehoyakim was made king by Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt, who had killed Yoshiyahu. The people of the land had made the young Yehoachaz king, because they were afraid of Yehoyakim. However, Yehoyakim promised Pharaoh Nekho a considerable amount of money in exchange for his appointment in place of his (step-)brother Yehoachaz, and took it forcibly from the people of the land:

Then the people of the land took Yehoachaz son of Yoshiyahu, anointed him, and made him king in his father's place… Pharaoh Nekho imprisoned him at Rivla in the land of Chamat to prevent him from reigning in Jerusalem and placed a penalty on the land of one hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. Then Pharaoh Nekho made Elyakim son of Yoshiyahu king in his father Yoshiyahu's place and changed his name to Yehoyakim. As for Yehoachaz, he seized him; and he came to Egypt, where he died. Yehoyakim paid the silver and gold to Pharaoh by assessing the land to meet Pharaoh's demand for money; he exacted the silver and gold from the people of the land according to each man's worth to pay Pharaoh Nekho. (II *Melakhim* 23:30-35)

Yehoyakim, whose tyranny we see in other places as well, was an unpopular king and faced many opponents. He needed informers to help rid himself of those who were suspected of being his opponents, and it is possible that he paid the informers for this. It appears from our prophecy that many did this through deceit and falsehood, exploiting Yehoyakim's policy to rid themselves of people they wished to harm, each for their own reasons:

Let each man be on guard against his fellow, and let no one trust his own brother, for every brother acts deceitfully, and every friend spreads slander. Each man defrauds his fellow and speaks untruth; they have trained their tongues to speak lies. They weary themselves with perversions. You dwell in the midst of deceit. In deceit they have refused to know Me – declares the Lord… Their tongue is a sharpened arrow, speaking deceit. One speaks peaceably to another but secretly plots an ambush. (3-5, 7)

**IV. The Sin of Abandoning the Torah**

Who is the wise man who knows this? Let all to whom the Lord has spoken confirm it: Why has the land been destroyed, laid waste like a wilderness with no passerby? The Lord said: For they abandoned the teaching [*Torah*] that I gave them. They did not heed Me, nor did they follow it. Instead they followed the waywardness of their hearts and the Baalim, as their fathers taught them. (9:11-13)

According to the plain meaning, abandoning the Torah seems here to refer to following the gods of idolatry – a prohibition that is the essence of the Torah and is one of the two commandments heard directly from God at Mount Sinai. But *Chazal* interpreted it differently:

For Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: What is meant by: "Who is the wise man who knows this?… [Why has the land been destroyed?]" This question was put to the Sages, prophets, and ministering angels, but they could not answer it, until the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself did so, as it is written: "The Lord said: For they abandoned the teaching that I gave them. [They did not heed Me, nor did they follow it]." But is not "they did not heed Me" identical with, "nor did they follow it"? Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: [It means] that they did not first recite a blessing over the Torah. (*Nedarim* 81a; *Bava Metzia* 84b-85a)

The commentators, both *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, had difficulty understanding the gravity of failure to recite a blessing over the Torah – an offense which, according to Rav, led to the destruction. It is possible that *Chazal* wished to counterbalance the sin of idol worship and the above-mentioned sin of slander that leads to bloodshed, especially when it comes with the pretense of "One speaks peaceably to another but secretly plots an ambush," with dishonesty and a lack of integrity. Our king and psalmist, David, also sets this sin against God's Torah and its expression of God's attributes, to which we must cling:

To the lead singer, on the *sheminit* – a psalm of David. Help, Lord, for the godly are no more, for the faithful have faded from humanity. People tell each other lies; they are smooth talking and two faced. May the Lord cut off all these smooth lips, these arrogant wagging tongues that declare, "Our tongues shall prevail; our lips are our own – who is our master?" "Because of the oppression of the poor, the groans of the needy, I will now rise up," declares the Lord. "I will grant them the safety they sigh for." The Lord's words are pure words, like silver refined in an earthen furnace, purified seven times over. (*Tehillim* 12:1-7)

The psalmist describes smooth lips that speak insincerely to a "friend" and thus lead to oppression of the poor and to the groans of the needy. He does not mention bloodshed, but does mention sins that may be direct results of sins of the tongue and tale-bearing that come with smooth lips. The psalmist contrasts this impure language to the pure language of God, which gives us pure words, i.e., His holy Torah. He sees sins of the tongue as the exact opposite of God's Torah – and this is what the prophet refers to as "for they have abandoned the teaching [*Torah*]that I gave them." We find the same idea in the Jerusalem Talmud:

The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the world to come: the honoring of father and mother, the practice of charity, and the making of peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all. (Mishna *Pe'a* 1:1)

And corresponding to them are four things for which a person is punished in this world and the principal remains for him in the world to come. They are: idolatry, incest, bloodshed, and *lashon ha-ra* [evil tongue] is equal to all of them. (Jerusalem Talmud, ad loc.)

By *lashon ha-ra*, the Jerusalem Talmud means tale-bearing, informing to the authorities. It is equal to, and the opposite of, Torah study.

Studying Torah without saying a blessing to acknowledge its Giver, and without connecting it to God's attributes, may lead to the opposite – to the tale-bearing that leads to bloodshed, of which the prophet speaks.

**V. The Knowledge of God**

"Speak!" Thus declares the Lord: The carcasses of men will fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves behind the reaper, with no one to gather them. Thus said the Lord: Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast of his might. Let not the wealthy boast of his wealth. Someone may boast only of his conscious knowledge of Me, for I the Lord act with lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness in the world. For it is these things that I desire, declares the Lord. (9:21-23)

The prophecy takes a surprising turn, from the expected calamity to the glory of the one who knows God. It is possible that the knowledge of God mentioned here is connected to not leaving the path of the Torah, which we discussed in the previous section. The knowledge of God in these verses is not knowledge of the root of his uniqueness and unity, nor is it related to the mysteries of His creation of the world or of the structure of His chariot. It is connected to His attributes and practice of lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness.

Let us return to what seems to be the root of the blessing recited over the Torah: knowing God is not just knowing the facts about God's acts of kindness, justice, and righteousness in the land. This may be enough for casual Torah study, but the blessing recited over the Torah requires devotion to these attributes and the deep understanding that if this is what God does, it is also what we are required to do. As God said about the patriarch Avraham:

For I have chosen him so that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

Avraham's descendants will follow the path of righteousness and justice because that is the way of God. This is the meaning of knowing Him.

Yirmeyahu will also say this in other prophecies – particularly to Yehoyakim, the primary audience to whom our *haftara* was addressed:

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? 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)

Once again – the knowledge of God is justice and righteousness for the poor, and Yehoyakim must follow in the footsteps of his father (which unfortunately did not happen).

The prophet Hoshea spoke in a similar fashion on the eve of the destruction of the kingdom of Shomron:

Hear the word of the Lord, children of Israel, for the Lord has a dispute with the people of this land – for there is no truthfulness or kindness and no awareness of God in the land. False swearing and lying, murder, thievery, and prostitution are rampant, raging, and bloodshed spills over into bloodshed. (*Hoshea* 4:1-2)

The small amount of consolation in these last verses concludes our otherwise harsh *haftara* of Tisha Be-Av.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all Biblical references are to the book of *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We dealt at length with the various positions of the halakhic authorities regarding tale-bearing and *lashon ha-ra* in "*He'arot be-Dinei Lashoh ha-Ra*," Alon Shevut 179, 5781, pp. 11-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)