

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.**

THE MARRIAGE OF ISRAEL AND THE HOLY ONE, BLESSED BE HE

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LECTURING ABOUT *MA'ASE MERKAVA*

We cannot give a *shiur* about the *haftara* for *Shavuot* which deals with *ma'ase merkava* (speculations about the Divine chariot; *Yechezkel* 1:1-28), because the Mishna (*Chagiga* 2:1) explicitly forbids this. The Mishna states:

One must not lecture about illicit sexual relations among three, nor about *ma'ase bereishit* (the creation) among two, nor about the *merkava* among one, unless he is wise and understands on his own. Whoever gazes upon four things, it would have been better for him had he not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what is ahead, and what is behind. Whoever shows no

consideration for the glory of his Maker, it would have been better for him had he not come into the world.

On the face of it, logic dictates that *ma'ase merkava* should not be read as the *haftara*, for what is the point of reading a *haftara* that may not be discussed? Indeed, the Mishna in *Megila*(25a) records a Tannaitic dispute: "One must not read [*ma'ase*] *merkava* as the *haftara*. Rabbi Yehuda permits this." Now the position of the anonymous first Tanna who forbids the reading of this chapter as the *haftara* is easy to understand, for public lecturing about *ma'ase merkava* is forbidden, whereas the position of Rabbi Yehuda requires explanation. Nevertheless, it is precisely the position of Rabbi Yehuda that was accepted as law, and already in the talmudic passage dealing with the *haftarot* read on the festivals, found at the end of tractate *Megila* (31a), the Gemara states that *ma'ase merkava* is read as the *haftara* on *Shavuot*:

On *Shavuot* [we read] from "Seven weeks" and read as the *haftara* from *Chabakuk*. Others say: "In the third month" and we read as the *haftara* from [*ma'ase*] *merkava*. Now that there are two days, we do both.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN READING AND LECTURING

The key to understanding the position of Rabbi Yehuda is the distinction that exists according to him between reading and lecturing. There is no prohibition to read *ma'ase merkava*, but there is a prohibition to lecture about it. This argument appears to be simple and persuasive, but it obligates us to define the difference between "lecturing" and "reading." This question is strongly bound up with the question regarding the reason for the prohibition to lecture about the *merkava*. By occupying ourselves with the reason for the prohibition, we might be able to come to an understanding of the basic principles governing the matter. For this end, we must turn to the Gemara in *Chagiga*.

The Mishna limits lecturing in three areas: illicit sexual relations, *ma'ase bereishit*, and *ma'ase merkava*. In general, we can talk about two reasons for the prohibition of occupation with these topics. One possible reason is the inability to discuss them properly owing to their content and the concern about mistakes that will

arise in sensitive areas, when the teacher cannot provide adequate supervision. Alternatively, another consideration might be raised that is not utilitarian nor is it based on concern about mishap. Rather, the very occupation with these issues is problematic, because "it is the glory of God to conceal a thing" (*Mishlei* 25:2). In other words, we are dealing with an issue of modesty.

DIFFERENT REASONS

On first glance, it would appear that a distinction can be made between illicit sexual relations, on the one hand, and *ma'ase bereishit* and *ma'ase merkava* on the other. The last two areas focus on knowledge about the Divine and its revelation to man, whereas the prohibition of illicit sexual relations is a prohibition like all others, and there is no need for it to be concealed any more than any other *mitzva*. There is also a significant difference between the laws governing the different areas. *Ma'ase bereishit* and *ma'ase merkava* may only be taught to a single disciple, whereas illicit sexual relations may not be discussed among three, but among two this is permitted. The reason is simple. Regarding illicit sexual relations, we are not concerned about the study in and of itself; we are worried about mistakes. Regarding *ma'ase bereishit* and *ma'ase merkava*, we are opposed to the very discussion of these issues.

With respect to forbidden sexual relations, the Gemara explicitly states that the guiding principle is the possible mishap.

