

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.**

PARASHAT VAYETZE

"HE IS FAITHFUL WITH HOLY ONES"

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

THE PERIOD OF THE PATRIARCHS THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PROPHET

The most interesting aspect of the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayetze*, taken from the end of the book of *Hoshea*, is the very fact that it relates to the period of the patriarchs. Very rarely do the prophets relate to the biblical stories told in the book of *Bereishit*. Even the few references to the patriarchs in the words of the prophets, e.g., Yeshayahu's mention of Avraham and Sara as models for imitation ("Look to Avraham your father, and to Sara that bore you" [*Yeshayahu* 51:2]), do not relate to specific events in the lives of the patriarchs, but rather to their personalities and righteousness as a whole. Hoshea's treatment of various episodes in Yaakov's life uniquely characterizes the prophecies at the end of the book of *Hoshea*. In the chapters that precede our *haftara*, the prophet refers to events that occurred in the biblical period, weaving them into his rebuke of

Israel. This policy begins with the mention made in chapters 9-10 of the period of Israel's wandering in the wilderness in general, and the sins of Ba'al Pe'or and the concubine in Giv'a in particular. And it continues with a significant treatment of stories from the book of *Bereishit* in chapters 12-13 which serve as the *haftarot* of *Parashat Vayetze* and *Parashat Vayishlach*.^[1]

FAITHFULNESS

The contents of our *haftara* can be summarized in a single word – faithfulness. Hoshea's rebuke of Israel revolves around their unfaithfulness to God. He reproaches them regarding the sin of idolatry, but the reproach focuses not on the error that idol worship involves, but on Israel's lack of fidelity and their display of ingratitude towards God. The image of an adulterous wife that is often used in Scripture in general and in the book of Hoshea in particular as a metaphor for idol worship can be applied to two different models of idolatry. There is the adulterous wife who fornicates with a single lover, to whom she remains faithful. In her case, the primary problem is the defilement and the betrayal of her husband, and not necessarily the haphazardness of her behavior and the disloyalty to the men with whom she engages in sexual relations. In contrast, there is the harlot, the focus of whose failure is the absence of a permanent relationship with anybody, because she offers herself to everybody. Not only is there defilement, but also wanton prostitution.

The same applies to idol worship. It is possible for a person to abandon the God of Israel and adopt a single and permanent false god, the problem with which is not the absence of religious commitment but error and falsehood. Yeshayahu's struggle with idolatry and the scorn that he heaps upon those who worship false gods, bowing down to wooden idols, is not directed at the randomness of such worship, but to the falsehood inherent in idolatry.

However, there is also a situation in which gods are constantly being substituted one for the other, with loyalty shown to none of them. It is easy to switch gods, and the impulse to turn to an idol in order to remove some threat that has arisen and to worship it in order to solve some immediate problem, encourages a person to turn each time to a different god. Worship does not express religious commitment, but rather a haphazard turning to one of many possible gods. From this perspective, the idol worshipper does not demonstrate loyalty even to his idol, and certainly not to the true God of Israel.

TWO-FOLD POLITICAL ALIGNMENTS

Hoshea's battle focuses on this point, namely, the people's failure to demonstrate loyalty to God. Let us open our discussion with two verses that finely illustrate this problem:

Efrayim compasses me about with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit: but Yehuda still rules with God, and is faithful with holy ones. Efrayim guards the wind, and follows after the east wind: he daily increases lies and desolation; and they make an alliance with Assyria, and oil is carried in Egypt. (*Hoshea* 12:1-2)

