

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

**This shiur is dedicated in memory of
Dr. William Major z"l.**

NITZAVIM-VAYELEKH

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The *haftara* for *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelekh* (*Yeshayahu* 61:10-63:9) is the last in the series of seven *haftarot* of consolation that we have been reading since *Tisha be-Av*. *Sos Asis* is not only the climax of the consolation in this series of *haftarot*, but of the entire book of *Yeshayahu*.^{1[1]} Thus, we would expect to find in this *haftara* a most lofty

^{1[1]} The last three chapters in the book of *Yeshayahu* that come after our *haftara* reflect an entirely different reality, very distant from the promises of redemption and consolation that we have read about in recent weeks. We have discussed this issue at length in our *shiur* regarding the *haftara* read on *Rosh Chodesh* that falls out on *Shabbat*.

consolation and a prophecy that heralds a most exalted redemption. This obligates us to examine the qualities of the redemption appearing in this *haftara*. Does it take us another step up the ladder and bring us to the highest level of redemption, and if so, how does this find expression? We have already made several references in this series to the words of the *Tosafot* (*Megila* 31b, s.v. *Rosh Chodesh*): "It is the way of consolations to be increasingly consoling... and *Sos Asis* is always read with *Atem Nitzavim*, namely, the *Shabbat* before *Rosh ha-Shana*, because it is the ultimate of consolations."

The truth is that the *haftara* of *Sos Asis* is comprised of several units that are not of a uniform bent. In order to understand the *haftara's* unique character, we must focus on each unit separately.

THE FIRST UNIT – REDEMPTION AS MARRIAGE

To open the discussion, we must examine not only the description of the redemption in our chapter as opposed to the previous chapters, but also the metaphor for the relationship between God and His people that is used in these chapters and its significance with respect to redemption. The first and most important point from this perspective is the prophet's use of the image of God and the people of Israel as husband and wife, groom and bride. The prophet opens as follows:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me in the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (61:10)

And he returns to this image in the continuation:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall your land any more be termed Desolate: but you shall be called Cheftziba (My Delight is in Her) and your land Be'ula (Espoused): for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be espoused. For as a young man takes to himself a virgin, so shall your sons take you to themselves, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (62:4-5)

TWO MODELS: SERVITUDE AND MARRIAGE

Two fundamental metaphors serve Yeshayahu throughout the chapters of consolation.^{2[2]} First, that man is God's servant ("I have formed you; you are My own servant"; 44:21); and second, that the relationship between God and Israel is like the relationship between groom and bride/husband and wife ("And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you; 62:5). There are very fundamental differences between the first that expresses the quality of fear, and the second that presents us with the quality of love. According to the first, man is expected to obey God and remain faithful to Him because of his obligation to his Creator and Master. The motto of this approach is the "we shall do" in "we shall do and we shall hear" (*na'ase ve-nishma*), and its clearest midrashic expression is the image of "God arched the mountain over them like a tank." This approach is accompanied by the fear of His exalted nature and the emphasis that is placed on the infinite transcendental distance between the Creator and the created, between God and man. Here there is no closeness or intimacy, but rather loftiness and exaltedness.

The second model, in contrast, emphasizes the closeness and intimacy between God and Israel. The lover and his beloved pursue each other, seek out an encounter, and spend the night together. Observance of the *mitzvot* does not follow from compulsion, but rather from the reasons for the commandments that are beneficial to man, and as a sign of the special connection between God and Israel. Just as husband and wife wish to fill their spouse's desires as an expression of their love and caring, so too God gives us commandments for our own benefit, and we strive to observe them in order to demonstrate that it is important to us to do His will. The main motif in the quality of love is not "we shall do," but rather "we shall hear."

^{2[2]} The truth is that in Scripture there are not two but three models, for in addition to the models discussed in the text of this *shiur*, we must add the metaphor of the father-son relationship. This serves as an important tool in the Torah to express the relationship between God and Israel, beginning in the book of *Shemot*, "My firstborn son, Israel," and through the book of *Devarim* which states, "You are sons to the Lord, your God." Yeshayahu makes a certain use of this metaphor in the chapters under discussion (in the *haftara* for *Parashat Ekev*), but it does not serve as a metaphor for the relationship itself, and it does not play an important role in these *haftarot*. We have, therefore, ignored this model in our discussion, despite its importance.

