

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

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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## VAYIGASH

### THE UNITY OF ISRAEL

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

### A SLIGHTLY STRONGER LIGHT

The *haftara* for *Parashat Vayigash* (*Yechezkel* 37:16-28) is problematic for anyone who comes to write about it; not because the *haftara* is particularly difficult, but on the contrary, because it is so perfectly understandable. The Hebrew is simple, it lacks difficult or obscure words, and its contents are clear. The connection to the *parasha* is also manifest to all, inasmuch as it deals with the reunification of the various parts of the people of Israel which had become separated, with special emphasis placed upon Yehuda and Yosef. Thus it fulfills the prophetic role of direct and comprehensible address to the people, and it achieves the objective of the *haftara* of a prophecy for future generations that speaks to the Jew sitting in synagogue in a manner that is meaningful to him. The truth is that we would have expected all prophecies and *haftarot* to be so clear and understandable.

Indeed, in our study of this week's *haftara*, we will not try to understand the goal and purpose of the *haftara*, but merely to illuminate the processes described therein in a slightly stronger light.

## CONSOLATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Let us open with an attempt to understand our *haftara's* place in the framework of Yechezkel's prophecies of consolation. The *haftara* is located in the second half of chapter 37 of *Yechezkel*, where it is preceded and followed by two other *haftarot*. It is preceded by the vision of the dry bones, which serves as the *haftara* for *Shabbat Chol Ha-Mo'ed of Pesach*, and it is followed by the prophecy concerning the war of Gog and Magog, which serves as the *haftara* of *Shabbat Chol Ha-Mo'ed of Sukkot*.

The vision of the dry bones is an exceedingly powerful prophecy, both with respect to its message and with respect to the imagery and its development over the course of the prophecy. All of its consolation, however, is directed toward the individual. Death is a phenomenon connected to the individual ("a community does not die"<sup>1[1]</sup>), and the bone-filled valley describes the situation of many individuals whose fate is tragic and hopeless.<sup>2[2]</sup> So too the description found in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (92b), which relates to what happened to the dry bones following their revival, focuses on their lives as individuals:

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<sup>1[1]</sup> *Horayot* 6a.

<sup>2[2]</sup> His turning to the community should be in the singular, for there is only a single community, but his description of many individuals testifies to his relating to the individual, for indeed there are many individuals. Thus the verse, "And you shall count for yourself" (in the singular), stated with respect to the count of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, is understood by *Chazal* as referring to the court's communal count, whereas "And you shall count for yourselves" (in the plural), stated with respect to the count of the *Omer*, is understood as an obligation falling upon each and every individual.

Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean says: The dead whom Yechezkel resurrected went up to Eretz Israel, married women, and fathered sons and daughters.

The purpose and the achievement are on the personal and familial plain, and not on the national plain.

## **COMMUNITY REDEMPTION**

Our *haftara* constitutes the next stage in Yechezkel's consolations, it being the transition from consolation of the individual to redemption of the community. The process he describes is national and communal, and the longed for unity is their being a unified nation having a shared political entity:

And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all: and they shall no more be two nations, nor shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all. (*Yechezkel* 37:22)

For the first time in the book, Yechezkel relates to redemption as a political process of Israel's revival as a nation in its own land. If in the earlier chapters, he spoke of the resurrection of the bones, or of "the waste cities filled with flocks of men" and the promise "I will increase them with men like a flock,"<sup>3[3]</sup> which are all promises to individuals but not to the nation – in our *haftara*, he prophesies about the restoration of the Davidic kingdom ("And David My servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd" [v. 24]), and its everlasting governance of Israel ("And My servant David shall be their prince for ever" [v. 25]), thus describing the redemption as the restoration of a fitting kingdom.

## **WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THESE**

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<sup>3[3]</sup> These two verses are taken from chapter 36, which serves as the *haftara* for *Parashat Para*.

After having seen how our *haftara* fits in to the idea of redemption as a whole as described by Yechezkel, we can attempt to analyze its specific content. The *haftara* opens with the image of the sticks (or perhaps wooden tablets) in the hands of the prophet, and their unification into a single stick, and the nation's question: "Will you not tell us what you mean by these" (v. 17). We shall begin by relating to the question posed by the people, who wondered about the very meaning of the metaphor, and then we shall try to analyze its various components.

