

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.**

Yehoshua

ZOT HA-BERAKHA

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WHICH *HAFTARAH* DO WE READ FOR *PARASHAT ZOT HA-BERAKHA*?

The first chapter of the book of *Yehoshua* constitutes a natural continuation to the story of the death of Moshe, and therefore its having been chosen as the *haftara* for *Parashat Zot Ha-berakha* need not surprise it. Indeed, the *haftara* suits the *parasha*, and the *parasha* suits the *haftara*. There is, however, a certain problem with the prevalent custom: it contradicts an explicit Gemara. The Gemara in *Megila* (31a) unequivocally establishes with respect to *Simchat Torah*: "The next day [i.e., the day after *Shemini Atzeret* outside of Israel] we read *Ve-zot Ha-berakha* and we read as the *haftara Va-Ya'amod Shelomo*." Already the *Tosafot* (ad loc.) note the difficulty:

In some places it is customary to read as *haftara* "*Va-Yehi Acharei Mot Moshe*." This, however, is a gross error, for the Gemara does not say this. Some say that Rav Hai Gaon instituted reading *Va-Yehi Acharei Mot Moshe*, but we do not know the reason that he changed the order in the Gemara.

The truth is that the custom of reading the first chapter of *Yehoshua* as the *haftara* for *Zot Ha-berakha* is indeed documented already in the Gaonic period. For example, *Siddur Rav Sa'adya Gaon* simply records our custom, whereas *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* cites the two customs. *Rishonim*, like the Rambam and the Rosh, also mention both possibilities. It is clear then that our custom became more and more dominant over time.[\[1\]](#)

At the heart of the issue is the question what do we wish to focus on in this *haftara* – the matter of the holiday, in which case we should choose a *haftara* that deals with a blessing that was given to the people, which is the original reason for reading *Zot Ha-berakha* on *Shemini Atzeret*[\[2\]](#); or do we prefer a chapter that reflects the contents of the *parasha*. For we are dealing here with a unique situation in which the reading for the *Yom Tov* is also one of the weekly *parashiyot*. Now, according to the thesis developed over the course of this series, that the primary function of the *haftara* is to relate to the existential condition of man in the framework of the yearly cycle and the cycle of life, rather than to serve as an interpretation of the Torah reading, it is clear that the scales should be tipped in favor of the holiday. The *haftara* should then reflect *Shemini Atzeret*, rather than relate to the contents of *Zot Ha-berakha*. Indeed, the Gemara accepts this approach and establishes the *haftara* according to the special significance of the day, similar to *Shabbat* that falls out on *Chanuka*, *Rosh Chodesh* and the like, and it does not consider the *parasha*. Our custom, however, requires clarification, for it gives priority to the *parasha* over the day.

This, however, is clearly not the case. Our custom does not give preference to the connection to the *parasha* over the existential messages connected to the yearly cycle. Rather, our custom sees the connection between the *haftara* and *Parashat Zot Ha-berakha* as bearing an existential message, owing to the fact that the *parasha* seals the Torah. Our interest lies not in the plot of the *parasha*, but in the fact that it serves as the Torah's conclusion. Therefore, the more that the day assumed the character of the holiday of *Simchat Torah*, rather than the day on which by chance we finish reading the Torah, the more the inner logic of the institution of reading

a *haftara* allowed, and perhaps even necessitated the replacement of the blessing of Shelomo with the beginning of the book of *Yehoshua*.

Let us move on now from the discussion of the selection of the *haftara* to an analysis of its contents.

FROM MOSHE TO YEHOSHUA

The transfer of leadership from Moshe to Yehoshua was natural and expected – assuming that the leadership should be passed on to Moshe's most distinguished disciple rather than to his son – and was determined by God Himself.^[3] Shortly before his death, Moshe too emphasized that he was appointing Yehoshua as his replacement to lead the people in his stead:

And Moshe called to Yehoshua, and said to him in the sight of all Israel, Be strong and of a good courage: for you must go with this people into the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it... And he gave Yehoshua the son of Nun a charge, and said, Be strong and of a good courage: for you shall bring the children of Israel in to the land of which I swore to them: and I will be with you. (*Devarim* 31:7, 23)

In this he followed the principle that he had received from God who had established at the time of Yehoshua's ordination that he should be appointed leader in the sight of the entire nation:

