

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Laws of Prayer
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 PARA

ON SIN AND REDEMPTION

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

SIN AS UNCLEANNESS

The *haftara* of *Parashat Para* ([Yechezkel 36:16-38](#)) opens with a description of the serious transgressions of Israel:

Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their way and by their doings: their way was before Me as the uncleanness of a menstruous woman. So I poured My fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols with which they had defiled it. (vv. 17-18)

The prophet describes two types of sin that are likened to two kinds of uncleanness, that of a menstruous woman and that of a corpse. These two types of uncleanness differ one from the other. The uncleanness of a menstruous woman comes in fixed cycles, whereas the uncleanness of a corpse is a deviation from the ordinary course of life.

THE UNCLEANNESS OF A MENSTRUOUS WOMAN

Chazal find consolation in the fact that the sins of Israel are likened to a menstruous woman, who, by the very nature of her uncleanness, is routinely restored to her state of cleanness, and even while she is unclean, remains connected to her husband:

"Their way was before Me as the uncleanness of a menstruous woman" ([Yechezkel36:17](#)) – just as a menstruous woman becomes defiled and [later] purified, so too the Holy One, blessed be He, will purify Israel, as it is stated: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you" (ibid. v. 25).

Another explanation: "As the uncleanness of a menstruous woman" – and not as the uncleanness of a corpse. Just as [when there is a corpse] in the house, the High Priest may not enter therein, but with a menstruous woman, he may enter the house, and sit with her on a couch, provided that it does not rock – so too had Israel been likened to the uncleanness of a corpse, you would say that the *Shekhina* will never return to

them. But [since Israel was likened to] a menstruous woman, just as a priest may remain with her in the house, without concern, so too the *Shekhina* rests upon Israel, even when they are unclean. As it is stated: "That remains among them in the midst of their uncleanness" (*Vayikra* 16:16).[1]

And furthermore, the sins that are likened to a menstruous woman are not so severe, for they are sins that are implanted in man's soul and are part of human nature. Such transgressions are not severe enough to be regarded as a corruption of the soul that totally veers from human nature. Sin that is likened to a menstruous woman testifies to human weakness rather than moral corruption.

On the other hand, the cyclical nature of the uncleanness of the menstruous woman which diminishes its gravity also aggravates it. It is not a one-time uncleanness that disappears over the horizon after the woman purifies herself, but rather uncleanness that is built in to the female body, and reappears periodically. Just as it is clear to us that the woman will return to her clean state, so too is it clear to us that she will once again become unclean. This seems to be the reason that Scripture refers to the uncleanness of a menstruous woman as a "way," for we are dealing with sins that have become a fixed way and are no longer accidental. The use of the expression "way" is also not by chance and the prophet repeats it several times in order to establish this point. The fact that these sins are implanted in man's soul indicates not only that they are less severe, but also that they are likely to recur. A person cannot overcome them and make them disappear, but rather they remain as part of his fixed conduct. The hope that the people of Israel will internalize God's will and change their nature by making their own will correspond to His will fails to be realized.

The prophet rebukes the people precisely for the fact that sin has become second nature to them and that they are incapable of breaking out of the periodicity of the expected sin.

THE UNCLEANNESS OF A CORPSE

Yechezkel's second reproach likens Israel's sins to the uncleanness of a corpse. While it is true that the uncleanness of a corpse is accidental,[2] rather than expected or built in to nature, it is, however, more severe than other types of uncleanness, for it testifies to the total failure of nature and matter to maintain themselves, and to the cessation of man's capability of breaking out of his world. It therefore requires stronger atonement, namely, the atonement of the red heifer. This is not the place to go into a detailed analysis of the idea of the purification process connected to the red heifer.[3] For our present purposes we can say that it differs in its very essence from the purification process of a menstruous woman. A menstruous woman immerses in a *mikve* filled with water in its natural state and in abundance. A reservoir of rain water or a natural spring can be arranged in most places. In contrast the "waters of sprinkling" (*mei chatat*) that purify a person from the uncleanness of a corpse are extremely rare and precious, and not available in all places and at all times. More importantly, they do not achieve cleanness through a restoration of the natural state, for the uncleanness that they wish to remove does not reflect a deficiency within the framework of nature, but rather a failure of the natural world in its entirety. This requires a purification process that breaches the boundaries of nature and repairs it by connecting to elements found beyond it. Since we are dealing with a corruption of the entire natural system, it is necessary to destroy a natural object and rebuild it.

