

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 BEHAR - BECHUKOTAI

NOTHING HAPPENS BY CHANCE

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

A PLEA, RATHER THAN A CONSOLATION

The *haftara* for *Behar-Bechukotai*, as is the case with the other double *parashiyot*, is the *haftara* of the second *parasha*. We, therefore, read this week the *haftara* for *Bechukotai*, which is taken from the book of *Yirmiyahu* (16:19-17:14). The core of *Parashat Bechukotai* is the rebuke, and the *haftara* serves as a response to that reproach. The *haftara's* opening words – "O Lord, my strength, and

my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction" (16:19) – prepares us for a prophecy of consolation. But the continuation of the *haftara* includes a harsh reproach, and even the concluding verse – "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for You are my praise" (17:14) – does not describe consolation and redemption, but merely expresses a wish and a desire for salvation and healing that are not yet visible on the horizon. Even at the end of the *haftara*, then, we still find ourselves far from salvation, which fails to arrive. The truth is that anyone who follows the reading of the *haftara* in the synagogue from a complete *Tanakh*, rather than from a *Chumash*, will be surprised to discover that the final verse of the *haftara* is actually the opening verse of a new section. In its context in the book of *Yirmiyahu*, the plea for healing and salvation is uttered out of distress and persecution, and as part of Yirmiyahu's bitter struggle with the people of his generation. It does not herald salvation, but rather it is a petition and prayer in anticipation of continued struggle and troubles.

REACTION IN A TIME OF TROUBLE

It should, then, be understood that the *haftara* is not one of consolation in the classical sense, that it does not come to describe a rosy future that will replace the gloomy present, and that we must understand its goal in a different manner. If we come to summarize its message in a single word, it is trust.

Over the course of the *parasha*, the Torah describes the ups and downs that will befall the people in the wake of their actions. God will bring upon them a sword that will avenge His covenant and make them flee before their enemies, and at the end of the *parasha*, we are told that He will return them to the desolate land in the wake of the covenant that had been made with their forefathers. All this is described at length in the section of the reproach. One component, however, is missing, namely, man's reaction and response. We hear nothing about the relationship between Israel and God in the wake of the troubles that will befall them. This is the point that the *haftara* comes to fill in, as a guide and model for response in times of affliction.

It is important to emphasize the *haftara's* place in the framework of the book of *Yirmiyahu*. It is found not in the context of chapters of consolation, but rather in

the very heart of a series of chapters of harsh and threatening reproach. To illustrate this, let us cite a few verses from the beginning of chapter 16, the same chapter from which the *haftara* is taken:

For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and concerning the daughters that are born in this place, and concerning their mothers that bore them, and concerning their fathers that begot them in this land.

They shall die of grievous deaths; they shall not be lamented; neither shall they be buried; but they shall be as dung upon the face of the earth: and they shall be consumed by the sword, and by famine; and their carcasses shall be food for the birds of the sky, and for the beasts of the earth.

For thus says the Lord, Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament nor bemoan them: for I have taken away My peace from this people, says the Lord, both love and mercy.

Both the great and the small shall die in this land: they shall not be buried, neither shall men lament for them, nor gash themselves, nor make themselves bald for them: neither shall men break bread for them during the mourning, to comfort him for the dead; neither shall men give them the cup of consolation to drink for his father or for his mother.

You shall also not go into the house of feasting, to sit with them to eat and to drink.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will cause to cease out of this place before your eyes, and in your days, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride. (*Yirmiyahu* 16:3-9)

The prophet's expression of the feeling that God is his strength and stronghold does not come against the backdrop of success and rescue, but out of the depths of crisis and threat, and here lies its significance.

TRUST, AND NOT OPTIMISM

At this point, let us cite the words of the *Chazon Ish* regarding trust:

An old mistake has settled in the hearts of many with respect to the idea of trust. The term *bitachon*, "trust," which describes a meritorious and essential quality among the pious, has come to be understood as an obligation to believe – in any situation where a person stands before an unknown future, and there are two possible future outcomes, one good and one not – that surely it will turn out well, and that if he remains in doubt, and worries about the opposite result, he lacks trust. This understanding of trust is incorrect, for as long as the future has not been clarified through a prophetic vision, it is not decided, for who knows God's judgments. But the idea of trust is to believe that nothing in the world happens by chance, and that whatever happens under the sun is all by God's decree.