The rebuke relates primarily to deceit and lies; the people are unfaithful to God and deny the special relationship between them, because they have no loyalty whatsoever. The kingdom of Israel is contrasted with the kingdom of Yehuda. The point of comparison and contrast is not the fear of God as opposed to idolatry in and of itself, but rather the issue of loyalty. Yehuda is defined as walking with God and demonstrating loyalty, whereas Efrayim is false all day long. The verse defines Efrayim's conduct as "guarding the wind and following after the east wind" – that is to say, pursuit of that which has no substance and changes direction all the time. The wind lacks permanence, and the root of the problem of chasing after the wind is not the error in and of itself, but the fact that it is such a transient phenomenon. The prophet illustrates this by pointing to the two-fold political alignments, namely, the attempt to rely on both Assyria and Egypt. Several times already in the earlier chapters (see 9:3 and 11:5), Hoshea mentioned the two-fold alignments with Assyria and Egypt. We are dealing then with a point that is exceedingly important from his perspective. When the people think that a pact with Assyria will work in their favor, they join with them, and when the very next day it seems that Egypt will help them more, they abandon Assyria in favor of Egypt, and then the cycle repeats itself. The impossible attempt to maintain diplomatic alignments with two competing regional powers, without committing themselves to either one other than in a haphazard and cynical manner in order to reap short-term gains, symbolizes for the prophet the basic problem of the people – preferring short-term utilitarianism over long-term commitment. If they enter into a pact with Assyria, with all the long-term consequences of mutuality and partnership arising from the pact, and then overnight they turn to its rival Egypt, surely then we are dealing with non-committal conduct, which is characteristic of all their behavior.

LOYALTY TO THE BELOVED

It is at this point that our *haftara* begins. The prophet recalls Yaakov, whom he presents as the symbol of loyalty: "And Yaakov fled into the country of Aram, and Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he kept [sheep/faith]" (12:13). If we pause for a moment and consider Yaakov's actions, we will see how powerful the idea of faithfulness is for him. This quality finds expression from the very beginning, when he falls in love with Rachel and asks to marry her. First, he is forced to wait seven years, engaged in years of hard work for Lavan, all because of his great love for Rachel.[2] Let us ask ourselves: How many of us, after having reached a marriageable age, would be prepared to wait seven years for a particular woman? Even if we loved her, we would still say how great a shame it is that we cannot marry her, but God has many agents, there are many fine women in the world, and we would not be ready to wait seven years. We would say good-bye and look for an even better (or at least equivalent) match. Yaakov, however, remains faithful in his love and does not look for other alternatives.

Already the first part of the verse ("And Israel served for a wife") embraces the idea of personal fidelity that finds great expression in Yaakov; the continuation of the verse relates to the fact that Lavan deceived Yaakov and gave him Leah as a wife. Now, after he already has one wife, the suggestion that he wait another seven years, as an alien in a foreign land and forced to engage in hard work, delay his return to his own country and thus the beginning of his independent life, remain in exile for another seven years when back at home he has an aged and ailing father and an elderly mother and he has no idea if and when he will ever see them again – requires a great deal of personal loyalty to his beloved. Let us not forget, he has no guarantee that Lavan will not try once again to deceive him and deny the agreement that had been reached between them. If the first time he switched the intended bride, who says that Lavan's deception will not repeat itself? Thus, Yaakov's readiness to work an additional seven years, despite the uncertainty of ever acquiring Rachel as his wife, gives expression to exceptional faithfulness. This is the meaning of the end of the verse: "And for a wife he kept [sheep/faith]."

The next verse draws a parallel between Yaakov's faithfulness and God's faithfulness to His people: "And by a prophet the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he preserved" (12:14). The end of the verse ("and by a prophet was he preserved" [*u-be-navi shamar*]) parallels the end of the previous verse ("and for a wife he kept [sheep/faith]" [*u-be-isha shamar*]). The earlier part of each verse may also be seen as paralleling each other, that is, working for Rachel parallels the prophet's bringing Israel out of Egypt. In both cases a long-term relationship is created in which there is readiness

to deal with the difficulties arising from the commitment made to the mate (Rachel/the Jewish people).