Rav Ashi said: What is meant by: "One must not lecture about illicit sexual relations among three"? One must not lecture about the secrets of illicit sexual relations among three. What is the reason? It is based on logic: When two [disciples] sit before their master, one discusses the matter with his master, and the other inclines his ear to learn. When three [sit before their master], one discusses the matter with his master, while the other two discuss the matter among themselves, and don't know what their master said. They will, therefore, come to permit a prohibition of forbidden sexual relations. - If so the whole Torah too! Illicit sexual relations are different, as the Master has said: Man has an inner desire and lust for theft and forbidden relations. - If so, theft also! Illicit sexual relations, both in his presence and not in his presence, his [evil]

inclination is great. Theft in his presence, his [evil] inclination is great; not in his presence, his inclination is not great.

As is evident, the concern follows from a lack of concentration and from possible error (apparently, unconscious) owing to the heart's predilection, and for that reason, study in a group of three is forbidden. For this reason, most of the commentators explained the "secrets" of the Torah mentioned here as complicated issues, which people are liable to misunderstand, and not as metaphysical mysteries.[\[1\]\[2\]](#)

Regarding *ma'ase bereishit* and *ma'ase merkava*, on the other hand, the Gemara does not mention these considerations. It would seem that the prohibition stems from the very discussion, and not from a fear concerning mistakes. This appears to be true, but we must first examine what the sources say on the matter.

MA'ASE MERKAVA

We shall focus here on *ma'ase merkava*, it being the topic of our *haftara*, and we shall not go into the matter of *ma'ase bereishit*, which demands a separate discussion. We will not be surprised to find that this examination will uncover divergent opinions on the matter. According to one approach, the reason that *ma'ase merkava* may not be studied is also its profundity and difficulty, on the one hand, and the great cost of a mistake in such a sensitive area, on the other. The foremost speaker on this matter is the Rambam, who relates to this issue in various places in his writings.[\[3\]](#) He maintains that the problem lies in the profundity of the material and the difficulty of comprehending it without prior metaphysical knowledge; this idea runs throughout his comments on the issue. It is not so easy to offer a single citation to illustrate the position; it is necessary to read what he writes all along the way in his treatment of the issue in *More Nevukhim*. Let us content ourselves with the following citation, taken from the Rambam's commentary to the Mishna in *Chagiga*:

Owing to the importance of these two sciences, the natural and the Divine, ... they warned us against teaching them in the manner of other sciences. For it is

known that every person naturally yearns for all knowledge, whether he is stupid or wise, and it is impossible for a person not to think about these two sciences, even if he does not have the [necessary] prior knowledge ... This is therefore forbidden... And to scare one who casts his thought upon *ma'ase bereishit* without the [requisite] prior knowledge, he said: Whoever gazes upon four things, etc. And to deter one who casts his thought and contemplates Divine matters with his simple imagination without climbing the stages of knowledge, he said: "Whoever shows no consideration for the glory of his Maker, etc."

MODESTY

In contrast, the Gemara itself implies that there is room for the proposal that we suggested above that the real problem is not the concern about possible mistakes, but the modesty that is necessary owing to the subject matter itself. *Chazal* expressed this principle when they related to the question of Torah study in the public domain:

Once again Rabbi [Yehuda ha-Nasi] decreed that [Torah] students should not study in the marketplace. What [verse] did he expound? "Your rounded thighs are like jewels" (*Shir ha-Shirim*7:2) – Just as a thigh is concealed, so the words of Torah must be concealed. (*Mo'ed Katan* 16a)

Exposing the thigh before strangers is not problematic because of possible errors, but because of the inner modesty that creates intimacy between spouses by limiting what is exposed to outsiders and keeping certain things private between them. Intimacy and interpersonal relations dictate the concealment of the thigh to outsiders and its exposure to one's spouse. As Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi's decree well illustrates, *Chazal* applied a similar idea to Torah study, because they saw it as an act of intimacy between the people of Israel and God. Another famous source for this idea is the prohibition of Torah study falling upon a non-Jew that is based on a *derasha* that sees the Torah as part of the personal relationship between Israel and God ("Moshe commanded us a Torah, the inheritance [*morasha*] etc." – do not read '*morasha*,' but '*me'orasa*' [betrothed]; *Berakhot* 57a).

