

**Themes and Ideas in the Haftara  
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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

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**LEKH LEKHA  
FEAR NOT FOR I AM WITH YOU**

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

THE CONSOLATION OF THE PROPHETS

The first three *haftarot* in the annual cycle of *haftarot* deal with redemption and with the promise of the future redemption of Israel. The intensive focus placed upon the topic of redemption over the course of these weeks may be understood in light of the contents of these *parashiyot*. *Parashat Bereishit*, though it opens with the story of creation and building, presents us with a pessimistic picture of a broken world dominated by sin and evil passions. Immediately following the account of the creation, the Torah continues with a description of the decline of man and the world, starting with the sin of the tree of knowledge and ending with the story of how the *benei elohim* pursued the daughters of man. God's conclusion from all this is depicted in *Parashat Bereishit* as regret about having created the world and disappointment in those He had created. It is clear, therefore, that the *haftara* comes to inject those who had just heard

the reading of the *parasha* with an optimistic spirit, and present them with redemption as a concrete hope.

*Parashat Noach* also leaves the congregation in a gloomy disposition. The *parasha* tells of destruction, reconstruction, and then renewed destruction, this being the great breaking point. The story leads us from a new world blessed with a unique covenant to division and dispersion, mankind being scattered across the entire world in the wake of sin. Put differently, *Parashat Bereishit* concludes with general destruction, and *Parashat Noach* ends with the model of sin and exile. In both cases, it falls upon the prophet to console the nation and present creation and the waters of Noach as a source of hope and consolation.

*Parashat Lekh Lekha*, in contrast, is not pessimistic, but rather optimistic. It is marked by the selection of the future people of Israel and the covenant made with the Patriarchs; the land of Israel is promised to the people of Israel. The power of the individual and the meaning of a relationship between man and God are presented in all their majesty and grandeur. This, however, does not remove the need for a prophecy of consolation, but rather it makes it all the more necessary from the opposite direction – the gap between the optimistic world of *Lekh Lekha* and the grave circumstances of the people in exile. Thus, the *haftara* is once again taken from the chapters of consolation in the book of *Yeshayahu* (the third week in succession) as a message of hope. It will be some time before we read another *haftara* from the book of *Yeshayahu*.<sup>[1]</sup>

## THE GREATNESS OF THE CREATOR AND THE INSIGNIFICANCE OF MAN

As in the previous *haftarot*, *Yeshayahu* discusses the redemption and the possibility of its realization in light of man's position in the world. The starting point of our *haftara* (40:27) is the conclusion of the previous prophecy (which serves as the *haftara* on *Shabbat Nachamu*). Throughout the *haftara* of *Nachamu*, the prophet emphasizes the greatness and exaltedness of the Creator in contrast to the insignificance of man. This idea is emphasized on many plains:

First of all, **on the plain of time**: Man is tyrannically ruled by time and the process of destruction, whereas God is above all that ("Beauty and eternity appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

All flesh is grass, and all its grace is as the flower of the field: the grass withers, the flower fades: when the breath of the Lord blows upon it: surely the people is like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades: but the world of our God shall stand for ever. (40:6-8)

Second, from the perspective of **Divine wisdom** in contrast to human knowledge ("Knowledge and speech appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or being his counselor has taught Him? With whom took He counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of judgment, and taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding? (40:12-14)

Third, from the perspective of **power and dominion** ("Rule and dominion appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

That brings princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth as vanity. Scarcely are they planted; scarcely are they sown; scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth: He merely blows upon them and they wither; and the storm wind takes them away as stubble. (40:23-24)

And fourth, even from the perspective of the immensity of the Creator in contrast to the smallness of man ("Exaltedness and greatness appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

Behold, the nations are as the drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, He takes up the isles like fine dust. And Lebanon is not sufficient for fuel; nor are its beasts sufficient for a burnt-offering... It is He that sits upon the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are as grasshoppers; that

stretches out the heavens as a curtain, and spreads them out as a tent to dwell in.  
(40:15-16, 22)

