

# 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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## **PARASHAT YITRO**

*Nothing is Nearer than Him*

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**PARADOX**

The giving of the Torah involves a great paradox. On the one hand, man is obligated toward the King, King of kings, on account of His greatness and exaltedness which are beyond all measure. It is because God is outside the world and beyond it that man who is found in the world is subjugated to Him. "For God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few" (*Kohelet* 5:1). On the other hand, it is this exaltedness itself that creates a problematic relationship between God and the world, for surely the world is too small to contain Him; how then can He act within it? In other words, God's transcendence stands in contradiction to His involvement in our material world.

### **DID THE SHEKHINA DESCEND?**

This tension exists on several plains. On one level, there is the contradiction between God's transcendence and exaltedness over the material world of man and His involvement in that very world. Already King Shelomo spoke of this at length in the prayer that he recited at the time of the dedication of the Temple, and it accompanies every attempt to establish a dwelling place for the *Shekhina* in our world. In this context, *Chazal* already said in tractate *Sukka* (5a) that "the *Shekhina* never descended, and Moshe and Eliyahu never ascended," thus asserting that even at the time of the giving of the Torah, a barrier still remained between God and the world. Thus they preserved the distance between man and God, but the world is still incapable of containing the *Shekhina's* presence. The kabbalistic authorities dealt extensively with this issue in their discussions concerning *tzimtzum*. They were troubled by the following problem: If God's glory embraces everything, how is it possible for the world to exist outside of him? If the entire world is filled with God's glory, where is there any room left for man?

On another plain, man encounters this problem on the level of cognition. God reveals Himself to him, addresses him directly and establishes a connection with him, but man, being

limited in his powers and capabilities, is incapable of comprehending God. Everything is sealed before him, and he cannot comprehend the revelation of the *Ein-Sof*.

For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. (*Yeshayahu* 55:8-9)

Indeed, at the giving of the Torah, Israel retreated backwards, it being difficult for them to stand before the *Shekhina*. As it is stated in the verses at the end of *Parashat Yitro* and in the book of *Devarim*: "For no man shall see me, and live" (*Shemot* 33:20).

## **THE SHEKHINA IN ITS PLACE**

Our *haftara* (*Yeshayahu* 6:1-7:6, 9:5-6) revolves around this tension. As opposed to the giving of the Torah, where God descended into our world, Yeshayahu's visions are of the *Shekhina* in its place and man ascending to heaven.[1] The vision which he sees relates to this point: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple" (*Yeshayahu* 6:1).

First of all, the very vision is paradoxical, for how can man see what is beyond his comprehension. Already the Gemara in *Yevamot* (49b) raised this question, and concluded that the vision was fuzzy and unclear, or as the Gemara puts it, "a dim mirror."

Second, God is high and lifted up, above everything else, yet He sits on a throne, which is an expression of the revelation of the glory of the *Shekhina* to us. And more than this, "His train filled the temple!" If the throne marks the glory that is revealed to us as high and lifted up and beyond our comprehension, surely His train fills the Temple and is involved in our world. Now, this involvement is an expression of God's providence and involvement in our world, but it too is not lacking in tension, for if God fills the Temple, then there should be no room for any other creature to take his place. For the edges of God's robe deny the rest of creation independent existence and everything is perceived as an expression of God's glory. The reader should not necessarily expect a resolution or answer to this difficulty. By definition, we are dealing here with a built-in tension that will never find absolute resolution.

## **TRANSCENDENT, TRANSCENDENT, TRANSCENDENT**

We come now to the central verse which states: "Holy holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts" (ibid. v. 3). Two main explanations that express basic differences on certain fundamental issues may be found in the commentaries to this verse. According to the first approach, the verse comes to note and emphasize again and again God's elevation and exaltedness over the world of matter and impurity. The explanation offered by the Radak, who follows in the wake of the *Kuzari* (IV, sec. 3), gives expression to this approach. Thus writes Rabbi Yehuda Halevi on this verse:

Yeshayahu heard the angels calling endlessly: Holy, holy, holy. That is to say, God is too high, elevated, holy, and pure for any impurity of the people in whose midst His glory dwells to adhere to Him. And therefore Yeshayahu saw Him "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." "Holy" is a description of the spiritual, which never assumes a corporeal form, and which nothing concrete can possibly resemble.

This approach was aptly summed up by Rav Soloveitchik, *ztz"l*, who translated the verse as "Transcendent, transcendent, transcendent." According to this, the continuation of the verse stands in contrast, and comes to indicate the built-in tension that we noted earlier, that God is high and lifted up from the world, yet involved in it. There is an important difference between the first part and the last part of the verse. The first part relates to God and His **holiness** which is beyond the world, whereas the second part relates to His **glory**. As the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages have explained, the glory is an external expression revealed to us, that reflects the Divine, but is not God Himself.