AS THE MORNING CLOUD

This motif of Egypt serving as the source for the long-term faithfulness between Israel and God repeats itself several verses later:

Therefore they shall be as the morning cloud, and as the dew that passes early away, as the chaff that is driven with the wind out of the floor, and as the smoke out of the window. Yet I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt, and you know no god but Me: for there is no savior besides Me. I did know you in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. (13:4-5)

The emphasis in these verses is not on "I am the Lord your God who took you out from the land of Egypt" as a proof of God's existence or His special relationship with the people of Israel in and of itself, but on the duration of that relationship. From the time of the exodus from Egypt, God has watched over Israel. False gods come and go, but the God of Israel has remained faithful to His people, from the time of the wilderness, the land of great drought. The principle of the faithfulness between the Jewish people and God finding expression in the wilderness is emphasized by Yirmiyahu in the famous verses regarding the merits of Israel ("I remember in your favor, the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, when you did go after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown"; *Yirmiyahu* 2:2). Hoshea, on the other hand, relates to that faithfulness from the opposite direction.

The truth is that this principle is already emphasized by Hoshea at the beginning of the book (in the prophecy that serves as the *haftara* for *Parashat Bamidbar*) as an obligation and a promise, when he proclaims:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... And she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. (*Hoshea* 2:16-17)

Afterwards, he concludes that prophecy with the promise of "And I will betroth you to Me for ever" (*Hoshea* 2:21). The portrayal of the relationship between God and Israel in Egypt and the wilderness as a relationship of faithfulness and as standing in contrast to the relationship between idols and their worshippers is what underlies this prophecy. Here, towards the close of the book, Hoshea goes back to his original point of departure.

This idea of fidelity continues in the *haftara* and underlies the metaphor of the morning cloud that precedes the historical declaration. A cloud by its very nature is transient and impermanent, but a morning cloud is the clearest expression of these qualities. It appears every morning as an impressive presence but dissipates within an hour or two. Just as the dew appears, disappears and has no lasting presence, so a morning cloud; and just as the morning cloud disappears and does not last, so too the relationship between Israel and its false gods. This is not the first time that Hoshea employs this metaphor,[3] and already *Chazal* noted the significance of the morning cloud for Hoshea:

Rav Yehuda bar Yitzchak said: Morning clouds have no substance. As it is written: "O Efrayim, what shall I do to you? O Yehuda, what shall I do to you? For your love is like a morning cloud..." (*Hoshea* 6:4). (*Taanit* 6b)

It is important to emphasize that the prophet's rebuke goes two ways: The false gods are unfaithful to Efrayim, but Efrayim is also unfaithful in their service of those gods. In other words, the betrayal of an adulterous woman with a single lover is great, but worse than that is the infidelity of a woman who remains faithful to nobody and nothing.

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AS A CAUSE OF INFIDELITY

The prophecy continues in its development of the idea of unfaithfulness by relating now to its cause. In a key verse, Hoshea lays the blame for infidelity at the door of economic prosperity: "When they were fed, they became full; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten Me" (13:6). This idea is familiar to us from Scripture, where it appears in many different places. The most famous expression

is found in the song of *Haazinu*: "But Yeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you are grown fat, you are become thick, you are covered with fatness; then he forsook God who made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (*Devarim* 32:15), but that is not the only place. *Chazal* also expressed this idea on many occasions, and in one source they invoked our verse as well as another verse from the book of *Hoshea* to illustrate the matter:

What is "And Di-Zahav" (*Devarim* 1:1)? They said in the school of R. Yannai: Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe, the silver and gold [*zahav*] which You showered on Israel until they said, Enough [*dai*], that it was which led to their making the Calf. They said in the school of R. Yannai: A lion does not roar over a basket of straw but over a basket of flesh. R. Oshaya said: It is like the case of a man who had a lean but large-limbed cow. He gave it lupines to eat and it began to kick him. He said to it: What led you to kick me except the lupines that I fed you with? R. Chiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: It is like the case of a man who had a son; he bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse round his neck and set him down at the door of a brothel. How could the boy help sinning? R. Acha the son of R. Huna said in the name of R. Sheshet: This bears out the popular saying: A full stomach is a bad sort, as it says: "**When they were fed, they became full; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten Me**" (*Hoshea* 13:6). R. Nachman learned it from here: "Then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord" (*Devarim* 8:14). The Rabbis learned it from here: "And they shall have eaten their fill and waxen fat, and turned unto other gods" (*Devarim* 31:20). Or, if you prefer, I can say from here. "But Yeshurun grew fat, and kicked" (*Devarim* 32:15). R. Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, in the end admitted as much to Moshe? Because it says: "And I multiplied unto her silver and gold, which they used for the Ba'al" (*Hoshea* 2:10). (*Berakhot* 32a)