And the Lord said to Moshe, Take you Yehoshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay your hand upon him; and set him before Elazar the priest, **and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight.** And you shall put some of your honor upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient. (*Bamidbar* 27:18-20)

Nevertheless, the transfer of leadership is not a bed of roses, and Yehoshua's appointment is not simple in the eyes of the people. Despite all their bitterness and their complaints about Moshe, who did not hesitate to say to them, "How can I myself alone bear your care, and your burden, and your strife" (*Devarim* 1:12), and despite all the friction between them, the people of Israel recognized that Moshe's authority drew its force not only from his being the savior of Israel, but also from his being their foremost prophet and Israel's teacher *par excellence* who had received the Torah. The combination of these three functions in the same person bestowed authority and meaning upon Moshe's leadership and fortified his position vis-a-vis the people. And then one day, Moshe died and Yehoshua succeeded him. Despite all of Yehoshua's virtues and spiritual greatness, he clearly did not reach Moshe's supreme spiritual level. This allowed the people to refuse to accept Yehoshua as their leader and to challenge him, for there was no denying the fact that Yehoshua was not Moshe's equal.

Therefore, what was most urgently needed immediately at the beginning of the book of *Yehoshua*, prior to Israel's entry into the land and the beginning of their conquest, was a reinforcement of Yehoshua's status as leader. This is the subject of our *haftara*. It is important to note that we are dealing with a process that begins in chapter 1, but continues through the first few chapters of the book, so that our chapter is part of a broader whole, as we shall see below.

The beginning of the *haftara* emphasizes Moshe's unique level as "servant of the Lord" and Yehoshua's standing as "Moshe's minister":

Now after the death of Moshe the servant of the Lord, it came to pass, that the Lord spoke to Yehoshua the son of Nun, Moshe's minister, saying. (*Yehoshua* 1:1)

The first half of the verse alludes to the problematic challenge of leading the people of Israel as successor to a person who was the servant of God and earning the people's trust in this position. Let us not forget that the one time that the people thought that Moshe had left them, they went into a panic and lost control, ultimately reaching the terrible sin of the golden calf. While it is true that forty years had passed since then, it was a new generation, and Moshe had prepared them at the end of his

life for his exit from the stage, it is still not clear how the people will react to his death and replacement by another leader. The second half of the verse, which describes Yehoshua as "Moshe's minister" points to the problematic nature of Yehoshua's appointment. On the one hand, he was the closest person to Moshe and his most loyal follower, and therefore he was worthy to take his place; on the other hand, this fact is liable to raise concern among the people that his achievements do not follow from his own personality but from Moshe's greatness, and if Moshe is gone, then the source of Yehoshua's strength is gone as well. In other words, if Moshe's countenance is similar to the sun, and Yehoshua's to the moon, of what value is the moon when the sun no longer shines?

God, therefore, strengthens Yehoshua's hand and stresses by way of a Divine promise that Yehoshua will continue Moshe's accomplishments and merit the same help from heaven:

Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given to you, as I said to Moshe. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Perat, all the land of the Chitti, as far as the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your border. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life: as I was with Moshe, so I will be with you. I will not fail you, nor forsake you. Be strong and of a good courage: for you shall cause the people to inherit the land, which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, and observe to do according to all the Torah, which Moshe My servant commanded you: turn not from it to the right hand nor to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. (ibid. vv. 3-7)

It is important to pay attention to the many times that Moshe is mentioned in these verses, the key sentence in this context undoubtedly being the assertion that "**as I was with Moshe, so I will be with you.**" If we examine these references, we see that the first one relates to the matter of leadership and promises that Yehoshua will achieve the accomplishments promised to Moshe. This point is of great importance, for it is not self-evident to the people that the promises given to Moshe are still valid. Perhaps these things were promised to Moshe owing to his righteousness and closeness to God, rather than promises connected to the actualization of the historical destiny of Israel as a nation! Surely some passages in the Torah leave us with the impression that God's promises to the patriarchs and His covenant with them followed from their personal righteousness. (It was, therefore, possible to rely on the covenant

with the patriarchs even at the difficult hour of the sin of the golden calf, for it does not depend on the people of Israel in and of themselves, but on a commitment to Israel via the patriarchs.) Thus, there is room to think that some of the promises that had been given to Moshe were also valid only under his leadership. God, therefore, emphasizes that Yehoshua will actualize the far-reaching promise that "every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given to you, **as I said to Moshe.**" The promise had not been given to Moshe as an individual, but as the leader of a nation, and anyone who takes his place as leader will merit to actualize it as the shepherd of Israel.

