YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Haftarot*

*Haftara – Tzav*

"Yet THey Did not hearken to me, nor incline their ear"

a rarely-read *Haftara*

dealing with the abominations of Jerusalem

HaRav Mosheh Lichtenstein

The *haftara* for *Parashat Tzav* (*Yirmeyahu* 7:21-8:3), which is included in the category of rarely-read *haftarot*, is one of the most difficult *haftarot* for synagogue goers. This is not because its language is particularly difficult or its content unusually obscure; on the contrary, Yirmyahu expresses himself with his characteristic clarity. But the *haftara* presents the listener with an emotional difficulty because of the harsh tone and severe justice that run through it without mercy. Abhorrence, abandonment and destruction appear together with the valley of slaughter and burial in the Tofet. The prophecy does not achieve satisfaction until it presents a graphic description of bones being removed from their graves, spread out in the sun, and turned into dung on the face of the earth. The prophecy concludes only after it reaches the most severe reality of "and death shall be chosen rather than life" (8:3).

With this harsh tone of rebuke and threat, this *haftara* stands out almost completely alone. Several *haftarot* deal with sin, rebuke and punishment, but none of them reach such a harsh level of vengeance being exacted on the people and its leaders. Even the *haftarot* of calamity that are read during the Three Weeks do not reach this level of rage and punishment. All the more so the rest of the *haftarot* that do not deal with mourning over the destruction of the Temple.

Rebuke is clearly an important component of the prophetic message to Israel, and it stands at the heart of Yirmeyahu's prophetic activity. On the contrary, rebuke is not less important than blessing, but rather more important, and therefore it may be argued that reading prophecies of rebuke in the synagogue, even the harshest among them, is necessary. Despite the problematic nature of exposing sin and transgression, Yirmeyahu sees fit to rebuke the people in his attempt to prevent the exile, and even today, it might be better to publicize the sins of Israel in order to prevent another exile.

However, throwing about such severe punishments and accusations is not the usual policy of the *haftarot*. An "ordinary" rebuke that points to that which is in need of improvement and repair, but lacks the threat and blatant defiance, is perceived as more appropriate and effective for later generations than presenting the horrific punishment that was singled out for a difficult generation like the generation of the destruction of the Temple and the unique reality of the impending destruction that that generation faced. The listener of later generations would not see himself as set in the spiritual or historical situation of the generation of the destruction, and therefore he would not be influenced by a prophecy that appears to be distant from his existential situation. What is more, one of the objectives of the enactment to read a *haftara* is to console the people during the time of their exile and to inspire them with hope. Therefore even if rebuke is necessary, the threat of destruction and desolation that accompanies the rebuke contradicts this objective frontally. And furthermore, the reading of such a blatant text like our *haftara* leaves us with a bitter taste that clashes with the experience of Shabbat in which the *haftara* is supposed to become integrated as part of the special *mitzvot* of the day.

The truth is that this question of whether or not to use such a blatant *haftara* was discussed by *Chazal* in the context of a different harsh *haftara.* The Mishna in the third chapter of *Megila* (25a) records a Tannaitic disagreement concerning a prophecy of Yechezkel: "Rabbi Eliezer says: The portion, 'Make known to Jerusalem' (*Yechezkel* 16), is not read as the *haftara*." On the face of it, he is correct, for chapter 16 in *Yechezkel* is a severe prophecy of rebuke, containing harsh expressions that the prophet casts against Israel. In the circumstances of his time and place, Yechezkel found it necessary to use these expressions, but of all the chapters in the Bible, must this very chapter be read to the congregation in the synagogue on Shabbat? Indeed, a Baraita (*Megila* 25b) relates Rabbi Eliezer's emotional reaction to one who reads this *haftara*: "It once happened that a certain man read in the presence of Rabbi Eliezer:'"Make known to Jerusalem her abominations.' He said to him: While you are investigating the abominations of Jerusalem, go and investigate the abominations of your own mother." The audacity of an ordinary person openly waving the sins of Jerusalem and publicizing her treacheries in the framework of a *haftara* of rebuke, infuriated Rabbi Eliezer who was concerned about the honor of Israel and Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, the conclusion arising from this Gemara regarding the matter at hand is not so clear. On the one hand, Rabbi Eliezer's position is easily understood and speaks to our hearts, but yet the Sages disagreed with him and permitted the reading of such a hard *haftara*. It would seem that the Sages support the reading of harsh and painful *haftarot*, despite the unpleasantry involved, because of their spiritual significance and meaning for the listeners. However, they do not explicitly express this position, and there is room to argue – as we did in the *shiur* dealing with the *haftara* of *Acharei-Mot-Kedoshim* - that in the Sages' opinion this *haftara* contains consolation which makes its reading possible. Needless to say, such a solution would not help for our *haftara*, as it ends with the words: "And death shall be chosen rather than life" (*Yirmeyahu* 8:3), and all would agree that it contains not a pinch of consolation.