These two models are not unique to Yeshayahu's prophecies, and they can be found throughout Scripture and the Halakha. This, however, is not the place to expand on the matter by bringing biblical examples and practical halakhic differences. They are too numerous, and this framework cannot possibly contain them.

Yeshayahu does not bring these two images merely as metaphysical statements, but rather they clarify and explain the promises of redemption with which he consoles the people. They will be redeemed because God sees them as His servants and desires their ministering before Him as servants, or alternatively, because Israel is God's spouse. Hence, the redemption is presented in this manner, as it finds expression in the verses cited above.

THE TENSION BETWEEN FEAR AND LOVE

Despite the schematic simplicity with which we presented the aforementioned ideas, they are really not simple at all, neither metaphysically and theologically, nor practically. Man's difficulty to draw near to God and reach the intimacy of a spousal relationship is connected to the dialectic tension between the two models. This is not only on the theological plain – is it possible to justify the model which brings the Infinite "who cannot be apprehended by the mind" close to the short-lived and trouble-filled offspring of a woman – but also on the existential plain. Does not man flinch from drawing too near to Him who is so much greater and mightier than him, owing to the fear that his own identity will come to be swallowed up and disappear?

However, if a person reaches this state, his spiritual achievement is tremendous and he ascends to the level of communion with God, the soul's most exalted religious aspiration. It should be noted that one can speak of this model with respect to the individual and his relationship to God, as the Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3) explains *Shir Ha-shirim* as a metaphor for the relationship between the soul and the Creator. On the other hand, one can apply this model to the relationship between the people of Israel as a nation and their Father in heaven, as Rashi explains that same book.

Our *haftara* is one of the clearest expressions in Scripture of the bride-groom relationship that exists between God and Israel, and this is the consolation of redemption.

Redemption is described here as a renewal and refreshing of Israel's relationship with God, and not as a rescue from the troubles and difficulties of exile. Israel is not described as a sad and forsaken woman whom God must redeem, but as a vital and energetic bride who rejoices in her bridegroom. God does not redeem her out of mercy and compassion, but out of desire – "but you shall be called Cheftziba (My Delight is in Her)... for the Lord delights in you." In other words, the main thing is not the redemption and the rescue from exile, but rather the reestablishment of the relationship between God and His people. Redemption is a side effect of this reconnection, and not the essence of the prophecy. The bride arrives at the bridal canopy together with her groom without a past of sin and exile, and owing to her young age, her entire being symbolizes freshness and renewal. If we compare this week's *haftara* to the last *haftara* in the series of *haftarot* of consolation that made use of the metaphor of a spousal relationship – *Roni Akara*, the *haftara* for *Parashat Ki-Tetze* – we can easily distinguish between the two *haftarot*. There, the people of Israel bear a difficult and scarred past. Aside from the opening verse which describes Israel as desolate, even in the metaphor of a spousal relationship, Israel is likened to a widow with a difficult history of shame and disgrace, to whom God turns as a sad and forsaken woman:

Fear not; for you shall not be ashamed: neither be confounded; for you shall not be put to shame: but you shall forget the shame of your youth, and shall not remember the reproach of your widowhood any more. For your Maker is your husband: the Lord of hosts is His name; and your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth is He called. For the Lord has called you as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit; but a wife of youth, can she be put off? says your God. For a small moment have I forsaken you; but with great mercies will I gather you. In the overflowing of wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting faithful love will I have mercy on you, says your redeemer, the Lord. (54:4-8)

The redemption comes out of mercy and pity, and the renewed relations come to rehabilitate the people of Israel. In contrast, our *haftara* speaks of "a young man taking to himself a virgin" (62:5), which alludes to the freshness of young lovers, rather than a rehabilitation project. God does not pity the people of Israel, but rather He is proud of them, like a husband who is proud of his wife – "You shall also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God" (62:3). He desires them and rejoices in them: "But you shall be called Cheftziba... and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (62:4-5).

If we compare the attitudes of the two *haftarot* to the desolation of exile, we will find the same contrast. Our *haftara* states: "You shall no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall your land any more be termed Desolate: but you shall be called Cheftziba (My Delight is in Her) and your land Be'ula (Espoused): for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be espoused" (62:4), that is to say, the past is gone and forgotten, and from now on there is only God's desire to delight in Israel. In contrast, *Roni Akara* says: "For more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, says the Lord" (54:1). This means that the people of Israel will retain their identity as a desolate woman, only that they are promised that even a desolate woman can enjoy success and achievement.