The same applies to sins that are likened to the uncleanness of a corpse. The prophet relates to such sins with extreme harshness, saying: "So I poured My fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols with which they had defiled it" (v. 18). We are not dealing here with an ordinary sin, but with a sin that testifies to moral or religious corruption, and with a person who veers from ordinary disobedience.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MURDER AND THE UNCLEANNES OF A CORPSE

With his metaphoric comparison between sin and uncleanness, Yechezkel draws a comparison between bloodshed and the uncleanness of a corpse. The connection is based not only on the common denominator of death, but on the fact that murder is the crime that deviates most from the human norm and from the feelings of mercy and compassion implanted within man. The sin of idolatry might be more severe, but murder testifies to extreme moral corruption. The Rambam's famous words in *Hilkhot Rotze'ach* (4:9) give fine expression to this idea:

For although there are worse crimes than bloodshed, none causes the destruction of civilized society as bloodshed. Not even idolatry, nor immorality, nor desecration of the Sabbath, is the equal of bloodshed. For these are crimes between man and God, while bloodshed is a crime between man and man. If one has committed this crime, he is deemed wholly wicked, and all the meritorious acts he has performed during his lifetime cannot outweigh this crime or save him from judgment...

IDOLATRY AS A MENSTRUOUS WOMAN

It is interesting to note that *Chazal* likened idolatry to the uncleanness of a menstruous woman, and not to the uncleanness of a corpse, and decreed that idols are unclean like a menstruous woman, as is stated in the Mishna in *Shabbat* (9:1):

Rabbi Akiva said: Whence do we know that an idol defiles by carriage (*masa*) like a menstruous woman? Because it is said: "You shall cast them away [= the idols] as a menstruous thing; you shall say unto it, Get you hence" (*Yeshayahu* 30:22). Just as a menstruous woman defiles by carriage, so does an idol defile by carriage.

In the context of our discussion, we must assume that the religious drive implanted in the human soul is liable to lead him to the perversion of idolatry, time after time, as indeed is documented by the

prophets. This, however, falls into the category of the uncleanness of a menstruous woman – a natural phenomenon that doesn't breach the limits of nature, but is severe owing to its periodicity and constancy. The idolatry mentioned in the verse together with bloodshed is not "ordinary" idolatry, but more severe, stemming not from man's normal religious drive, but from other sources.

PURIFICATION FROM THE UNCLEANNES OF A CORPSE

Fundamentally, there is no way to purify oneself of the uncleanness of a corpse, for nature indeed failed. The encounter with death reveals the cessation of matter, and there is no response to this, for indeed matter was routed by death, and there is no remedy. Unlike the periodicity of the uncleanness of a menstruous woman, which repairs itself once again every month, death cannot be repaired on the natural plain, and the key to resurrection is not found in the natural world.

This, however, is the great mystery of the red heifer, namely, that despite the fact that there does not appear to be any repair or remedy, the encounter with God by way of the red heifer and the Temple is capable of repairing the failure. The same applies to these sins. While it seems that they are not subject to repair, and that repentance on the natural plain cannot repair and achieve atonement for them, the mystery of repentance that involves God's purifying man is capable of removing the sin.