Just as Torah study in its entirety was forbidden to one who is not connected to the existential principle expressed therein, so too *ma'ase merkava* is governed by a

similar principle. Owing to the unique intimacy of the topic that deals with visions of God, any non-intimate occupation with it is forbidden. For this reason one is forbidden to lecture about it in the presence of more than a single disciple, even if there are a number of disciples who meet the requirements of such study (that is, if they are wise enough to understand things on their own, having already passed the earlier stages of this theoretical study, and they meet the criterion of "the captain of fifty, and the honorable man, and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator," derived from *Yeshayahu* 3:3). Even if they are capable of understanding, they are only to be taught in private and with chapter headings. This is to avoid impairment of the necessary intimacy, and not because of the danger of error. "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter" (*Mishlei* 25:2).

UNDERSTANDING THE STUDY OF THE *MERKAVA*

The root of the difference between these two approaches lies in our understanding of the study of *ma'ase merkava*. The suggestion that the study of *ma'ase merkava* should be concealed owing to the intimacy inherent to that study, is based on the assumption that the study of the *merkava* should be viewed as an expression of an inter-personal relationship. If, on the other hand, we understand *ma'ase merkava* as a vision describing the exaltedness of the Creator, and we see it as the description of the King's sanctuary that comes to impress the visitor, then the Rambam's approach is more reasonable. Accordingly, it may be argued that the disagreement about the reason for the prohibition reflects a more basic difference of opinion regarding the nature of the revelation and the nature of the human vision contemplating it. One approach sees the prophet as the beloved servant of the king, who is granted permission to go in behind the curtains and see things that are concealed from others. The fondness that is showed him as a special servant to whom secrets are revealed reflects the Master's trust and love for him, and His readiness to allow him to see behind the curtains ("the heavens were opened" (*Yechezkel* 1:1) owing to the nearness between them. The other approach understands the vision of the *merkava* as a revelation of Divine might that is meant to impress the prophet who comes to the sanctuary as a visitor. There is no concern about revelation of intimacies that are not intended for a stranger's eyes, for the whole purpose of the vision is to impress the contemplator. The onlooker is not seen as one who is regularly present in the royal palace, but as a guest who is meant to be impressed by the grandness of the King, King of kings. Accordingly, the concern is not about the revelation itself of things that are supposed to be covered, but about a possible misunderstanding of the situation, and the serious errors that might ensue.[\[4\]](#)

SYNTHESIS

Before completing our discussion of the passage in *Chagiga*, it is important to note that the Gemara sets two limits to the study of *ma'ase merkava*. They are:

- 1) The number of people.
- 2) Their religious-metaphysical level.

The first limit relates to the issue of modesty, whereas the second one relates to the difficulty of the subject matter. Thus, it seems that we should adopt both approaches, that of the Rambam who is concerned about errors, and therefore fit people are required, and that related to the need for concealment, which requires that the study must be done in private.

SUPERFICIAL READING

Now, let us go back to the question of reading the *haftara* on the holiday of *Shavuot*. As we remarked at the outset, it seems that a distinction can be made between reading *ma'ase merkava* and lecturing about it. The Mishna states that one must not lecture about it, but this does not prevent it from being read in public, according to Rabbi Yehuda, and the way that the Halakha has been decided. According to the Rambam, the significance of this distinction is clear. Lecturing about the verses constitutes an attempt to penetrate their surface, to decipher their symbols and expose the deeper levels contained within them. This is perilous activity, the danger of error being exceedingly great. But the public reading of the *haftara* is merely superficial reading that does not attempt to go beyond the symbolic curtain and therefore it is not forbidden. The assumption that the public comprehends only the superficial level is what permits the reading.