In light of what has been said, we can certainly understand why *Sos Asis* is described as the highest and ultimate consolation.

In the hope that we will not tire the reader, let us add another point in this context. Consolation comes in the wake of mourning. We began the series of *haftarot* of consolation in the wake of *Tisha be-Av* and its mourning, which is described in the opening verse of *Eikha* as widowhood: "the city that was full of people, how is she become like a widow." Thus far, the *haftarot* assumed the reality of widowhood and tried to console Israel with hopes and promises of overcoming the difficulties of widowhood. The great breakthrough of *Sos Asis* is not a bigger promise but the denial of the reality of widowhood, and the redefinition of the situation as one of a young virgin bride beginning her life with her husband with no painful past whatsoever.

Let us add another point. As was stated, Yeshayahu focuses on the two models of the relationship between God and Israel: servitude and subjugation to the Master of the universe, and connection to God as lover and beloved. And as was stated, *Sos Asis* is the highest consolation with respect to the second model. What is the highest consolation with respect to the first model? It may be argued that only *Sos Asis* is regarded as the ultimate consolation, this on the assumption that the quality of love is greater and more elevated than the quality of fear (as is emphasized by the Ramban in his commentary to the Torah^{3[3]}). Accordingly, the very transition from prophecies that focus on the principle of "I have formed you; you are My own servant" to "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" is itself a step forward in the consolation which improves by the fact that closeness to God is created. It appears, however, that Yeshayahu did not stop here, but rather he created two final *haftarot* for

^{3[3]} *Shemot* 27.

the series of seven *haftarot* of consolation. Indeed, aside from *Sos Asis*, it seems that last week's *haftara* of *Kumi Ori* serves as the highest consolation with respect to the master-slave model. As may be remembered, we emphasized last week that *Kumi Ori* deals with the future messianic period as a reality altogether different from the providence by way of nature that is familiar to us. On the one hand, this is an exalted and impressive consolation, but on the other hand, it is directed at the reality of God's lordship and exaltation. It speaks of the glory of God, His providence over the world as king, and Israel's status of being watched over, as opposed to the other nations. All this expresses the second process of redemption, which sees in Israel servants of God, rather than a lover and a beloved.

Two models of relationships accompany the chapters of consolation the whole way, and each one reaches its own climax of consolation. They are found in adjacent chapters in Scripture and we read them on adjacent *Shabbatot*, the last two of the seven *Shabbatot* of consolation.

THE SECOND UNIT – REVENGE UPON THE NATIONS

As stated at the beginning of this *shiur*, the *haftara* divides into three sections, having entirely different motifs. Thus far, we have dealt with the first unit, but because of the limitations of the framework of these *shiurim*, we will not expand upon the other units. We will only point out the main ideas found in each. The second unit focuses on the revenge that will be taken from the nations, and reaches its highpoint in the strong image of God treading over the officer of Esav and the other nations as one treads grapes. It seems that up to this point, Yeshayahu never spoke about revenge as an independent value. Some prophecies speak about the need to overcome the nations in order to redeem Israel and rescue them from their troubles. They also speak about the reversal in the fate of Israel and the nations that subjugate them, as an expression of the reversal that will take place. But we haven't yet come across revenge as an independent value of exacting payment from the nation as an expression of Divine justice. In our *haftara*, however, aside from the need to subjugate the nations in order that Israel not be harmed, there is also the idea of "For the day of vengeance is in My heart" (63:4).

THE THIRD UNIT – THE PEOPLE'S REACTION

In their scriptural setting, the last three verses of the *haftara* do not belong to this prophecy, but rather they constitute the beginning of the next prophecy, which does not belong to the series of consolations which we have dealt with thus far. However, as in the case of other *haftarot* and prayers, *Chazal* thought it legitimate to relate to every verse on its own, and thus these verses are appended to our *haftara* where they serve a different role than in their original context. In the *haftara*, these verses fulfill the role of the people's reaction to the redemption. As we come to the end of the *haftarot* of consolation, *Chazal* saw fit to conclude with three verses in which the people of Israel mention God's lovingkindness and praises for all the redemptions and consolations that He has performed. Thus these three verses were detached from the continuation of the chapter and interpreted in connection with the previous chapter to express the principle of man's gratitude to God.

(Translated by David Strauss)