The people's infidelity toward God, on the one hand, and – not to be compared - even toward their false gods, stems from the fact that they are not searching for religious truth or spiritual satisfaction, but mere pleasure. Their momentary loyalty is based on the pleasure of the moment, and does not follow from a deep spiritual relationship. *Hoshea* relates to this at length at the beginning of the book:

For their mother has played the harlot; she who conceived them has acted shamefully: for she said, I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink. (*Hoshea* 2:7)

INFIDELITY DUE TO GREED FOR MONEY

Thus, we have reached the point of contact between the *haftara* and the *parasha*. The society in Charan in which Yaakov finds himself is not an anti-Semitic society that refuses to recognize him because he is an alien; quite the contrary, there is nothing preventing anybody from marrying him and entering into social relations with him. It is, however, a society where greed and pursuit of money stand at the core of its existence. *Chazal* have characterized Lavan in this fashion, and for good and justified reasons. What kind of person would switch his daughters under the bridal canopy, and then demand another seven years of work? Had he insisted that Yaakov marry only Leah, she being the older daughter, or had he agreed that he marry both Leah and Rachel, we might have objected, but we would not have characterized him as one who attaches greater importance to money than to his daughters' happiness. However, his agreement to marry off Rachel and create a complicated and problematic family situation, only on condition that he receive full monetary recompense for her, sheds a different light on his personality. His handling of Yaakov in the continuation of the *parasha*, regarding the payment that he changed ten times, also testifies to the same trait.

Thus, the *parasha* presents and contrasts two different models of conduct. There is Yaakov who demonstrates faithfulness to Rachel and is ready to work for years for her sake, and there is Lavan who demonstrates faithlessness toward Yaakov and Rachel in the story of her wedding, but shows great concern for her monetary dowry. There is Yaakov who demonstrates faithfulness toward Lavan, tending his flocks with extraordinary dedication in all weather conditions ("In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from my eyes"; *Bereishit* 31:40) and dealing with him in monetary issues in a manner that goes beyond the demands of law ("That which was torn by beasts I brought not to you; I bore the loss of it; of my hand did you require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night"; *ibid.* v. 39); and there is Lavan who tries to deceive him and withhold the payment that is coming to him ("And you have changed my wages ten times"; *ibid.* v. 41). Yaakov's model presents personal fidelity and financial compromise, whereas Lavan's model points to the fact that when people chase after money and pleasure, they are ready to sacrifice loyalty to reach their aims. This is the same dynamic that is described in the *haftara* – the absence of faithfulness deriving from the pursuit of pleasure and satiety.

REMOVING THE EASE AND ABUNDANCE

One solution regarding Israel's idolatrous practices that stem from their pursuit of material abundance involves the withholding of that abundance, and thus the removal of the incentive for idol worship. This is the first stage described earlier in chapter 2:

Therefore, behold, I will hedge up your way with thorns, and make a wall against her, that she shall not find her paths. And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not catch them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then she shall say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then it was better with me than now. For she did not know that it was I who gave her the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and multiplied silver and gold for her, which they used for the Ba'al. Therefore I will take back My corn in its time, and My wine in its season, and will take away My wool and My flax which were to cover her nakedness. (2:8-11)

This, however, is only the first stage, for such governance testifies to a corrupt soul that has no spiritual vitality; they are moved neither by passion for holiness nor by passion for idolatry, but only by hedonism and utilitarianism.