The conclusion that arises from all this is stated explicitly by the prophet ("Splendor and eminence appertain to You who lives for evermore"):

All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?... To whom then will you liken Me, that I should be his equal, says the Holy One. (40:17-18, 25)

Indeed, one of the fundamental principles of our religious outlook is the contrast between the work of God and human action. The feeling of lowliness is one of the foundations of man's standing before God, and a leitmotif in our sources in Scripture, in the Midrash, and in our prayers. One of the clearest expressions of this idea is found in the words of the Rambam in *Hilkhos Yesodei Ha-Torah* (2:2):

When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name; even as David said: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (*Tehilim* 42:3). And when he ponders these matters, he will recoil affrighted, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. And so David said: "When I consider Your heaven, the work of Your fingers... what is man that You are mindful of Him" (*Tehilim* 8:4-5).

The importance of this feeling of the insignificance of man as part of his existential experience cannot be exaggerated, for without it, a person does not recognize his place in the world or appreciate the absolute abyss between the finite and the infinite, and between the ephemeral and the eternal.

THE GREAT TIDINGS OF PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

This position, however, is also liable to bring a person to despair from redemption of the world and from the Creator's desire and readiness to bring about its redemption. For if all flesh is grass, and man is like a fading flower and a passing dream, then why should God concern Himself with man's destiny? If, as the prophet proclaimed, all nations are as naught, and all mighty and distinguished people are as nothing before Him, then it follows that God should have no interest in this lowly and despicable world, populated by wretched, short-lived and angry creatures.

The great tidings of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* relate to this very point. It is not only Avraham's righteousness and his recognition of God that finds expression. There is also another, more fundamental element – man's very right and ability to stand before his Creator. The relationship between Avraham[2] and God is conditioned not only upon Avraham's righteousness, but upon God's readiness to connect with man. Were it not for the Divine desire that wants man and draws him near, Avraham's recognition of God would not have ripened into a relationship with Him, but rather it would have remained at the level of recognition and admiration of the power of the omnipotent God.

God is high and exalted, above all else, but this does not cause Him to disregard man or to refuse to descend into his world. "Rabbi Yochanan said: Wherever you find a description of the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, you also find a description of his condescension [towards the lowly]" (*Megila* 31a). The Aristotelian concept of a god who is removed from our world and severed from it, because of the deficiency and lowliness of that world, reflects a position that follows from the principle of the exaltedness of God, but is far from the world of Judaism in which the relationship and connection between God and the world – which find expression in providence, prophecy and prayer – is a fundamental principle. The well-known contrast that R. Yehuda Ha-Levi makes between the God of Avraham and that of Aristotle reflects this point and serves as the foundation of *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. [3]

## THE TIDINGS OF THE PROPHET

Our *haftara*, which immediately follows the prophecy that emphasizes the exaltedness of the Creator, comes to deal with man's feeling of distance from the sublime and transcendental God who may be conceived as being far from our world. In the wake of Israel's exile, the problem becomes even more pronounced than in our

*parasha*, for on the face of it the exile serves as proof of that distance, and thus the people feel that they have been abandoned by their Creator.

The prophet starts out by relating to the people's feeling that God ignores them: "Why say you, O Yaakov, and speak, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord" (40:27). The people's feeling is based on a combination of the exile and the message of the previous prophecy regarding God's exaltedness, and the prophet must relate to it.

The prophet responds by focusing on God's greatness and strength as he had done earlier, but here he turns the tables upside down, emphasizing that this is not reason for despair, but on the contrary, it is reason for hope. If, indeed, God is so strong and mighty, then it must be within His power to redeem Israel whenever He so desires and to provide them with the strength necessary for their survival. God's very desire and readiness to create the world attest to His involvement in the human world and His providence over man's needs:

Have you not heard, that **the God of the world**, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, faints not, nor is He weary? There is no searching of His understanding. (40:28)

