YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**The *Haftara* for *Parashat Nitzavim***

**(The Last of the Seven *Haftarot* of Consolation)**

I shall rejoice, rejoice in the Lord; my soul exults in my God; He has wrapped me in garb of rescue, on my shoulders the mantle of righteousness, as a bridegroom attends in splendor, and a bride puts on her jewels; just as the land brings forth green life, having all that is planted in her flower like a garden, so will the Lord God bring forth righteousness and glory before all the nations. For Zion's sake I cannot be silent, for Jerusalem's I cannot be still, until righteousness bursts forth shining, and rescue burns like a brand, and all nations see your righteousness, all the kings your glory. They will call you by a new name spoken from the Lord's own mouth. You will be a crown of glory in the Lord's hand, a kingly diadem in your God's palms. No more will they say of you, "Abandoned," "Desolate" of your land, for you shall be called "My Desire," your land renamed "Embraced" [*Be’ula*], for it is you the Lord desires, and your land shall be embraced [*tiba’el*]; as a young man embraces [*yiv’al*]a maid, so will your children embrace you [*yiv’alukh*], while the joy of a bridegroom over his bride is the joy your God will take in you. Over your walls, Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen, all day, all night long, always, and they will not keep silence; you who call the Lord by name, none of you be quiet, and do not give Him quiet until He has established, until He has raised Jerusalem to be the glory of this earth. The Lord has sworn by His right hand and by His mighty arm: never again to give away your grain as your foes' food, never to let strangers drink the wine that you have labored for. No – the ones who harvest it will eat and sing out the Lord's praise, and those He has gathered in will drink within My sacred courtyards. Pass, pass through the gates, and make way for the people. Mark, mark a road here; clear the stones; raise a banner above all peoples. Behold: the Lord resounding to the earth's ends; tell daughter Zion, your rescue is come, and with Him, His prize: His work walking before Him. They will call them a holy people, redeemed ones of the Lord. And you – you shall be called the One Sought After, the City That Will Never Be Abandoned. "Who is this, coming from Edom, from Botzra, in reddened clothes? Who, His clothing glorious, striding forth in might?" It is I who speak with rectitude, powerful to rescue. "And why is Your clothing red, your garments, as if You trod the winepress?" I have trodden the vat alone; no man of any nation was there with Me; I trod them in My fury, trampling them in rage, until their lifeblood steeped My clothes, befouling all My garments, for today in My heart is a day of vengeance; My year of redemption is come. I look, and no one is there to help; with dismay I see – no aid; so My arm will bear My rescue; My rage is My support. My fury will tread peoples low; in My rage I shall make them drunk and pour down their lifeblood to earth. Let me speak the Lord's acts of kindness, praises of the Lord for all the Lord has done for us, for His great goodness to Israel, performed in all compassion, in all His loving-kindness. He said: They, they are My people, My children who would not lie to Me – and He was their rescue. Wherever they suffered, He too suffered, and His presence, its emissary rescued them; in His love, in His mercy He redeemed them and took them up and bore them through all those long-past days. (*Yeshayahu* 61:10-63:9)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. The Joy of a Bridegroom Over his Bride**

I shall rejoice, rejoice in the Lord; my soul exults in my God; He has wrapped me in garb of rescue, on my shoulders the mantle of righteousness, as a bridegroom attends in splendor, and a bride puts on her jewels. (61:10)

 The *haftara* opens with the celebration of the renewed marriage between God and the people of Israel, a metaphor that brings to mind passages from *Shir Ha-Shirim*. In addition to the expression of God's love for his people, the marriage bond also expresses the depth of the covenant between them, in which the people of Israel pledge not to exchange Him for another god, God forbid. Betrayal of this covenant would lead to the severance of the relationship, in which case the wife would have to leave her husband's house and go into exile. Thus, the return of the woman (the people of Israel) to her land and to her redemption must indicate a renewal of the marriage covenant. The same metaphor also appears below:

The joy of a bridegroom over his bride is the joy your God will take in you. (62:5)

**II. The City of Righteousness**

So will the Lord God bring forth **righteousness** and glory before all the nations.

For Zion's sake I cannot be silent, for Jerusalem's I cannot be still until **righteousness** bursts forth shining, and rescue burns like a brand, and all nations see your **righteousness**, all the kings your glory. They will call you by a new name spoken from the Lord's own mouth. (61:11-62:2)

Jerusalem’s righteousness is mentioned three times in these verses: God will bring it forth, it will burst forth shining, and all the nations will see it. The connection between Jerusalem and righteousness runs through many passages in the Bible. The king of "Shalem," which *Chazal* identified with Jerusalem,[[2]](#footnote-2) is Malki **Tzedek** (*Bereishit* 14:18), and the king of Jerusalem in the days of Yehoshua is Adoni **Tzedek** (*Yehoshua* 10:1).