Second, even though the Halakha was established in accordance with the opinion of the Sages, Jewish practice had difficulty digesting this ruling, and an alternative *haftara* from the book of *Amos* arose to compete against it, and it continues to establish its place, while pushing aside the *haftara* from *Yechezkel*. Indeed, in many communities, the customary practice in our time follows the view of Rabbi Eliezer not to read as the *haftara* the passage dealing with the abominations of Jerusalem.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In light of this, all that we can say is that the reading of our *haftara* is indeed problematic and exceptional in its severity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, the authorities of earlier generations were uncomfortable with this *haftara* – as one early Ashkenazi authority put it,[[3]](#footnote-3) "it is impossible to read as the *haftara* on the day of the slaughter of the Paschal offering: 'Cut off your hair, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the high hills' (*Yirmeyahu* 7:29) on the *Shabbat* that falls on the eve of Pesach, and thus cast down the hearts of Israel on the festival pilgrimage" – and over the course of time it was pushed aside. In practice, it is the Jewish calendar that to a great extent has neutralized the *haftara*, for in non-leap years, *Parashat Tzav* is always *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, and even in leap years it is liable to be one of the four special *parashiyot* connected to the month of Adar.This fact solved the problem for the festive *Shabbatot* and blunted the hard feeling left by the selection of such a difficult *haftara* to be included in the annual *haftarot* cycle. Nevertheless, since on all *Shabbatot* we do not wish to "cast down the hearts of Israel," and not only on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* and during the month of Adar, the problematic nature of the *haftara* remains in place during those years when it is in fact read.

Let us now begin to discuss the *haftara* itself. In truth, the *haftara* divides into two distinct parts. The first part deals with people who offer sacrifices to God, who come to the Temple to offer their sacrifices and meal-offerings to God, but do not otherwise conduct their lives in an appropriate manner. They recognize the Temple and approach the altar, but they do not do the will of God to be a holy nation in their personal behavior. God's problem with them is twofold: First of all, their ways are clearly negative and immoral, which is a problem in itself. While it is true that the prophet does not spell out what is evil and defective in their actions, he leaves no room for doubt regarding Providence's view of their behavior.

Second, in addition to the very evil in itself, there is a second problem, namely, the hypocrisy. The offering of sacrifices by people who hold fast to corrupt ways, apart from the danger posed to them by the illusion that they will not be punished, constitutes hypocrisy toward God and an impairment of the meaning of the sacrifices. As the prophets emphasized, the sacrifices are meant to serve as a material expression of man's connection to and relationship with God; in the absence of the sacrifice or honor that find expression in the material object they have no meaning at all. This may be likened to a person who sends a greeting card to a friend or flowers to his wife, but his heart remains cold and closed to them; he has done nothing. So too one who brings a sacrifice, but has no interest in the word of God; his actions are meaningless, for a sacrifice without the accompanying feeling is merely meat for which God has no need at all. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that this is not merely hypocrisy; the entire sacrifice is emptied of content, and so the people fail to fulfill even the *mitzva* of offering sacrifices.