A DECLARATION OF INTIMACY

However, if we accept the second approach that intimate matters should not be exposed in public, the question just becomes stronger. How can we read in public, in a packed synagogue, matters that may only be discussed in private? This indeed is a problem!

The allowance does not appear to be based on the fact that the congregation does not pay attention to the meaning of the *haftara*, as we suggested according to the Rambam. On the contrary, the reading takes place on the holiday of *Shavuot* precisely in order to reach its full experiential significance. The problem of public occupation with *ma'ase harkava* does not exist on *Shavuot* because the whole meaning of the festival lies in the intimacy that was created between God and Israel. The giving of the Torah is described by *Chazal* at the end of tractate *Ta'anit* as a wedding between God and Israel – if this is the relationship, then it is certainly permissible to reveal things between the "spouses" that may not be shared with strangers. It is precisely on *Shavuot* that we read *ma'ase merkava*, despite the fact that we could have found an alternative, because we wish to emphasize and sharpen this principle. When we read the *haftara* and expose its contents before the public, we are proclaiming the intimacy that exists between God and Israel on this day.[\[5\]](#)

In this context, we should recall the argument put forward in the *shiur* that served as an introduction to the entire series, regarding the role of the *haftara* as an expression of and guide to man's existential situation. For this reason, particular *haftarot* were designated for special *Shabbatot* and for the various festivals because of the specific spiritual needs of those days. The reading of *ma'ase merkava* on the festival of *Shavuot* constitutes an excellent example of this phenomenon.

If what we said is correct, then a great responsibility that contains also a great opportunity rests upon the shoulders of the congregants when *ma'ase merkava* is read. Instead of trying to understand as little as possible of the *haftara* and dozing off with the self-confidence that in this manner one is stringently observing the instructions of the Mishna in *Chagiga*, it falls upon a person to rise up and fully feel the meaning of

peeking behind the curtain that God has allowed us on this special festival commemorating the giving of the Torah, and experience it in its full intensity. It should be noted that the *Mishna Berura* (494, no. 4) brings a custom that illustrates and expresses this feeling:

There are those who are accustomed that whoever reads along silently with the *maftir* should do so standing because of the honor that is due it.

May we be privileged to the partnership, illumination and exposure that lies concealed in the public reading of *ma'ase merkava*. And may we listen to the reading of the *haftara* with the recognition of the greatness of the hour and the situation.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] See Rashi, s.v. *be-sitrei arayot*, and Rabbenu Chananel, ad loc. In contrast, the Maharsha (s.v. *be-arayot*) understands "the secrets of illicit sexual relations" in an esoteric manner. His explanation in itself is interesting, but the continuation of the talmudic passage supports the alternative understanding.

[2] The concern about making a halakhic mistake because of emotional involvement in the decision appears in several places in Halakha. See *Yevamot* 98a, *Nega'im* 2:5, and in the *Rishonim* on *Nidda* 20b.

[3] Commentary to the Mishna, *Chagiga* 2:1; introduction to *More Nevukhim*; *More* I, 32; introduction to part III.

[4] It seems to me that there is room to distinguish between different parts of the vision, that is to say, that the beginning of the vision fits in better with the impressive model, whereas the continuation fits in with the model of illumination and peeking for one who is near. This is supported by the Gemara in *Chagiga* 13a (bottom) and fits in with the biblical passage, to the best of my understanding. It is not my intention, however, to enter into an analysis of *ma'ase merkava*, and so I will suffice with the reference to the aforementioned Gemara.

[5] If this understanding is correct, then the reading of *ma'ase merkava* as a *haftara* should be limited to the holiday of *Shavuot*, and it should not be permitted on other *Shabbatot* of the year. Whereas according to the first explanation in the framework of the position of the Rambam, reading *ma'ase merkava* as a *haftara* should be permitted all year long, because of the difference between "reading" and "lecturing."