The connection between the *haftara* and the *parasha* becomes evident from the words of Yechezkel which reveal the mystery of repentance that involves purification from above:

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give

you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. ([Yechezkel 36:25-26](#))

EXILE AND REDEMPTION

TWO MODELS OF REDEMPTION

Let us now consider the continuation of the *haftara*. The prophet briefly describes the exile, its significance as a profanation of God's name among the nations, and the need to redeem Israel as a result.

The *parashiyot* at the end of the book of *Devarim* present two models of redemption. The first one, found in *Parashat Nitzavim*, describes a process of destruction and exile that comes in the aftermath of sin, and in its wake repentance:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you shall call them to mind among all the nations, into which the Lord your God has driven you, and shall return to the Lord your God, and shall obey His voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul; and then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts be at the utmost parts of heaven from there will the Lord your God gather you, and from there will He fetch you: and the Lord your God will bring you into the land which you fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you more than your fathers. ([Devarim 30:1-5](#))

Immediately afterwards, in *Parshiyot Vayelevh and Ve-Ha'azinu*, we find a totally different description of Israel's redemption. The nation sins, leaves God, and breaks the covenant, and God responds with the "hiding of His face." This situation of God's forsaking Israel is the closing point of *Parashat Vayelevh* and the opening point of the song of *Ha'azinu*. The tidings of the end of the exile appear at the end of the song, but there is no mention of repentance or return to God. Israel's spiritual state is not described as having improved and there is no stirring of repentance, yearning for God, or remorse about the sins of the past. Nevertheless, God intervenes and redeems Israel out of a different consideration, namely, the profanation of His name caused by Israel's subjugation to the nations. The people do not attain to redemption because of their actions and standing, but rather God is concerned about the glory of His name and therefore saves Israel from the nations and returns them to their land. This is not the first time that this argument appears in the Torah as a reason to have mercy upon Israel; it was already sounded by Moshe Rabbenu at the time of the sin of the golden calf: "Wherefore should Egypt speak, and say, In an evil hour did He bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce anger, and relent of this evil against Your people" (*Shemot 32:12*).

THE TWO MODELS IN THE WORDS OF CHAZAL

In a famous discussion in the Gemara in tractate *Sanhedrin (97b)*, *Chazal* inform us of these two models, while disagreeing about the legitimacy of one of them:

Rav said: All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Shemuel said: It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning.

This matter is disputed by Tannaim: Rabbi Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed! But the Holy One, blessed be He, will set up a king

over them, whose decrees shall be as cruel as Haman's, whereby Israel shall engage in repentance, and He will thus bring them back to the right path.

Another [Baraita] taught: Rabbi Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed, as it is written: "Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: But is it not written: "You have sold yourselves for naught; and you shall be redeemed without money"? "You have sold yourselves for naught" - for idolatry; "and you shall be redeemed without money" —without repentance and good deeds. Rabbi Eliezer retorted to Rabbi Yehoshua: But is it not written, "Return unto Me, and I will return unto you"?..[4]

It is self-evident that the preferred model is that of repentance that leads to redemption. The people repent and draw near to God, God draws them near, and then redemption comes and actualizes the state of Israel being found under the wings of the *Shekhina*. And indeed, Rav and Rabbi Eliezer are unable to accept any other possibility, for if Israel is unfit, it is only right that they should not be redeemed, but rather they must continue to suffer in exile until they improve their ways.

According to Shemuel and Rabbi Yehoshua, however, redemption through repentance is not the only model of redemption. There is also a model of redemption without repentance. The rationale behind such redemption is twofold:

- 1) Preventing profanation of God's name.
- 2) "It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning" ☞ the difficulty of Israel's subjugation threatens Israel's very existence and the time has come to bring the exile to a close because of the needs of Israel.

In either case, redemption without redemption is a process that must be taken into account as a legitimate *modus operandi* of providence, which has pity on the glory of God's great name and/or Israel in exile.