Therefore the prophet emphasizes Israel's refusal to obey the voice of God:

But this thing I commanded them, saying, Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people; and walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you. But they did not hearken, nor incline their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward. From the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt to this day I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, sending them from morning till night. Yet they did not hearken to Me, nor incline their ear, but stiffened their neck; they did worse than their fathers. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:23-26)

As is evident, the motif that keeps repeating itself in these verses is the people of Israel's failure to consider the word of God and their viewing the Divine message as something that is not relevant to their lives. The expression, "in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart," conjures up associations with the section of "a root that bears gall and wormwood" at the end of the book of *Devarim* (chap. 29) and with him that blesses himself in his heart and says: "I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst" (*Devarim* 29:8), who does not consider whatsoever the will of God. Here too, the root of the problem lies in the same issue of recognizing the word of God as a meaningful factor. Therefore, apart from the problem of the sin and the disregard of the Divine command in themselves, such behavior contradicts the idea of a sacrifice as a gift presented to God and "an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor to the Lord," that is meant to express man's relationship with God and to find favor before Him.

In light of this, we can understand a point that troubled many of the commentators. The *haftara* opens with an astonishing assertion that, on the face of it, contradicts what is stated in the Torah: "For I did not speak to your fathers, nor command them in the day that I brought you out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:22). Many have wondered about this statement that Israel was not commanded about sacrifices, which seems to run counter to all that is stated in the book of *Vayikra* and in other places in the Torah. The Abravanel posed the question in his typically elegant fashion:

How can this statement be justified? Surely at Mount Sinai they were given many commandments concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices, essentially the entire book of *Vayikra*! How then could he have said that He did not command anything about them? (Abravanel, introduction to *Yirmeyahu*, chap. 7, second question)

The Abravanel does not question the fact that Yirmeyahu rebukes the people for offering sacrifices as sinners; on the contrary, the idea that "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination" (*Mishlei* 15:8) is accepted by all. His amazement concerns the declaration that there was never any command regarding the sacrifices, when it should have been said that the commandment to bring sacrifices does not outweigh their wickedness, and not that they were not at all commanded to offer sacrifices. However, it is precisely this point that Yirmeyahu emphasizes: Offering sacrifices without a proper relationship with God is not a defective observance of the commandment; it is not a commandment at all. In fact, there was never any commandment about burnt-offerings and sacrifices that are accompanied not by closeness to God, but by stubbornness of the heart; it is an action void of all content concerning which they were never commanded.

This principle, that sacrifices that do not achieve their objective are not sacrifices, was formulated by the Rambam in the framework of a discussion concerning our verse:

And Yirmeyahu says: "For I did not speak to your fathers, nor command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices: but this thing I commanded them, saying, Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:22-23). This dictum has been regarded as difficult by everyone whose words I have seen or heard. They say: How can Yirmeyahu say of God that He has given us no injunctions concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices, seeing that the greater part of the commandments are concerned with these things? However, the purpose of the dictum is as I have explained to you. For he says that the first intention consists only in your apprehending Me and not worshipping someone other than Me: "And I will be your God, and you shall be My people." Those laws concerning sacrifices and repairing to the Temple were given only for the sake of the realization of this fundamental principle. It is for the sake of that principle that I transferred these modes of worship to My name, so that the trace of idolatry be effaced and the fundamental principle of My unity be established. You, however, came and abolished this end, while holding fast to what has been done for its sake. For you have doubted of My existence: "They have belied the Lord, and said: It is not He" (*Yirmeyahu* 5:12). And you have committed idolatry: "And burn incense to the Ba'al, and walk after gods… and come… into this house…" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:9-10). And still you continue to repair to the Temple of the Lord, offerings sacrifices, which are things that have not been intended in the first intention. (Rambam, *The Guide of the Perplexed* III, 32).

Thus far, we have dealt with the first half of the *haftara*, which relates to the reality in which the people of Israel offer sacrifices to God but empty them of their meaning. This section extends from the beginning of the *haftara* (*Yirmeyahu* 7:21), which is marked in the Hebrew Bible as the beginning of a closed unit, until the end of that unit (7:28). The second section, which is separated from the first by an empty space, opens with the declaration: "Cut off your hair" (7:29), and deals with a different reality, one in which the people of Israel do not even bring their offerings to the Temple, but rather they openly worship idols and defile the Temple.