Yeshayahu himself calls Jerusalem by its new name: "I shall set up your judges again as they first were, your counselors as long ago. And then you shall be called Righteous City, Faithful Metropolis" (*Yeshayahu* 1:26). Yirmeyahu refers to Jerusalem with a similar designation:

In those days and in that time, I will make a righteous scion blossom forth from David, and he will dispense justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Yehuda will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell in safety, and this is what He will call her: "The Lord is our righteous one." (*Yirmeyahu* 33:15-16)

In the light of these prophecies, it stands to reason that the new name mentioned in our *haftara* is "Righteous City," and if we say that it will be "spoken from the Lord's own mouth," perhaps the new name is "The Lord is our righteous one."

In this respect, a distinction must be made between two types of righteousness, both of which are important. Elsewhere, Yeshayahu and Yirmeyahu speak of the righteousness that will be carried out in Jerusalem by its king and judges, who had previously filled the city with injustice. Once they fill it with righteousness, it will be possible to call it "Righteous City." From the prophecy in our *haftara*, however, it seems that we are dealing with the righteousness that God will perform on behalf of Jerusalem when He redeems it.

Yirmeyahu laments in *Eikha* about the terrible punishment that Jerusalem received at the time of the destruction, and says in his prophecies that the surrounding nations are even more corrupt than Jerusalem and therefore deserve greater punishment:

For I am about to bring evil upon the city that is called by My name, and you expect to be absolved? You will not be absolved. (*Yirmeyahu* 25:29)

For this is what the Lord said: Even those who are not sentenced to drink the cup of wrath must drink it, and yet you expect to be absolved? You will certainly not be absolved. (*Yirmeyahu* 49:12)

Long after the destruction of Jerusalem, Daniel said similar things about it:

He fulfilled His word, that which He had spoken regarding us and our judges who judged us, to bring upon us a great evil the likes of which has never been done beneath all the heavens as it was done in Jerusalem. (*Daniel* 9:12)

 Jerusalem is now destroyed and in mourning, without its children. When the *Shekhina* returns to Jerusalem together with the redeemed people of Israel, God will execute righteousness toward it. The nations will see this righteousness as a spark, together with the salvation of Jerusalem. Righteousness also will be carried out for the people of Israel, the fruits of whose labor the nations have been consuming:

The Lord has sworn by His right hand and by His mighty arm: never again to give away your grain as your foes' food, never to let strangers drink the wine that you have labored for. No – the ones who harvest it will eat and sing out the Lord's praise, and those He has gathered in will drink within My sacred courtyards. (62:8-9)

According to *Chazal*, on God's mighty arm rests, as it were, His arm *tefillin*, and it is on this that He swears He will never again allow the nations to eat the fruits of Israel's labor:

Rabbi Avin bar Rav Ada said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, puts on *tefillin*? As it is stated: "The Lord has sworn by His right hand and by His mighty arm." (*Berakhot* 6a)

**III. My Desire**

No more will they say of you, "Abandoned," "Desolate" of your land, for you shall be called "My Desire"… for it is you the Lord desires. (62:4)

Here we see that the formerly abandoned city of Jerusalem will be called by another new name: "My Desire" – Cheftziva. This was the name of the mother of Menashe, son of Chizkiyahu; in other words, she was the wife of Chizkiyahu:

Menashe was twelve years old when he became king, and for fifty-five years he reigned in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Cheftziva. (II *Melakhim* 21:1)

 The Gemara in *Berakhot* (10a) further indicates that Chizkiyahu's wife was the daughter of Yeshayahu the prophet. Yeshayahu named his children after his prophecies. His oldest son was She'ar Yashuv (see *Yeshayahu* 7:3), from the prophecy that declared: "A remnant will return [*she'ar yashuv*], the remnant of Yaakov, to mighty God. For though your people Israel may be like sands of the sea for number, but a remnant will return of them" (*Yeshayahu* 10:21-22). Another son of Yeshayahu was named "Maher Shalal Chash Baz," (see *Yeshayahu* 8:1-3), and so too his son Imanu El (see Rashi, Radak, and Ibn Ezra on *Yeshayahu* 7:14). The prophet himself attests:

You see: I and all the children the Lord gave me are messages, are signs, to Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who rests upon Mount Zion. (*Yeshayahu* 8:18)

 It seems that Cheftziba, the daughter of Yeshayahu, was also named after his prophecy, after the new name of Jerusalem given in our *haftara*.

 The prophet in our *haftara* then goes on to give Jerusalem yet another name: "And you – you shall be called the One Sought After [*Derusha*], the City That Will Never Be Abandoned" (62:12). This name cannot but bring to mind what is said in the Torah:

Instead, seek [*tidreshu*]the place that the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to set His name there, to be His dwelling. (*Devarim* 12:5)

 The name "Cheftziva" expresses primarily God's desire for us, whereas seeking, “Derusha,” expresses primarily our desire for God's *Shekhina*.

**IV. The Bride and the Young Woman**

As a young man espouses [*yiv’al*]a maid, so will your children espouse you [*yiv’alukh*], while the joy of a bridegroom over his bride is the joy your God will take in you. (62:5)

The root of the Hebrew word *yiv’al*, translated here as “espousing,” indicates physical intimacy. It seems to be used merely as a metaphor; nevertheless, the reader cannot but wonder about the horrifying association it conveys, which is incest of the lowest possible type. Moreover, how can the woman appear in the same verse, even metaphorically, as both the partner of her children and also the partner of her groom (i.e., her God)?