To what may this be likened? To a person's clothing or home. Someone who sees me dressed in my clothing does not actually see me, but it identifies and characterizes me to others, and it serves as a personal expression of my unique taste and style. A person's clothing is an external identifying mark that gives expression to his inner self, but it is not the person himself. The same can be said about a person's home, his car, and the like. The glory discussed here and in other prophetic passages is similar to this. It is not God Himself, but rather a creation that was revealed to the prophet and that allows us to know God's attributes and ways. Therefore, the end of the verse speaks of the revelation of the *Shekhina* in the mundane world by way of the glory, but this is not the Divine holiness itself. It finds expression in the gap between God and the world.

## **HOLY UPON EARTH, HIS WORK OF MIGHT**

The second understanding adopts the opposite approach and sees the expressions of God's holiness in the midst of our world. The clearest representative of this approach is the Aramaic translation of the verse, familiar to all of us from its inclusion in the liturgy in the *Kedusha De-sidra* recited at the end of the morning service and other times:

Holy in the highest heavens, the abode of His *Shekhina*; holy upon earth, His mighty work; holy forever and to all eternity.

As is evident, holiness finds expression not only in heaven, but also here on earth. There are, then, two types of holiness – holiness in the world and holiness that is beyond it.

## THE IMAGINATION OF THE MAN OF UNCLEAR LIPS

The rest of the *haftara* consists of Yeshayahu's response to the vision that he saw:

Thus said I, Woe is me! For I am ruined (*nidmeti*); because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. (v. 5)

Various explanations have been offered as to the meaning of the word "*nidmeti*" (translated here as "I am ruined"). Some understand the term in the sense of death and ruin (Rashi, Radak), similar to word *domen*. Others understand it in the sense of silence (*demama*) (Radak's father, Mahari Kra). The most appropriate understanding, however, seems to be in the sense of imagination (*dimayon*), as the word is used by the prophets, namely, use of the imaginative faculty for the sake of prophecy. In this context, let us mention the verse in *Hoshea*(12:11): "I have multiplied visions, and used similes (*adame*) by means of the prophets." It seems that Yeshayahu's words "Woe is me, for *nidmeti*" should be understood in light of the above. Yeshayahu is distressed by his very prophecy, for after he saw God sitting on His throne, high and lifted up, he understood the infinite gap between man and the King, Lord of hosts. And therefore, he questioned his very prophecy. How can man born of woman come into contact with the holy and exalted, and speak in His name? Is this possible? The designation "of unclean lips" does not necessarily relate to the fact that the people are sinners in human terms

(though *Chazal* saw this in his words as well), but rather it relates first and foremost to man's very standing as a creature bound by matter. Uncleanness is closely connected to matter and its limitations, and therefore man's state is connected to the world of uncleanness by its very definition. Is there a man who will not eventually become unclean? How can such a creature expose himself to the word of God and bear it? It is fitting to remember the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (in *Yerushalmi Shabbat*) who proclaimed that had he been present at Mount Sinai, he would have asked that man be given two mouths – one for eating and drinking, and one for words of Torah. The tension between man as a material creature and man as recipient of the spiritual word of God which is beyond the world of matter, prodded Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to this request. And this is what stands behind Yeshayahu's astonishment regarding the possibility of prophecy for man, owing to his being of unclean lips by very definition.

## **PROPHET – BETWEEN ANGEL AND MAN**

In response to this question, one of the angels approaches Yeshayahu and burns his lips with a live coal taken from the altar. This is an action similar to the offering of a sacrifice. What is a sacrifice? Taking matter and turning it from something dense and material to something refined and spiritual, both in the symbolic sense of destroying the matter and turning it into the most refined thing possible, and in the inner sense of turning the animal into a holy object. Here too, taking the coal from the altar and placing it on Yeshayahu's body in a place that he had designated as unclean owing to its material nature, and with which he is supposed to speak in the name of God, is an act of sacrifice. In a deeper sense, we can say that symbolically Yeshayahu turns thereby into an angel. The angels are designated here as *serafim*, and his burning (*serafa*) by way of the live coal turns him into a *seraf*. Thus, the prophet turns from one who speaks on behalf of the people to one who speaks on behalf of God. The term *malakh* (angel) means "agent," angels serving as God's messengers who lack free choice. Yeshayahu's consecration as a prophet by way of such an act turns him into an angel and an agent of God. Indeed, in the very next verse Yeshayahu hears God asking the angels in the Temple, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (ibid. v. 8), and he agrees to go, because from now on he has joined them.

Thus, we have touched upon one of the basic sources of tension found among the prophets. On the one hand, the very position involves serving as God's agent, standing before the people, and speaking to them as God's emissary. More than this, the prophet has no choice, and in this he is similar to the angels. He who suppresses his prophecy is liable for death and Yirmiyahu even describes prophecy as a fire burning within his bones that he cannot block. On the other hand, the prophet remains a human being, he is part of the people and often also their agent to speak to God on their behalf.