THE PREFERENCE OF REDEMPTION THROUGH REPENTANCE

There are two points, however, that must be emphasized:

1) Despite the fact that both tracks lead to an ingathering of the exiles and Israel's return to its land, they are not two different models having the same value and leading to the same goal. On the contrary, they are utterly different, both with respect to the historical process that accompanies it, and with respect to the spiritual meaning of redemption. A people that is redeemed without repentance is not the same as a people that is redeemed by merit of its return to God. And the cost that must be paid by a nation that is redeemed without repentance is much greater than the cost that must be paid by a nation that repents and returns to God.

2) This being the case, it is clearly our hope and prayer that our redemption will come through repentance, and we do not say that we do not care how redemption will arrive, as long as we are redeemed.

RETURNING TO THE *HAFTARA*

At this point, let us go back and examine our *haftara*, whose concern is redemption without repentance. As stated in the verses, the objective of the ingathering of the exiles is to prevent the profanation of God's name; it is not the merit of Israel that brings about their redemption. It is based not upon repentance and good deeds, but rather upon the profanation of God's name:

But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations, into which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God; I do not do this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations, to which you came. And I will sanctify My great name, which was profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in the midst of them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord; says the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I shall take you forth among the nations, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. (*Yechezkel 36:21-24*)

If we examine the process of redemption described in the continuation of the prophecy, we will see that the people of Israel leave the exile and return to their land, even before they repent. Simply stated, the restoration of Zion as described in our *haftara* is executed when most of the people are "non-religious" and fail to observe Torah and *mitzvot*. This follows from the process that dictates the redemption (for they are redeemed because of the profanation of God's name, and not because they are worthy of redemption), and is explicit in the verses:

For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My spirit within you, and cause you to follow my statutes, and you shall keep My judgments, and do them. (ibid. vv. 24-27)

As can be seen, the verse that speaks of taking Israel from the nations and bringing them to the land of Israel is the first stage, whereas giving them a new spirit and bringing them to follow God's statutes and observe His commandments appear only afterwards. The continuation of the prophecy speaks of an ever improving situation in which Israel rises spiritually and becomes established materially and politically, but the foundation of the redemption is Divine intervention that redeems Israel, despite the fact that they are unworthy.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE REDEMPTION IN OUR *HAFTARA*

It would seem that all is fine and good. The people of Israel are redeemed, they return to their land and are purified of their sins. Things, however, are not so simple, owing to the two points mentioned above. First, this is not the preferred situation. The situation in which Israel fails to repent but is redeemed for extrinsic reasons is not a situation that we strive for. Using the terminology found in the Gemara in [*Sanhedrin \(98a\)*](#), which states that "the [Messiah] son of David will only come in a generation that is entirely guiltless or entirely guilty," this is a redemption that resembles that of a generation that is entirely (or mostly) guilty. The redemption arrives, but Israel's primary interest is that it should come by way of repentance. More important than the question whether they are found in their land or on foreign ground is the critical question of the individual's/the nation's relationship with the Creator.

It is better to be less guilty and less redeemed than more guilty and more redeemed, for it is the acceptance of the yoke of heaven and conjoining with God that lie at the heart of the matter. From God's perspective, this type of redemption repairs the blemished world, but only the aspect of the profanation of God's name. The nation's relationship with God is not repaired in this manner, and thus this type of redemption does not solve the nation's problem vis-a-vis God.

It might still be argued that the prophet attests that God will return Israel to their land and draw them near to His service, so that this problem is resolved as well, and we are dealing here with a prophecy of great consolation. This argument, however, is also problematic, inasmuch as it ignores the process and the heavy price that it exacts. The verse in the passage dealing with repentance in the book of *Devarim* says that "you shall return to your heart" (*Devarim 30:1*), and not that God will take care of everything from up above. From a spiritual perspective as well, there is no comparing willing repentance to repentance imposed by Divine force.