The gist of what he says is that trust in God does not mean optimism that God will only do nice things for a person, but rather trust that whatever will happen to him is most appropriate for him, and that it will be done because of God's relationship with him. In words, it is not that I am confident that God will act in a particular way on my behalf, but rather I trust in God and in His judgment.

This quality of trust in God despite the punishment and the price that He extracts fits in well with the words of Yirmiyahu, which come in response to the difficult reality of his time. "God is my strength and My stronghold" despite the fact that mirth will cease and people will die – this is the message of our *haftara*. This is why the *haftara* opens with an expression of trust, continues with a description of sin and its punishment, and concludes with another expression of trust.

THE HAFTARAH IS BUILT IN PIECES

When we come to examine the *haftara*, we see that that it is composed of a series of sections. It is comprised of several units of short prophecies which are set apart in a *Tanakh asparashiyot setumot*. Moreover, there are sharp transitions from third person to first person, and the reverse. Thus, for example, the opening verse refers to God in the third person, expressing man's desire to rely on God – "O Lord, My strength, and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction" – whereas the third verse is formulated in the first person as the words of God – "Therefore, behold, I will make known to them this once, I will cause them to know My hand and My

might; and they shall know that My name is the Lord." Thus, we see that in the same prophetic vision, we encounter a prophet who speaks in the name of man and from a human perspective, and a prophet who speaks in the name of God. The continuation of the *haftara* follows a similar pattern. Some verses are formulated in the first person as stated by God, whereas in other verses the prophet speaks directly to God or else he talks about Him in the third person. The end of the *haftara* brings us back to verses uttered by the prophet and directed to God as a person who relies upon Him, expresses his trust in Him, and awaits His salvation:

O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake You shall be ashamed, and they who depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters. Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for You are my praise. (17:13-14)

What follows from all this is that the *haftara* combines a prophecy of rebuke from God, on the one hand, and verses of hope and trust on the part of the prophet, on the other. The *haftara* opens and closes with statements expressing man's reliance on God, and it seems that they constitute the essence of the *haftara*. The prophecies of rebuke in the middle provide the background for man's expression of trust, but the primary message for us lies in man's expression of trust in times of affliction and difficulties. Therefore, were a person to hear the beginning of the *haftara*, doze off in the middle, and wake up toward the end, we could say that he has received the primary message of the *haftara* of *Bechukotai*, because the essence of the *haftara* is man's expression of trust in God.

CONNECTION OR ABANDONMENT

If we examine the concluding verses, we will immediately discern that the final verse is a call from man to God and an expression of his hope for salvation. Expression is thereby given to the continued connection between the prophet and his Maker, despite the troubles, and to his trust that God is the address regarding his difficulties. But this verse expresses hope in a better future and thus it exemplifies less the point that we have emphasized. In contrast, the two previous verses – which belong, from the perspective of the structure of the chapter, to the reproach that precedes them, as opposed to the final verse which in the prophetic

source relates to what follows – well express what we said above. The prophet presents man with two alternatives: continued cleaving to God and trusting in Him, which at some point in the future will be translated into salvation from trouble, or else abandoning him. Connection or abandonment – this is the choice that a person must decide between in a time of crisis.

The verse, "A glorious throne exalted from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary" (17:12) is difficult, and its meaning is not self-evident. It is not even clear whether it is a continuation of God's words in the previous verses, or else the words of the prophet in his capacity as representative of man in the following verses. For our purposes, we shall follow in the footsteps of those commentators who see the verse as pointing to the deep and eternal connection between God and the people of Israel that exists at all times.^[1] The prophet's expression of trust in the throne of glory, even in a time of trouble, is the quality of trust that the *haftara* comes to express.

In this context, we must relate to the verses in the middle of the *haftara* that relate directly to the quality of trust:

Thus says the Lord; Cursed be the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm, and whose heart departs from the Lord. For he shall be like the juniper tree in the desert, and shall not see when good comes; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is.

For He shall be like a tree planted by the waters, and that spreads out its roots by the river, and shall not be anxious in the year of drought, nor shall it cease from yielding fruit. (17:5-8)

The verses illustrate our assertion that the quality of trust constitutes the essence of the *haftara*, and they are well integrated into this framework. On the other hand, they seem to contradict the *Chazon Ish's* argument cited earlier, for they describe the success promised to him who trusts in God and the failure that awaits him who puts his trust in flesh and blood. Thus, a certain clarification must be added. We have already noted the transitions found throughout the *haftara* between the words of man and the words of God. These verses are stated by God, and they express the recompense that awaits those who do His word and those who violate His will. As

part of His providence, God will indeed reward him who trusts in Him and disconcert him who trusts in man; this is the promise given in these verses. This, however, must not be the foundation for man's trust in God.