What is the meaning of their question? On the face of it, the people understand that Yechezkel's "gimmick" of the sticks in his hands must have some significance, and they want to know what it is. The prophet is known as a bearer of messages that are directed to the public at large, and if he is standing in a public area with symbolic objects in his hands, he presumably wishes to give expression to the word of God by way of those objects, and they want to understand the meaning that is thus far concealed from them.

There is, however, another possible way of understanding the people's question. The question that Yechezkel puts in their mouths, and which represents the mood of the people as he understands it, may be seen as a denial of the basic need for unity between the exiles of Israel and Yehuda. Surely a long time has already passed since Israel and Yehuda were together, and since the exile of the ten tribes to Ashur and the exile of the kingdom of Yehuda to Bavel, their paths parted completely. From their perspective, returning to the situation that prevailed hundreds of years ago during the kingdom of Shelomo, and even renewing the shared connections that existed during the days of the kingdom of Israel, would be a hopeless attempt to recover a glorious path that has disappeared from the world. At its time, the national identity was composed of all of the tribes, and that constituted a blessing and a fulfillment of the Divine promise to the patriarchs. But history decided their fate to break apart and they are no longer one. When providence had its say that Israel would be exiled from its land, and that the two kingdoms would be exiled to different countries, a historical dynamic of national separation was set into motion. There is no longer a shared historical narrative; the existential experience and national identity of each group is now different. How then can the different groups be reunited, and what purpose would that serve?

**NOT SELF-EVIDENT**

Do not think that this is a ridiculous idea. History is full of examples of national groups that had been joined together as a single national and cultural entity, but later separated, never to rejoin. For example, Normandy and other parts of present-day France were part of England for more than three hundred and fifty years, but would anybody today entertain the idea of trying to reunite England and western France? So too, Italy and Germany were subject to a common political leadership for much of the Middle Age, but nobody dreams any more of reuniting them. The assumption is that this was the situation in its time, but historical reality has changed, and there is no reason to embark on a hopeless attempt at reconstructing the past.

Israel had never encountered exile prior to the destruction of the first Temple, and it was when they were faced with this reality that Yechezkel said what he said. Seeing the people of Israel as a single nation in all of its dispersions, its religious identity also satisfying its historical identity, was not self-evident to the members of that generation. This idea of seeing the entirety of the people as a single entity, with all the historical changes passing over parts of it, and the desire to unite the various parts of the nation in the future is the message of the *haftara*. At the time, however, it was not at all clear to the people of Yehuda living in Bavel, and it was for this reason that Yechezkel addressed the issue.

In this context, two other points should be added:

First, even when Israel and Yehuda lived together in Eretz Israel, they constituted two separate kingdoms, the relationship between them having its ups and downs. The people of Yehuda did not necessarily long for a return to that situation, and they may have viewed the removal of the kingdom of Israel from the picture as the mere removal of a divisive factor from their midst.

Second, the suggestion that the break between Israel and Yehuda is eternal is not so absurd. To us, who from our earliest days of childhood and throughout Jewish history have been brought up on the idea of the connection between religion and nationality, the suggestion appears totally preposterous, but in its time it would have appeared entirely reasonable. To illustrate the matter, let us present the *Netziv's* interpretation of an episode at the end of the book of *Yehoshu'a*. As it may be remembered, following the conquest and division of the land of Israel, the people of Reuven and Gad return to the territory that had been given to them on the eastern bank of the Jordan and erect there

an altar, an action that arouses the anger of the other tribes who accuse them of sacrilege and the desire to "turn away this day from following the Lord" (*Yehoshua* 22:16). The nature of that sacrilege and turning away from God is not stated explicitly in the verses. The *Netziv* explains that there was no concern about idolatry, and that even the people of Gad and Reuven wanted to continue serving God in holiness and purity. Their entire desire was to separate from the rest of the people on the national level, and establish a separate national entity on the eastern bank of the Jordan, that would be a Jewish state religiously, but politically separated from Israel on the western bank of the Jordan. Just as there are Christian countries with a shared religious belief, but different national identities, so too they saw the situation of the Jewish people as allowing this, and it was against this idea of separating religion from nationality that the rest of Israel objected.

