

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 BALAK

WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

ONE OUT OF THREE

The *haftara* for *Parashat Balak* (*Mikha* 5:6-6:8) introduces us to a new prophet whom we have not previously encountered, and he is the last prophet to join the list of prophets from whose prophecies the *haftarot* are taken.[\[1\]](#)

The prophets mention Balak and his struggle with Israel in three different places,^[2] and it is only natural that one of them should be chosen as the *haftara* for the *parasha* that is entirely devoted to that topic. In this week's *shiur*, we will try to analyze our *haftara*, and through our analysis explain why it was Mikha's prophecy that was selected as the *haftara*, and not one of the two other prophecies.

TWO THAT ARE THREE

When we examine our *haftara*, it is immediately evident that contents-wise it is divided into two main sections:

- 1) The prophecy of consolation of chapter 5 (the first half of the *haftara*).
- 2) The prophecy of rebuke of chapter 6 (the second half of the *haftara*).

We also see that according to the masoretic tradition, the *haftara* is comprised of three closed sections – *parashiyot segurot* – and this is because the prophecy of consolation that constitutes the beginning of the *haftara* deals with two different issues.

A SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE, RATHER THAN A POLITICAL ONE

Were we to be asked to explain the connection between these prophecies and the common denominator that unites the various parts of the *haftara*, we would answer that the central issue that stands at the heart of the *haftara* is the relationship between human power and geo-political considerations on the one hand, and Divine providence and spiritual elements on the other. Balak's basic insight that he must conduct his military campaign on a spiritual-religious plain, and therefore he must mobilize a spiritual personality to fight against Israel, rather than seek out war strategies and military solutions, underlies our *haftara*. Balak's selection of Bilam the son of Be'or to lead the campaign against Israel, and his waiving of his own leadership

of the people and his managing of the war effort, set the tone of the struggle, and this fundamental assumption is acceptable to us.

We can already point to a difference between Balak's treatment of the issue of Balak and the way that Yiftach makes use of the story.^[3] Yiftach relates neither to the curse nor to the spiritual struggle; he merely notes that Balak withdrew from a geopolitical confrontation with Israel. His interest lies in the political argument, and therefore he expands at length on Israel's relationship with Edom and Moav and their war against Sichon, because these were the important geopolitical events that Israel dealt with in his time. In this framework, mention is also made of Balak's policies, but only his decision to withdraw from the military arena, and not the spiritual struggle that he conducted. It is, therefore, Balak who is mentioned, and not Bilam, for Balak is the king who makes the political decisions, whereas Bilam is irrelevant on the political plain. Bilam is only connected to the spiritual struggle, but this was of no concern to Yiftach, when he turned to the king of Amon. Thus, the chapter that deals with Yiftach and his political leadership is a fitting *haftara* for *Parashat Chukat*, but inappropriate for *Parashat Balak*, which is entirely focused on the spiritual, and not the political struggle.

In contrast, our *haftara* was chosen because it makes no mention of Balak's military policies, but only his counsel against the sanctity of Israel, and thus it refers also to Bilam's involvement. Indeed, when we examine the *haftara* in its entirety, we see that it revolves around this principle, and thus it is well-suited for our *parasha*.^[4]

LIBERATION FROM DEPENDENCY

The opening verse of the *haftara* promises consolation to the remnant of Israel. The consolation, however, does not relate to the place that Israel will return to, or to Jerusalem during the period of redemption (as we find at length in Yeshayahu's prophecies of consolation which we will soon encounter in the framework of the seven *haftarot* of consolation), or to the removal of the yoke of subjugation to the nations in itself. Rather, the consolation lies in the fact that Israel will no longer be dependent upon men of flesh and blood. Even if they will remain scattered across the

world, they will be freed from dependence upon the nations, in the sense of "that carries not for man, nor waits for the sons of men" (*Mikha* 5:6).