Indeed, among certain prophets, like Yirmiyahu and even Moshe Rabbenu, the tension is exceedingly acute and it accompanies them wherever they go as a constant struggle that they must fight with their very standing as prophets. Among other prophets, in contrast, we find no echoes of such tension in Scripture. This is the case with Yeshayahu. Following his consecration ceremony, we no longer hear him struggling with the problem of prophecy and the human condition, but only read his prophecies. There are various models of prophecy, and the meaning of the coal and the "sacrifice" of Yeshayahu is that it turns him into a prophet who is consecrated to heaven.[2]

## **THE TRANSITION TO EARTHLY POLITICS**

Yeshayahu's consecration concludes with the angel who flies to him and touches his mouth, and thus the vision of the revelation of the *Shekhina* which parallels the giving of the Torah comes to an end. The *haftara*, however, does not end here, but rather it continues and deals with earthly politics and the historical situation of his generation. Why doesn't the *haftara* end earlier, and why do we join to the vision of God's Temple a most localized political prophecy relating to a specific human situation? Is it only because otherwise the *haftara* would be very short, and thus we are forced to append to it the next chapter, despite

the descent from the high and exalted God to the highway of the washers' field at the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool?

The answer, of course, is that the transition from the celestial sphere of the angels and *serafim* to the earthly world of Israel and their historical reality is due not only to the concern about the length of the *haftara*. But rather the continuation of the *haftara* constitutes a very important completion of its beginning. The contrast that Yeshayahu saw in his vision between the exalted Temple in which God sits on His high and lifted up throne, His train filling the Temple, and the human world of creatures of unclean lips, born of women, short lived and sated with afflictions, and the tension between them that Yeshayahu senses, can easily lead to the conclusion that God has no interest or desire in the lower worlds whatsoever. Indeed, Aristotelian philosophy arrived at this conclusion out of religious motivations which refused to see God as involved in such a base and material world.

### **IS THERE A GOD NEARER THAN THIS?**

Judaism refused to accept this approach and proclaimed that despite the fact that "holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," nevertheless, "the whole earth is full of His glory." Moreover, it is not only that His glory is reflected in the world, but also His providence intervenes in the quarrels and wars of man and in everything else that troubles him. The fact that Yeshayahu is sent to deal with a current issue sends out a two-fold message. Israel is not only being told that they need not fear the two tails of the smoking firebrands, and that God will protect them. The grand message of this prophecy is the very readiness of the transcendent God to deal with such issues and spread His providence over the world. After having forcefully presented us with the great distance that lies between our world and God, he delivers a second prophecy that indicates God's presence in our world. "Wherever you find a description of greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, you also find a description of His condescension" (*Megilla* 31a), and wherever you find a description of His exaltedness, you also find a description of His providence.

In conclusion, let us cite the *Yerushalmi* in *Berakhot* (9:1) which expresses this point in an exceedingly beautiful fashion:

[The heretics] further asked [Rabbi Simla'i]: What is that which is written: "For what nation is there so great, that has God so near [*kerovim*, in the plural] to them" (*Devarim* 4:7)? He said to them: It does not say: "As the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon *them*," but rather: "in all things that we call upon *Him*" (*ibid.*). His disciples said to him: O master, them you pushed aside with a reed; how do you answer us? He said to them: Near in all types of nearness. For Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rav Yehuda bar Simon: Idols appear near, but are in fact distant. What is the reason? "They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him" (*Yeshayahu* 46:7). In the end, his god is with him in his house, and he cries out until he dies, but it does not hear or deliver him from his trouble. But the Holy One, blessed be He, appears far, but there is none nearer than He. For Levi said: From the earth until the firmament is a journey of five hundred years, and from one firmament to the next, a journey of five hundred years, and the depth of the firmament is five hundred years, and so too for each firmament. And Rabbi Berakhya and Rabbi Chelbo said in the name of Rabbi Abba Samuka: Even the hooves of the [heavenly] creatures are a journey of five hundred and fifteen years, the numerical value of the letters comprising the word *yeshara*. See how much higher He is than His world. And [yet] a person enters the synagogue and stands behind a stand praying silently, and the Holy One, blessed be He, listens to 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 with all His creatures. As it is stated: "A prayer of the afflicted, when he faints, [and pours out his complaint before the Lord]" (*Tehilim* 102:1). Like a person who speaks into his friend's ear, and he hears him. Is there a God nearer than this, He being as close to His creatures, as a mouth to an ear?

(Translated by David Strauss)

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[1] In the introduction to Yechezkel's vision of *Ma'ase Merkava* (which *Chazal* connected to our *haftara*), this is stated directly: "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (*Yechezkel*1:1).

[2] By way of analogy, it may be argued that Yeshayahu is reminiscent of Yitzchak who went up on the altar, whereas Yirmiyahu more closely resembles Yaakov.