What is more, we are not dealing in this prophecy with ordinary idolatry, but rather with a prophet who rebukes Israel for worshipping the Molekh. The Molekh is presented in the Torah as defiling the Temple ("Because he had given of his seed to the Molekh, to defile My sanctuary, and to profane My holy name" [*Vayikra* 20:3]). This is because worship of the Molekh is not only one of the most severe transgressions in itself, but rather it impairs all that is done in the Temple. The Ramban, in his commentary to the Torah, explains this as follows:

Mention is made of the profanation of God's name, because when the nations hear that he honored the Molekh with his seed and offered of his cattle as a sacrifice to God, this is a profanation of God's name. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:21)

However, it is important to emphasize that the honor reaching idolatry from the fact that a person gives of his seed to the Molekh is not because of the act in itself and from the fact that a sacrifice which was meant for God was offered instead to the idol, for the sacrifice under discussion was never meant for God. This is the point emphasized by the *haftara*, that a person's sacrifice falls into the category of "which I did not command them, nor did it come into My heart" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:31), and the Temple has no desire or interest in child sacrifice. However, subjectively speaking, passing one's child to the Molekh attests to the fact that the person offering the sacrifice attaches great importance to service of the Molekh, and he is prepared to offer it a sacrifice that is greater than the sacrifice he is prepared to offer to God. Needless to say, sacrificing a child is an action that requires extreme self-sacrifice on the part of a person, and therefore it attests to absolute devotion to the idol. In this contrast between the attitude toward idol worship and the person's connection to God lies the connection to the beginning of the *haftara.* When we combine the two parts of the *haftara*, we can understand it in its entirety, and properly appreciate the spiritual state of the Jewish people. In the wake of this, it seems that the picture that reveals itself before our eyes is: "For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters, and have hewn them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:13). For with respect to the sacrifices that are offered to God, everything is mere lip service, whereas the sacrifices being offered to the idols reflect obligation and dedication.

It further seems that the Molekh impairs the sacrifices not only because it attests to commitment to idol worship, but because the very offering of human sacrifices impacts negatively on the idea of a sacrifice. As is emphasized by the beginning of the *haftara*, the idea that stands behind the world of sacrifices is giving expression to the relationship between man and God as an I-Thou relationship. The person is a subject who participates in a mutual relationship and brings a gift to God who is dear and close to him, whereas the animal is an object by way of which the person-subject expresses his feelings toward God. This tradition maintains a clear distinction between these different roles; preserving the essential difference between the person who offers the sacrifice and the animal that is being sacrificed is critical to defining the person bringing the sacrifice as a subject. Offering a person as a sacrifice to God as the object that is being sacrificed, as did those who worshipped the Molekh, turns him from a person into a natural-animal object, and cancels man's unique status in contrast to animals.

The aversion to human sacrifice is not only because of the bloodshed and the insult to the Divine image resting in man. It is also because of the inherent nature of sacrifices, because human sacrifice stands in contradiction to man's place in his relationship with God. Therefore Yirmeyahu juxtaposes his treatment of sacrifices without commitment to his rebuke concerning human sacrifices to idols, because they too overturn and impair the idea of a sacrifice (even though they are directed to idolatry).

In light of this we can understand the terrible punishment with which Yirmeyahu threatens the people at the end of the *haftara* as an instance of measure for measure:

And the carcasses of this people shall be food for the birds of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and none shall frighten them away. Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Yehuda, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; for the land shall be desolate. At that time, says the Lord, they shall bring out the bones of the kings of Yehuda, and the bones of his princes, and the bones of the priests, and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, out of their graves; and they shall spread them before the sun, and the moon, and all the host of heaven, whom they have loved, and whom they have served, and after whom they have walked, and whom they have served, and whom they have worshipped; they shall not be gathered, nor be buried, they shall be for dung upon the face of the earth. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:33-8:2)