It should be emphasized that when the prophet proclaims that Israel will be among the nations like dew (5:6), he is not referring to their influence upon those nations, nor is he pointing to the blessing that Israel will bring them. Rather, he is saying that Israel will no longer be dependent upon those nations.^[5] The next verse (v.7), which is connected to the previous verse both stylistically and linguistically, continues this idea. When the prophet says that Israel will be among the nations like a lion, he does not mean to say only that Israel will take revenge from their enemies, but rather he emphasizes the absence of dependence, for a lion is not subject to the limitations applying to other animals. This is the connection between the two verses, whose styles are very similar, but whose contents seem to be different, for the one describes Israel as living among the nations, the host culture being the stronger and more dominant one, whereas the second prophecies about the opposite situation. The common element, however, is that both sever Israel from political considerations and describe Israel as placing their trust in heaven.

DEPENDENCE UPON GOD

The *haftara* continues with this line of thought. It offers a promise of consolation that is exceedingly paradoxical, namely, the destruction of Israel's military resources. No more horses and chariots, and no more fortified cities! "I will cut off the cities of your land, and throw down all your strongholds" (v. 10) – this is the blessing promised to Israel. Of course, the main idea is not the destruction of Israel's resources, but rather the creation of a situation of dependence upon God, and the bringing of Israel to the recognition that their deliverance will come through their trust in God and reliance upon Him, and not from their armed forces. See the Radak, who emphasizes that the fortifications will be destroyed because they will no longer be necessary - "they will no longer need a wall, because they will live in peace, and there will be no quarrels of men among them" – and that Israel will derive earthly benefits from the new situation – "because living in an unwalled city is healthier than living in a walled city." Of course, one should hope that Israel will derive this benefit, but it seems that the prophet's interest in the destruction of the fortifications and in the removal of the city walls is not the material benefits derived there from, but rather the creation of a spiritual climate of dependence upon God. And indeed, the verses that

follow do not emphasize the redemption itself, but rather the process of removing the spiritual stumbling blocks that Israel encounters.

DEPENDENCE IS THE DECISIVE FACTOR

We have now reached the transition between the first and the second halves of the *haftara*. On the one hand, there is a transition from consolation to rebuke and from the redemption of the remnant of Yaakov to the quarrel between God and Israel, and thus, there is a significant difference between the two parts of the *haftara*.^[6] On the other hand, the emphasis of dependence upon God and of man's spiritual situation as the decisive factor, is common to both halves. The prophet refers to Israel's being led in the wilderness by Moshe, Aharon and Miryam, figures whose political leadership stemmed from their spiritual status, and also to Bilam's counsel, in order to emphasize these ideas.

As stated above, Balak correctly understood the importance of the spiritual factor, and he also understood that in order to confront Moshe's leadership, he would have to confront him on the prophetic level and not on the military plain. For this end, he mobilizes Bilam who was capable of such a confrontation (and therefore *Chazal* say that Bilam reached the level of Moshe), and casts upon him the mission of the metaphysical struggle with Israel. Balak's failure and the turning of Bilam's curse into a blessing was the spiritual factor that tipped the scales in Israel's favor. God, therefore, demands recognition of His goodness which must express itself in spiritual recognition and acceptance of the principle of power's dependence upon spirit, and that the people's political success depends upon their connection to God.

EXTERNAL ACTION AND SERVICE OF THE HEART

Immediately following his words concerning Balak and Bilam, Mikha relates to the issue of sacrifices and the appropriate way of offering them. The contents of Mikha's prophecy regarding the relationship between external actions and true service of the heart, the appropriate relationship between man and God, and the

meaninglessness of grandiose sacrifices that are void of inner intention, are familiar to us from other prophets. Mikha's words on these issues fit in with the general prophetic outlook on this issue, and it is not our intention to expand upon this here. It is appropriate, however, to examine the juxtaposition of the section dealing with the sacrifices to what precedes it in the *haftara*.