The critical expression in this verse is "the God of the world" – a God who is involved in the world and governs it. This, of course, is Avraham Avinu's fundamental insight that the palace has a governor, and that the seed of redemption lies in this governance. Since God watches over the world and desires it, His strength and might are not reasons for pushing off the redemption but for drawing it near, for all of His mighty strength will be directed toward Israel's benefit. God rules over the ends of the earth, and does not tire or become weary; He will provide strength to Israel as well:

He gives power to the faint; and to the powerless He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint. (40:29-31)

The prophet's argument is simple: since man in and of himself is a lowly and wretched creature, he has no strength or energy but that which he receives from God. Therefore, even young men and youths, who are considered strong and energetic by nature, will derive no benefit from their natural prowess, for they will tire and fall. And it is the weary and powerless who put their trust in God who will succeed because of His providence and involvement. God's power does not lead to His disappearance from the world; on the contrary, it is a source of strength, and therefore the people can hope for good.

From here the prophet begins to focus explicitly on God's providence in the world. God judges the nations and administers recompense in accordance with their actions. That is to say, the world is governed on the basis of the principles of justice and judgment. This point is stressed in the next verse: "Who raised up one from the east whom righteousness met wherever he set his foot" (41:2). Here it is expressly emphasized that righteousness is the guiding principle dictating Divine providence. Thus the prophet establishes the principles of providence as laws of nature that operate within the framework of history. Just as the sun shines in the east as a fixed law of nature, so providence operates among the nations in accordance with the principle of righteousness that illuminates the world. The prophet does not suffice with the implication of the judgment of the nations; he explicitly proclaims the principle of providence: "Who has wrought and done it? He who calls the generations from the beginning" (41:4)

#### THE CONTINUED SELECTION OF ISRAEL

This is the first stage of the *haftara*, in which the prophet establishes that God governs the world and supervises over it, and therefore He is capable of redeeming Israel. After having established his first conclusion, the prophet moves on to the next stage, and raises the argument that God is not only capable, but He also **desires** to redeem Israel. This desire stems from the selection of Israel and their unique relationship to God. Thus, the *haftara* relates to another basic principle found in *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, namely, the selection of Avraham and his descendants. The selection of Israel is also emphasized in the *haftara*:

But you, Israel, are My servant, Yaakov whom I have chosen, the seed of Avraham My friend. You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called you

from its farthest corners, and said to you, You are my servant; I have chosen you, and not cast you away. (41:8-9)

Indeed, in the world of exile with which the prophet is dealing, it is necessary not only to focus upon the very selection of Israel, but to emphasize that that choice has endured across the generations. It is not enough to argue that Israel had been chosen in the past, for Israel's actions may have led to the nullification of the covenant and selection, the fact of their exile being an expression and proof thereof. *Chazal* put this argument of "a servant who was sold by his master, what claim does he have against him," in the mouths of the generation of Yechezkel, and in order to sidestep it, Yeshayahu emphasizes the fact that "I have not cast you away." It does not suffice to mention the choosing of Israel without adding the fact that their selection is anchored in a covenant, and that God has remained committed to His people throughout the generations.

Another point should be added in this context. In our chapter, as in the adjacent chapters, the relationship between Creator and creatures is presented as a relationship of servitude and obligation, rather than a relationship of closeness and intimacy similar to the love that a husband has for his wife. A person accepts upon himself the yoke of heaven and is obligated to his Maker as is a servant to his master. The trait of fear, rather than the trait of love, rules these chapters, and the fundamental emphasis here is upon the master-servant relationship. However, it is precisely this perspective - that presents the relationship between God and man as based on authority and demanding the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven - that raises the problem of the eternity of the selection. Surely a master has no desire for a servant who does not fulfill his duties, and therefore there is room to think that the selection of Israel and the providence over it has been cancelled.

## COVENANT WITH THE PATRIARCHS

The solution to this, aside from the very fact that God is abundant in His mercy, lies in the idea of **covenant with the patriarchs**. For the covenant with the patriarchs, assumes a connection and obligation toward the patriarchs as the expression of the relationship between them and God, which is independent of the merits or demerits of their descendants. Therefore, the prophet mentions the covenant with the patriarchs in conjunction with the idea of "Israel, My servant": "But you, Israel, are My servant, Yaakov whom I have chosen, the seed of Avraham My friend." Avraham is

described as God's friend, this emphasizing his merits and the covenant made with him that will stand for Israel through all their years in exile.[4] The covenant that God had made with him is what guarantees the future of Israel, as promised to him in our *parasha* without conditioning it on his descendants following in his path.