TENDER TALK

Removing the impetus may cure the symptom, but it fails to get to the root of the problem. This requires a more substantial spiritual treatment that will bring about a psychological upheaval. This is Hoshea's goal in these two prophecies, that of our *haftara* and that of the *haftara* for *Parashat Bamidbar*. The means, however, are different. At the beginning of the book, Hoshea describes a process of speaking tenderly to Israel:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... And she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be on that day, says the Lord, that you shall say, *Ishi* (my Husband;) and shall no more say to Me *Ba'ali* (my Master.) For I will take away the names of the Be'alim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be mentioned by their name. And on that day I will make a covenant for them with the wild beasts, and with the birds of the sky, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to

Me for ever; and I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in judgment, and in loyal love, and in mercies. And I will betroth you to me in faithfulness: and you shall know the Lord. (2:16-22)

I WILL REND THEIR CLOSED UP HEART

As can be seen, we are dealing with an educational process that is meant to bring about an essential change (from *Ba'ali* to *Ishi*) through personal talk and discussion, and end with a relationship that will endure for ever and out of faithfulness and knowledge. In our *haftara*, however, the situation is different and the process that is meant to remove the obstruction of the heart resulting from satiety is a more difficult process:

Therefore I will be to them as a lion: as a leopard by the way I will observe them: I will meet them like a bear that is bereaved of her whelps, and I will rend their closed up heart, and there will I devour them like a lion: the wild beast shall tear them. O Israel you have destroyed yourself; for you are against Me, against your help. Where is your king, that he may save you in all your cities? and your judges of whom you did say, Give me a king and princes. I give you a king in My anger, and take him away in My wrath. (13:7-10)

We are not dealing here with talk and persuasion, but rather with harsh force to be used against Israel in order to rend their closed up hearts. They are so rooted in hedonism and sin that only a deep shock can remove them from that state. The prophet describes them as corrupt; only a leader who can rule over them with anger and wrath will be able to control them. The metaphors of the bereaved bear and the devouring lion are exceedingly harsh (not just an ordinary bear, but a "bereaved bear"). The prophet employs them only as a measure of last resort and out of the sense that the methods of persuasion and personal talk have been absolutely ineffective. This is not the preferred manner of restoring lost sons to the straight path, and only in the absence of viable alternatives, when the impermeability of their hearts is so great that no other possibilities exist, should it be adopted. This, however, is the situation which the prophet sees before his eyes at the end of the book.

The end of the process is "O Israel, return to the Lord your God" (14:2), but this repentance can only come in the wake of the rending of the closed hearts. The repentance which occurs at the end of the *haftara* is born out of a feeling and situation of failure, and not out of religious awareness in and of itself. Efrayim comes to repentance only because

the way of sin does not succeed; the source of repentance is not spiritual thirst, but only the feeling of failure. Already *Chazal* in *Yoma* contrasted the repentance described here to repentance out of love, and they noted that it does not reach the level of repentance out of love.[4] We will not enter here into a detailed analysis of the concluding verses; that we shall leave for the *shiur* for *Shabbat Shuva*. However, the direction that we have noted in these lines corresponds to the entire development of the *haftara* thus far. The nature and character of repentance follow from the sin and the spiritual state reflected through them, that is, a world of pleasure and infidelity which Hoshea struggles against throughout the book.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] According to the original Ashkenazi rite, the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayishlach* is "And My people are bent upon turning away from Me" (*Hoshea* 11:7-12:13). In this series, we will relate to *the* "Vision of Ovadya" as the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayishlach*, in accordance with the prevailing practice today in Israel and in many Diaspora communities.

[2] There the text presents Yaakov as having initiated the deal of the seven years, but I assume that Yaakov was forced to agree to the wait because of Lavan's demands regarding a dowry and the like. I have no doubt that had the matter depended upon Yaakov himself, he would have wanted to marry immediately, as Yitzchak and Rivka had advised him.

[3] A computer check using the Bar Ilan Responsa program indicates that Hoshea is the only prophet to have used the metaphor of a "morning cloud."

[4] "Resh Lakish said: Great is repentance, for it turns intentional [sins] into inadvertent [ones]. As it is stated: 'O Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity' (*Hoshea* 14:2). Surely, *avon* implies intention, and he calls it stumbling. Is this so? But surely Resh Lakish said: Great is repentance, for it turns intentional [sins] into merits. As it is stated: 'But if the wicked man turn from his wickedness, and do that which is lawful and right he shall live in those' (*Yechezkel* 33:19). There is no difficulty – here, out of love; there, out of fear" (*Yoma* 86b)

(Translated by David Strauss)