It seems that a distinction must be made between the young woman in the first part of the verse and the bride in the second part. In the first part, the woman represents the soil of the land of Israel (which is, in a sense, the “body” of *Knesset Yisrael*). The bride in the second part, however, is *Knesset Yisrael* itself, which is likened to a woman (as in *Shir Ha-Shirim*). As an abstract concept, *Knesset Yisrael* expresses the general manifestation of the people of Israel across the generations in its best qualities, which are eternal. The people of Israel qua *Knesset Yisrael* are God's "bride" in the prophecy.

In *Shir Ha-Shirim* as well, *Knesset Yisrael* sometimes manifests itself as the land of Israel and its very soil, and her children "embrace" her. This is not just a metaphor to convey an idea in a clear and simple fashion (as such, it would have been preferable to use a different coupling, that does not involve a woman and her children). In a sense, a farmer "espouses" his land: he places seed within it, and the land turns that seed into produce. The "espousing" (*be’ila*) is setting the seed within the body of the espoused, both in the case of a woman and in the case of land. Today, we associate *be’ila* exclusively with marital relations, but this is not the case in Scripture:

Sow your seeds in the morning, and come evening do not lay your hands to rest – for you do not know which will prove fit, these seeds or those, or whether the two are as good as one another. (*Kohelet* 11:7)

A man plants his field in the morning, and at night, his wife. He must hope and believe in the success of both types of seed – livelihood and children. This also sheds light on the derivation of the rules of *kinyan* that effect a betrothal from the rules of acquiring (*kinyan*) a field:

And how do we know that money effects betrothal? By deriving the meaning of "taking" from the field of Efron: Here it is written: "If any man take a wife"; and there it is written: "I will give you money for the field: take it of me." And taking is designated acquisition, as it is written: "The field which Avraham acquired." (*Kiddushin* 2a)

**V. Revenge against Edom**

"Who is this, coming from Edom, from Botzra, in reddened clothes? Who, His clothing glorious, striding forth in might?" It is I who speak with rectitude, powerful to rescue. "And why is Your clothing red, your garments, as if You trod the winepress?" I have trodden the vat alone; no man of any nation was there with Me; I trod them in My fury, trampling them in rage, until their lifeblood steeped My clothes, befouling all My garments, for today in My heart is a day of vengeance; My year of redemption is come. (63:1-3)

The prophet connects the redemption of Israel with revenge against Edom, the father of Amalek – similar to the redemption from Egypt and the close of the war against Israel's enemies in the land of Israel, which involved revenge against Amalek. The prophets (Ovadya and Yirmeyahu) elaborated on the need to take revenge against Edom for their part in the destruction of the First Temple and the sale of refugees from Yehuda into slavery:

Rejoice, be merry, daughter Edom, sitting there in the land of Utz. The cup will come to you in turn; you will get drunk and be laid bare. Your offenses are done with, daughter Zion; He will exile you no more. Your offenses are noted, daughter Edom; your sins have been exposed. (*Eikha* 4:21-22)

Even in earlier times, Yehuda had an open and particularly painful account to settle with Edom. It is possible that during the time of Menashe (the seventh century BCE) as well – which, in my opinion, is the approximate time of Yeshayahu's prophecy here – the Edomites helped Israel's enemies, and especially the Assyrian power, in its conflicts with the kingdom of Yehuda.

**VI. My Children Who Would Not Lie to Me**

He said: They, they are My people, My children who would not lie to Me – and He was their rescue. (63:8)

The concluding verses of the *haftara* (63:7 and on) are part of a separate prophecy, which continues past the end of our *haftara*. It includes the hope that the people of Israel do not lie. Hatred of lies is common to the entire Bible, but it is appropriate to distinguish between two types of lies that the prophets dealt with. One is lack of credibility in business dealings, testimony, judgment, and any other interpersonal matters. The prophet Zekharya dealt with this at length:

So says the Lord of Hosts: Judge truthful justice; show kindness and compassion to one another. (*Zekharya* 7:9)

So says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and dwelled within Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be called City of Truth. (*Zekharya* 8:3)

This is what you should do: Speak truthfully, one to another. In your gates render judgments of truth and peace… Do not love the false oath. I hate all of these – the Lord has spoken. (*Zekharya* 8:16-17)

The second type of lies is that which Yeshayahu deals with in our prophecy: the truth of keeping our covenant with God, and not exchanging Him for another god. Adopting another God would be false and a failure to keep the covenant of trust between Him and us.

The prophet says that God comes back and saves us time and time again in the hope that we will not prove false against His covenant and that we will maintain our faithfulness to Him forever. Is this indeed what happened? That is the issue addressed in the rest of the prophecy, after the conclusion of our ­*haftara.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless specified otherwise, all Biblical references are to the book of *Yeshayahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This identification is based on the verse in *Tehillim* 76:3: "His tent is set in Shalem, His abode in Zion." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)