The answer regarding Bilam is simple, and it relates to the sacrifices that he offered. As stated above, both Balak and Bilam correctly understood the true field of battle between them and Israel, and therefore they offered sacrifices with true inner intention. Bilam's attempts to connect with the forces of impurity by way of his sacrifices were genuine, and thus he demonstrated the appropriate manner of offering sacrifices, to the discredit of later generations of Jews who offered sacrifices without any correspondence between heart and deed.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAGIC AND WORSHIP OF GOD

There is, however, an important difference between the sacrifices brought by Balak and Bilam and the outlook of the prophets, which turns Bilam's sacrifices into the antithesis of Mikha's message. Bilam was a magician and the actions that he performed on behalf of Balak were based on magic and sorcery.^[7] In the framework of such an outlook, a sacrifice does not express inner religious experience, but rather the attempt to magically appease God by way of actions and deeds that will win Him over. Just as at the outset Bilam does not examine the true will of God, but rather he tries to appease Him, so that He not be angry with him, so too his attitude toward the sacrifices. What underlies his actions is not a bending of his inner will to God's will, but rather the performance of external actions. All this stands in stark contrast to the position presented by Mikha that sacrifices are meaningless when unaccompanied by deep inner religious experience. Bilam sets man in the center – and therefore he all the time glories in his great powers and spiritual attainments – whereas Mikha sees man as subject to God and obligated toward others. His message is to practice justice and lovingkindness towards others and walk humbly with God.

Therefore, despite the common assumption of Balak and Mikha that Israel's situation vis-a-vis the nations of the world depends on their spiritual state and not on

political considerations, a wide abyss separates between them. Mikha's message regarding the sacrifices focuses on the inner world that must accompany them, and thus he connects to what he said in the first half of the *haftara*. Inner truth, dependence and trust in God, doing justice and lovingkindness, recognizing God's goodness and humbly walking with Him are the messages of the *haftara* and these are the lessons that the prophet wants us take from the story of Bilam.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] There are *haftarot* from all the prophetic books, to the exclusion of three short books in *Trei Asar* (*Nachum*, *Tzefanya*, and *Chaggai*; the *haftara* for the second day of *Shavuot* outside Eretz Israel is taken from *Chabakuk*).

[2] *Yehoshua* 24, *Shofetim* 11 and *Mikha* 6 (the matter is mentioned once again in *Nechemya* 13, but there the focus is on the prohibition to enter into marriage with an Amonite or Moavite, and not on the story itself).

[3] In *Shofetim* 11:25, Yiftach sends the king of Amon a long speech which he hopes will deter him from waging war against Israel, having been convinced of the historical justice on the side of Israel. In the framework of that speech, Yiftach declares: "And now are you at all better than Balak the son of Tzippor, king of Moav? Did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against him?"

[4] Regarding this point, Yehoshua's dealing with Bilam is similar to that of Mikha, so that it too could have served as the *haftara*. It seems that Mikha's prophecy was preferred because it integrates the story of Bilam into the framework of a prophecy of rebuke that is directed at a people who sinned and calls upon them to repent, whereas Yehoshua's words are directed toward a nation that is totally righteous and his objective is to encourage them to continue. Recognizing human nature and Jewish history, Chazal apparently preferred Mikha's context and saw his words as more appropriate for the needs of future generations, than the circumstances at the end of the book of *Yehoshua* which were more unique. In previous *shiurim* we noted that the primary objective of the *haftara* is to relate to the spiritual condition of the ordinary synagogue goer, and therefore it is important to choose a chapter that will speak to him and goad him to spiritual improvement.

[5] See Rashi and Radak who emphasize this point, in contrast to Malbim who writes that "so will they bestow goodness and lovingkindness on the nations in the midst of which they live, and they will not receive anything from them." Ibn Ezra brings both explanations.

[6] According to *Da'at Mikra's* division of the book into six sections, the two parts of the *haftara* are found in different units of the book owing to their different concerns.

[7] See: 1) *Yehoshua* 13:22, where he is called, "Bilam the son of Be'or the magician," 2) the beginning of the *parasha* where the elders of Moav and Midyan go to him with the rewards of divination in their hands, 3) what Scripture says about Bilam going to seek for enchantments, 4) and the words of *Chazal* regarding Bilam's attempts to calculate the moment of God's anger.