THE PEOPLE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD YEHOSHUA

The second mention of Moshe in this passage does not relate to the realization of goals, but to the obligations cast upon Yehoshua owing to the Torah that he had received from Moshe: "Only be strong and very courageous, and observe to do according to all the Torah, which Moshe My servant commanded you." Aside from the obligation falling upon every individual to fulfill the Torah, the emphasis that is placed upon the fact that it was Moshe who had commanded Yehoshua is important in the context of Yehoshua's appointment. Since his entire standing stems from his being "Moshe's minister," his following in the path commanded by Moshe is what justifies his leadership. His abandonment of this path, God forbid, would not merely be a religious transgression, but rather it would pull the rug out from under his standing as leader, both according to the truth vis-a-vis God, and vis-a-vis the nation and their expectations.

Indeed, in the closing verses of the chapter and *haftara*, we can see the slightly hesitant attitude of the people toward Yehoshua's new leadership. When Yehoshua turns to the people of Gad and Reuven to fulfill the commitment that they had given to Moshe, the backing that they give to his leadership is full and broad, **but conditional:**

Pass through the midst of the camp, and command the people, saying, Prepare your food; for within three days you shall pass over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land, which the Lord your God gives you to possess it. And to the Re'uvani, and to the Gadi, and to half the tribe of Menashe, Yehoshua spoke

saying, Remember the word which Moshe the servant of the Lord commanded you, saying, The Lord your God gives you rest, and will give you this land. Your wives, your little ones, and your cattle shall remain in the land which Moshe gave you on the far side of the Jordan; but you shall pass before your brethren armed, all the mighty men of valor, and help them; until the Lord has given your brethren rest, as he has given you, and they also have possessed the land which the Lord your God gives them: then you shall return to the land of your possession, which Moshe the Lord's servant gave you on the far side of the Jordan, toward the sunrising, and occupy it. And they answered Yehoshua, saying, All that you command us we will do, and wherever you send us, we will go. As we hearkened to Moshe in all things, so will we hearken to you: only the Lord your God be with you, as He was with Moshe. Whoever rebels against your commandment, and will not hearken to your words in all that you command him, he shall be put to death: only be strong and of a good courage. (vv. 11-18)

First of all, attention should be paid to the fact that Yehoshua mobilizes Moshe's authority and prestige to justify his request; he does not approach them based on his independent status as leader. Moreover, he does not content himself with a general mention of Moshe as leader, but rather he mobilizes Moshe's designation as servant of the Lord as the basis for their obligation to fulfill the mission that they had accepted upon themselves. We are left with the impression that at this point Yehoshua feels that he is still in need of Moshe's authority if people are to listen to him.

The response of the people of Gad and Reuven is very interesting. On the one hand, they accept Yehoshua's authority and give him their full backing as Moshe's successor, "As we hearkened to Moshe in all things, so will we hearken to you." They promise to strengthen his position, beyond what is stated in the Torah, which does not spell out in detail the punishment awaiting one who rebels against royalty: "Whoever rebels against your commandment, and will not hearken to your words in all that you command him, he shall be put to death."

On the other hand, their words allude to the points raised above. First, the very need to emphasize the law governing one who rebels against royalty and his punishment testifies that this appeared to them as a realistic possibility which must be contended with, and that it is possible that some members of the people of Israel will

not obey Yehoshua. So too, even their attitude toward Yehoshua's leadership is still found in Moshe's shadow, and therefore they declare their loyalty to Yehoshua while referring to the leadership of Moshe. The main point, however, is the explicit stipulation regarding Yehoshua: "As we hearkened to Moshe in all things, so will we hearken to you: **only** the Lord your God be with you, as He was with Moshe." There is here a declaration of absolute loyalty and readiness to kill all those who rebel against Yehoshua's authority, but it is all conditional: "Only the Lord your God be with you, as He was with Moshe." If they do not feel that God is supporting Yehoshua the way that He had supported Moshe, their loyalty and support will be withdrawn.