THE MATERIAL PRICE

There is also a difference with respect to the material price. Anyone who reads the description of the redemption in the book of *Yechezkel* and contrasts it to that in the book of *Yeshayahu* will immediately discern the great difference between them. In *Yeshayahu*'s prophecies, the redemption is a most pleasant and elevating experience. The following verses will serve as an example:

The wilderness and the arid land shall be glad; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom like the tulip. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of the Lebanon shall be given to it, the excellency of the Karmel and the Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God... And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and singing shall flee away. (*Yeshayahu 35:1-2, 10*)

In the book of *Yechezkel*, on the other hand, the attribute of justice is stretched out against Israel, even during the period of redemption. Instead of the blossoming of the wilderness and the mountains

ringing with joy that we saw in *Yeshayahu*, we encounter the war of Gog and Magog, with all the ruin and destruction that that involves. God rules over Israel with a mighty hand and an outstretched hand, and even when they are redeemed, this is the mode of governance. The reason for the difference between the two books follows from the course of the redemption. When redemption arrives for a generation that is wholly guiltless and Israel is redeemed following repentance, then they merit a pleasant and caressing mode of governance. But when redemption arrives without repentance, and owing to Divine "compulsion," the trait of justice remains in place, and the redemption leads neither to joy nor to happiness.

THE CONSOLATION

In summary, the *haftara* testifies that Israel is capable of being redeemed and purified even in grave situations of sin, but this is a difficult and problematic course, that does not resemble redemption by way of repentance and "stirring from below." When God sprinkles clean water on the nation, because they are unable to purify themselves on their own by way of immersion, this involves a consolation. For the people do not sink to the depths of sin, and even if their sins fall into the category of the uncleanness of a corpse and not that of a menstruous woman, they have the hope of being purified from above, since it has not been decreed that they will sink to the depths of sin for all time. So too, the *haftara* assigns religious value to the ingathering of the exiles even before the nation repents, this owing to the prevention of the profanation of God's name. This, however, is still not the full and noble redemption described by the other prophets and set aside for the situation in which Israel is redeemed in the wake of repentance.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

It goes without saying that the model of the ingathering of the exiles in our *haftara* for a nation that does not observe Torah and *mitzvot*, in order to prevent the profanation of God's nation, provides much food for thought about our present historical situation. Is it right to see the return to Zion in our generation, and especially in the wake of the terrible profanation of God's name during the years of the Holocaust, as corresponding to the model set down in the *haftara*, in which case the redemption does not follow from the nation and its religious connection, but from God's exaltedness? Or should we not demean the religious meaning of the Zionist project as worthy of redemption in its own right? I do not come to answer these questions, but only to present them to the reader as something to think about. As we have emphasized many times in the past, the function of the *haftara* is not only to teach *Tanakh*, but also to stir up thought in relation to man's existential state in the present time. Thus, our raising of these questions matches the objective of the *haftara*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] *Yalkut Shimoni* (ad loc.). See also *Shabbat* 64b: "And she that is sick shall be in her impurity.' The early Sages ruled: This means that she must not rouge nor paint nor adorn herself in dyed garments; until Rabbi Akiba came and taught: If so, you make her repulsive to her husband, with the result that he will divorce her! But what [then] is taught by: 'And she that is sick shall be in her impurity'? She shall remain in her impurity until she enters into water."

[2] Let us also remember the wording of the verse regarding the Nazirite: "And if any man die very suddenly by him, and he has defiled the head of his consecration..." (*Bamidbar* 6:9).

[3] I have related to this in the past in several articles published in *Daf Keshet le-Talmidei Yeshivat Har Etzion*. See *Bi-Kedusha u-be-Tahara, Daf Keshet* 432 (5754); *Ba-Shamayim mi-*

Ma'al ve-al ha-Aretz mi-Tachat," Daf Kesher 487 (5755); Zahav va-Eifer – Bein Mishkan ve-ha-Egel le-Para Aduma," Daf Kesher 593 (5757).

[4] The discussion continues in the Gemara with each side bringing additional verses to prove its position.