### **ONE PEOPLE – ONE KING**

In the wake of the exile this idea reappears, and the people of Israel view it as a legitimate possibility. Thus, Yechezkel's prophecy and the unification of the two sticks come not only to fill the people with hope that the two parts of the nation will eventually reunite, but also to clarify that this is the desired and fitting state of the Jewish people, and that the changes in the historical situation have no effect on seeing the entirety of the people as a single nation and as one national and political entity. Attention should be paid to the wording of the verse that emphasizes this point:

And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all: and they shall no more be two nations, nor shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all. (v. 22)

As is evident, the verse contains a double promise:

1) That Israel will be **one nation**, the different parts of the nation being connected and no longer divided into different peoples.

2)

That Israel will turn into **a single kingdom** on the political plain, and there will no longer be two separate political entities.

In consideration of this context, the connection between the *haftara* and the *parasha* becomes more pronounced. Not only is the promise made that the years of separation will be followed by a dramatic reunification, but the importance of that unity is clarified. So too in the case of Yosef and his brothers, the fear arose that after such a lengthy separation and such different biographical realities, it would no longer be possible to reunite them as a single family, even if they once again meet up with each other. Yosef's achievement lies in his loyalty to his family and in his ability to see them once again as brothers despite the change in circumstances and their responsibility for it. And the merit of the brothers lies in the fact that they too receive Yosef despite the distance and the differences that had been created. In this, "the actions of the forefathers are a sign for the children," and the unification in our *parasha* between Yosef and Yehuda constitutes a model for the reunification of the people of Israel in the future.

## TWO MODELS OF UNITY

With this we have finished our discussion of the question raised by the people to the prophet, and we return to the metaphor of the sticks.<sup>4[4]</sup> The commentators disagree about the act of unification:

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<sup>4[4]</sup> It is only right to cite here the words of the Rambam, in his introduction to the *More Nevukhim*, regarding the importance of analyzing the metaphors of the prophets:

Know that the key to the understanding of all that the prophets, peace be on them, have said, and to the knowledge of its truth, is an understanding of the parables, of their import, and of the meaning of the words, occurring in them. You know what God, may He be exalted, has said: "And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes" (*Hoshea* 12:11). And you know that He has said: "Put forth a riddle and speak a parable" (*Yechezkel* 17:2). You know too that because of the frequent use prophets make of parables, the prophet has said: "They say of me: Is he not a maker of parables?" (*Yechezkel* 21:5). You know how Shelomo began his book: "To understand a proverb, and a figure; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings" (*Mishlei* 1:6).

"And they shall become one in your hands" – the two elements will become in your hands as one, a sign that the kingdom of Israel will be one. And my revered father, of blessed memory, explained: He told him to bring the two pieces of wood together and they will join together and form a single piece of wood in miraculous manner. (Radak, ad loc.)

As may be seen, two different approaches to the achievement of unity are presented here. The Radak himself does not speak of turning the two sticks into a single piece of wood, but rather of joining them together by way of an external force (his hands). His father, on the other hand, speaks of a miracle that combines them into a single unity. In the Radak's model, the two pieces retain their independent identities; they do not lose their own form, though in certain frameworks they function as one. In the model of unity proposed by his father, on the other hand, the two pieces of wood lose their previous identity and turn into a new entity for all purposes.

In truth, the issue at hand is the relationship between tribal affinity and a unified Israel, and in the two interpretations presented above we have two different fundamental positions. The one views the division into tribes in a positive light and sees the people's division into different units as a desirable situation that creates variety and plurality within the unity, each tribe contributing of its own unique existence, and the wider framework holding them all together. Just as the pieces of wood are merely held together by the prophet's hands, but do not join as one, so too the tribes of Israel.

In the framework of this interpretation, the metaphor of the hand holding the pieces of wood together in a shared framework, is open to various interpretations. One may speak of a hand that holds the wood together by force, with a strong grip, in which case it refers by analogy to the afflictions that all across history have brought the people of Israel together in a covenant of shared destiny. On the other hand, one may speak of a different kind of hand that is not an external force raising the sticks against them, but rather the hand of the creator who holds them together in order to realize the destiny that he had planned for them. In that case we are dealing with an internal process of the unity of Israel by will of the people and providence.