Man's superiority over animals lies in burial. Burial signifies that man is not an object but rather a spiritual entity, and that his spirit, "the Divine part from above" within him, dwells inside his body in such a way that it bestows moral value even upon his body. Just as the sanctity of a Torah scroll, *tefilin*, and *mezuzot* necessitate that they be buried once they have become worn out, because the parchment itself absorbs the sanctity of what is written on it, so too the body draws sanctity from the soul that dwells within it that requires that it be buried. This sanctity is different than the sanctity of an offering, because the animal becomes sanctified as an article that is dedicated to God and as a silent object, whereas a person is a subject whose personal sanctity stems from his standing before God and from his being a person who stands before his Creator in autonomous fashion. One of the expressions of the difference between man and an animal is burial, since burial attests to the fact that the body is not considered a mere object. Objects are discarded after they are no longer fit for use, and they do not preserve their value once they have lost their utility, because it is only the matter that is important, and when the matter is canceled it loses all meaning. Subjects, on the other hand, preserve their value even after the matter has lost its power, since they draw their meaning from the relationship to the spirit and from their being symbols that reflect the spiritual entity. Therefore, even after they have lost their use as matter, their symbolic and moral power remains filled with sanctity.

Yirmeyahu's harsh words that prophesy about bones that will roll in the streets and in the fields, attest to their turning from precious spiritual entities that are buried with honor and respect into wretched objects exposed to the sun, rain and other natural hazards that destroy everything in their path, and recycle them in the nature cycle of decay and destruction. These bones do not serve as a focus center of remembrance and communion with the kings and the prophets, but rather they turn into building blocks in the natural cycle of dismantling and reassembly. In this way, they move from the human level to the level of grass, and they turn from human bones to an animal carcass. Bones rolling in the fields and carcasses eaten by the birds of the sky are phenomena found in the animal kingdom but not in the world of man.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is the measure for measure included in the words of Yirmeyahu. The punishment expresses not only Israel's worship of the host of heaven and the inability of those heavenly factors to save them, but it relates to the worship of the Molekh and its significance: Israel transformed its children from humans to things and from subjects to objects by offering them as sacrifices in a manner fit for animals. Therefore they will be punished in similar fashion with the fate of their corpses being like that of the carcasses of animals, and thus they will turn themselves from subjects into objects.

Thus we have come to the common denominator between the two parts of the *haftara*. In both cases, those who sacrifice animals to God but are not existential partners in the meaning of the sacrifice as a relationship with God, and those who offer human sacrifices to the Molekh, there is an impairment of the value of the sacrifice as an expression of the relationship between man and God, and it is about this that the prophet complains. In light of this we can understand that a main component of this prophecy is not only the evil actions of Israel in themselves, but also the impairment of the sacrifices and the meaning of a sacrifice. For this reason it is read as the *haftara* of *Parashat Tzav.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This is the prevalent practice in Israel today. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At the same time, it should be emphasized that on one important point there is a difference between Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel. Yirmeyahu is a Jerusalemite who lives the events and experiences them on his own flesh. He is familiar with the suffering, the siege, and the distress from up close, and his activity is characterized by personal involvement in what is happening in Jerusalem in the generation of its destruction and in the attempts to influence the situation from within. Yechezkel, on the other hand, lives in a foreign land, far from Jerusalem, and his prophecies are those of an outside observer. From this perspective it is easier to accept Yirmeyahu's criticisms, for the accusing finger is connected to the hand that is trying to help and make things easier for the people. In fact, several verses before the beginning of the *haftara*, God "pleads" with Yirmeyahu not to pray on behalf of the people and not to supplicate for them. However, it is still not clear that this difference between the prophecies of Yirmeyahu and of Yechezkel should impact upon whether they are read in the synagogue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A responsum of Rabbi Menachem brought in *Sefer ha-Pardes* (ed. Ehrenreich p. 353) and in the *Or Zaru'a* (pt. II, no. 393) regarding the *haftara* for *Shabbat ha-Gadol*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shakespeare emphasizes this point of seeing man after his death as an object in the cemetery scene at the end of *Hamlet*, but he does not present this as a punishment, but rather as a comment in the style of *Kohelet* about the fate of man:

   "Hamlet: To what base uses we may return, Horatio. Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole?

   Horatio: 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.

   Hamlet: No, faith, not a jot. But to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it, as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam—and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer barrel?

   Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,

   Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

   Oh, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,

   Should patch a wall t' expel the winter’s flaw!" (V, 1) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)