A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST

The trust expected of man is trust in God as part of the relationship between them, and not the expectation of receiving a reward. Thus, it exists in times of crisis as in times of joy, and its significance in the *haftara* is precisely in the use that Yirmiyahu makes of it in times of trouble. God, from His perspective, promises reward to those who trust in Him. From man's perspective, as well, a good relationship of trust in God is supposed to give rise to reward and salvation, but this is not the essence of trust, but rather one its side effects.

If there is closeness between man and God, then in the absence of other considerations, God will want to confer good upon man, owing to the nearness between them. Therefore, trust gives rise to hope in salvation, but this is all conditioned on the absence of other considerations of providence. As soon as there are other considerations, they can cause God not to confer good upon His people. This may be likened to the parent-child relationship. In the absence of prophylactic educational considerations, a parent will want to bestow good upon his child and give him presents and candy, and thus give expression to his love. However, various considerations often enter into the picture and bring the parent to decide not to reward his child. This does not testify to a lack of love, but rather to a more complicated situation regarding the child's world and his parent's attitude toward him. A wise and mature child will continue to put his trust in his parents, even if they don't provide him with his every desire. This is also true regarding the relationship between man and God.

It should be noted that the prophet likens one who trusts in God to a blossoming tree, and, it should be remembered, a tree is planted for what it will produce over the long term and it is not meant to yield immediate results.

THE WAR AGAINST CHANCE

Besides the very expression of trust that constitutes the essence of our *haftara*, it is important to emphasize another point that connects the *haftara* to the *parasha*. The primary battle being fought in the *parasha* is that between providence and chance. The main struggle is with the idea that everything happens by chance, rather than with idolatry in and of itself. A famous expression of the attitude that bursts forth from these verses, and the battle against it, is given by the Rambam:

This is one of the paths to repentance, for when trouble arrives and people cry out and shout, they will all know that it is on account of their evil deeds that evil befell them. As it is written: "Your iniquities have turned away [these things]" (*Yirmiyahu* 5:25). And this will cause them to remove the trouble. But if they do not cry out and shout, but rather they say that this befell us because such is the world and this trouble was by chance, this is a path of cruelty and it causes them to cling to their evil deeds, and it leads to other troubles. This is what is written in the Torah: "... and you walk contrary to Me, then I will walk contrary to you also in fury" (*Vayikra* 26:27-28). That is to say, when I bring trouble upon you so that you should repent, if you say that it is by chance, I will add fury. (*Hilkhos Ta'anuyot* 1:3)

In general, Yirmiyahu does not fight against this attitude, but rather he fights against those who abandon God in favor of idolatry. One who worships an idol does not necessarily deny spiritual providence over the world, but rather he attributes it to false gods. The issue of trust in God versus reliance on man does not even arise, because the question is not whether to trust, but in whom to trust. Our *haftara* relates to idol worship, but it also struggles with the abandonment of God owing to the feeling that the world is a place of chance, and therefore a person must put his trust exclusively in man. The words of the prophet who is aware of this problem bring him to emphasize the importance of trust in God as He who runs man's world and they are appropriate for the *parasha* of rebuke which deals with the same issue.

We can now say that the gist of the *haftara* lies in its expression of the quality of trust. And this in a twofold sense:

- 1) The trust in providence as opposed to chance and human causality.
- 2) The importance of trust in God in times of crisis.

These two messages make this prophecy a most appropriate choice as the *haftara* for the *parasha* of rebuke.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[\[1\]](#) There are those who understand that the throne of glory which is the place of our sanctuary refers to God's connection to man and the resting of His *Shekhina* upon him. According to this, the *Mikdash* serves as proof for providence and to God's involvement in man's world, and there is no need to limit this to the period during which the *Mikdash* stands. According to another understanding, the throne of glory [God's revelation to man] stands above time and history ("exalted from the beginning"), and therefore it is the true place of the sanctuary, for the connection between man and God will remain forever, and it is not impaired by the vicissitudes of time.