The image presented by the Radak's father, in contrast, which speaks about the sticks miraculously joining together into a single unit, sees no positive value in tribal

affinity, but rather wishes for it to disappear. In the end of the historical process, Yehuda and Yosef will unite and become a single stick, and the unity will appear in perfect manner, leaving no remembrance of the previous tribal identity. From this perspective, tribal affinity is understood as a transitional stage that was important in its time, but will have no place in the future.

## **ANOTHER DIRECTION**

The aforementioned analysis is based on seeing the metaphor of the sticks as relating to the tribes even according to the Radak's father. It is possible, however, that he saw the metaphor as directed exclusively at the political reality of the kingdoms of Israel and Yehuda, but not to their existence as tribes. In that case the disagreement between him and his son is an exegetical disagreement as to what the prophet is referring to. Indeed, the aforementioned verse which states that they shall not be divided into two kingdoms assumes that there is also a break in the nation, but it is possible to interpret this as referring to a nation that is divided into two kingdoms, and not to the Torah's tribal structure. Thus, it is not necessarily true that a disagreement exists between them about the value of tribal affinity. The reader can choose between these two alternatives; the important point is raising these issues and seeing them as being reflected in the metaphor of the wood.

## **NAILS**

So too, it must be added that there exists a third possible interpretation, that lies somewhere between the two alternatives presented by the Radak, namely, that the pieces of wood are actually joined and not held together in the hands of the prophet, but they do not join to form a single organic unit, but rather they are connected by nails, or the like. The idea is that the nation unites, but this is unity by way of an external force, rather than an internal force, and that a sufficiently strong counter-force can come and separate between them once again.

## **MIRACLE**

As an aside, it might be added that the Radak's father sees the sticks as uniting by way of a miracle. He is forced to say this in order to explain the metaphor, but the pessimistic reader may read his words as referring by analogy also to the conclusion, namely, that the unity of Israel can only be brought about by way of a miracle and Divine intervention.

## RELIGIOUS REDEMPTION FOLLOWING NATIONAL REDEMPTION

In conclusion, let us examine the continuation of the *haftara*. Observance of the *mitzvot* only enters into the picture after the unification of the sticks and the formation of the political framework: "And David My servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also follow My judgments, and observe My statutes, and do them" (v. 24). The purification from defilement mentioned in the previous verse also comes only after the return to the land. Thus the process described here is similar to the situation described in the previous chapter (which serves as the *haftara* of *Parashat Para*), when in both cases, Yechezkel describes the religious redemption as coming in the aftermath of national redemption.<sup>5[5]</sup> We shall address this issue at length when we come to *Parashat Para*, and here we wish only to offer a brief comment.

On this point, there is an additional connection between the *haftara* and the *parasha*, but we shall suffice with a brief allusion. At the heart of the argument between Yosef and Yehuda at the beginning of the *parasha*, stands the issue whether the quality of justice should extract a heavy human price from anyone who stands in its way, or perhaps consideration should be given to human emotion, to an elderly father, and similar human considerations. Yosef's conduct toward his brothers and his father, from the beginning of *Parashat Vayeshev* when he brings their father their evil report, and until the beginning of *Parashat Vayigash*, when he wishes to jail Binyamin, reflects the quality of truth that extracts a heavy price. It saves him from the trials that pass over him, because he has the strength to stand up to its demands, but it tramples his brothers. The Yehuda of the beginning of *Parashat Vayigash* (as opposed to the Yehuda of *Parashat Vayeshev*)

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<sup>5[5]</sup> In terms of the famous midrashic framework, we are dealing here with *Moshiach ben Yosef* and *Moshiach ben David*, it being commonly accepted that the first will pave the path for national identity and the second will come afterwards and perfect the world religiously. In our *haftara*, we can see the unity of the stick of Yosef and the stick of Yehuda, as the *Moshiach ben Yosef* returning Israel to their land as a unified nation, and the kingdom of David bringing it to religious perfection.

firmly opposes this line, and this is the strength of his argument, which in the end overpowers Yosef.

So too the prophecy of Yechezkel dedicates the first stage of the redemption to human reality. It is prepared to redeem the people despite the fact that they have not yet been purified and do not yet observe the *mitzvot*. It does not condition redemption on repentance. Perfecting society, unifying it and worrying about the wholeness of the nation comes before repentance. In this manner, it follows the path of Yehuda and prophesies that David, Yehuda's descendant, will redeem the people and bring them to repent by way of human understanding, and not by invoking the quality of justice.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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