It should, however, be noted that the covenant with Avraham in the Torah stresses his excellence in the area of fear. In three different places, the Torah attests to the reason for Avraham's selection, and in each of them **fear** plays a central role:[5]

1)"For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him." (*Bereishit* 18:19)

2)"For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me." (*Bereishit* 22:12)

3)"Because Avraham obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." (*Bereishit* 26:5)

Yeshayahu, who describes Avraham as **the friend of God**, adds another dimension to what is stated in the book of *Bereishit* as reason for Avraham's selection, and thus he completes the picture. Moreover, the emphasis placed on love significantly contributes to the establishment of the covenant for Avraham's wayward descendants, this being the prophet's primary objective.

## THE WORM OF YAAKOV

Not only man's absolute insignificance as compared to eternity, but also Israel's relative insignificance as compared to the other nations can lead to despair. The

prophet deals with this aspect of despair at the end of the *haftara*. Yeshayahu responds by combining the two arguments that had already been voiced over the course of the prophecy – that is, the greatness of the Creator who watches over the world, and the selection of Israel – from which we understand that God is both capable and desirous of redeeming Israel from the stronger nations to whom they have been subjected. This is the message of the concluding section of the prophecy:

Fear not, you worm Yaakov, O men of Israel; I will help you, says the Lord, and your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. (*Yeshayahu* 41:14)

God with His great power and His strong hand will redeem His nation because of the qualitative importance of Israel and because of the covenant made with the patriarchs, and not because of their quantitative size. The prophet clarifies this message with a beautiful image:

Behold, I will make you a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth; you shall thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shall make the hills as chaff. (*Yeshayahu* 41:15)

The small but qualitative metal threshing instrument can take apart an entire mountain because of its unique qualities, despite its tiny size as compared to the great mountain. So too Israel will be redeemed because they are like an instrument in the hand of the God of Israel who rules in history.

#### FOOTNOTES:

[1] Ashkenazim will once again meet with Yeshayahu at the end of the month of Tevet in *Parashat Shemot*. The Sefardic communities will have to wait another month until *Parashat Yitro*.

[2] Who is described in our *haftara* as "Avraham My friend."

[3] The gap between the Jewish position and the position that was prevalent in the mythological world of Greece is finely expressed in the *Yerushalmi*, end of *Berakhot* (9:1): "Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rav Yehuda bar Simon: An idol appears near, but is distant. What is the reason? He carries it on his shoulder, bears it, and in the end his god is with him in his house; he cries out until he dies, but it does not hear nor does it save him from his troubles. The Holy One, blessed be He, on the other hand, appears far, but there is none closer than He, for Levi said: From the earth to the firmament is a walk of five hundred years, and from one firmament to the next is a walk of five hundred years, and the width of the firmament is [a walk of] five hundred years, and

so too regarding each of the firmaments... See how elevated He is above His world, yet a person enters a synagogue, stands behind a pillar, and prays in a whisper, and the Holy One, blessed be He, hears his prayer, as it is stated: "Now Channa spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard" (I *Shemuel* 1:13), and the Holy One, blessed be He, listened to her prayer. And so too regarding all of His creatures, as it is stated: "A prayer of the afflicted, when he faints" (*Tehilim* 102:1) – like a person who speaks in his friend's ear and he hears. Is there a God closer than this, close to His creatures like a mouth to the ear?"

[4] See *Shabbat* 55a, and *Tosafot*, s.v. *u-Shemuel*.

[5] To remove all doubt, let me add that I am referring to the justifications for Avraham's selection, and not to all the stories told about Avraham in the book of *Bereishit*, in which the trait of love is of course reflected.

(Translated by David Strauss)