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE VERSES DEALING WITH MOSHE AND THOSE DEALING WITH YEHOSHUA

At this point our *haftara* comes to an end, but the attempt to support Yehoshua and rest upon him of Moshe's glory continues in the coming chapters. Many of the episodes in these chapters parallel actions taken by Moshe, this in order to fortify Yehoshua's standing. This is especially evident in chapter 3, which recounts the story of Israel's crossing of the Jordan, when the associations with the parting of the Sea of Suf are self-evident. Not only the very parting of the waters into two, but even the wording of the passage consciously parallels the verses in the Torah. Thus, for example, we encounter the following expressions: "And it came to pass, when the people moved" (3:14), "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean you by these stones? then you shall answer them" (4:6-7), "And these stones shall be for a memorial" (4:7), "And all Israel passed over on dry ground" (3:17). If these shared formulations are not enough, Scripture removes all doubt when the prophet himself asserts: "For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan from before you, until you were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Sea of Suf, which He dried up before us, until we were gone over" (4:23).

The purpose of these similarities is also stated explicitly by Scripture both at the beginning and at the end of its description of Israel's crossing of the Jordan. At the beginning it says: "And the Lord said to Yehoshua, This day will I begin to magnify you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moshe, so I will be with you." (3:7). And at the end of the section it says: "On that day the Lord magnified Yehoshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moshe, all the days of his life" (4:14). Thus it is stated explicitly that it was God's

intention to bring the people to recognize Yehoshua's leadership as they had recognized that of Moshe, and that He will work toward that end in His governance of Israel when they enter the Land. The problematic aspects of Yehoshua's standing is indeed an important issue that occupies Scripture at the beginning of the book of *Yehoshua*, and Divine providence works to fortify his standing. In our chapter this is done primarily through the command given to Yehoshua, whereas in the continuation actions are taken to demonstrate to the people the continuity and authority of Yehoshua's leadership. As we have seen, this goal is indeed reached: "On that day the Lord magnified Yehoshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moshe, all the days of his life" – Yehoshua becoming the unchallenged leader of Israel.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *SIMCHAT TORAH* AND THE *HAFTARAH*

With this we have completed our discussion of the *haftara* itself. We now wish to add a few words in honor of *Simchat Torah* and the connection between it and the *haftara*.

Some of the most famous verses regarding Torah study, including the key verse, "And you shall meditate therein day and night" (1:8), are found in our *haftara*. We must ask ourselves why it is that these verses find their place at the beginning of the book of *Yehoshua*, and not in the five books of Moshe. In order to answer this question, let us cite the most important talmudic passage dealing with our verse:

Rabbi Ami said: We learn from the words of Rabbi Yose that even if a person studies only one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening, he fulfills the *mitzva* of "This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth" (*Yehoshua* 1:8). Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: Even if a person reads only the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening, he fulfills "[This book of the Torah] shall not depart." But one may not say this in the presence of ignorant people. And Rava said: It is a *mitzva* to say this in the presence of ignorant people. Ben Dama the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister asked Rabbi Yishmael: Somebody like me who has studied

the entire Torah - is he permitted to study Greek wisdom? Apply to him this verse: "This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth, and you shall meditate therein day and night." Go out and find a time that is neither day nor night, and study then Greek wisdom. He argues with Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani, for Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: This verse is neither an obligation nor a *mitzva*, but rather a blessing. The Holy One, blessed be He, saw in Yehoshua that the words of the Torah are exceedingly dear to him, as it is stated, "But his servant Yehoshua, the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from tent" (*Shemot* 33:11). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Yehoshua, the words of the Torah are so dear to you; this book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth. (*Menachot* 99b)

To understand this passage, we shall cite in utmost brevity the words of Rav Sh. Y. Zevin, based on the words of the author of the *Tanya* in *Shulchan Arukh ha-Rav*. Rav Zevin writes as follows:[\[4\]](#)

The study of Torah and the knowledge of the Torah are two separate *mitzvot*. Study without knowledge is possible in two ways: Either a person already knows all the laws of the Torah, and as Ben Dama, the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister, asked Rabbi Yishmael: Somebody like me who has studied the entire Torah is he permitted to study Greek wisdom? Or an ignoramus, who even if he studies understands nothing, and acquires no knowledge...

What is the biblical source for these two *mitzvot*... "And you shall teach them diligently" (*Devarim* 6:7) points to knowledge. And thus the Sages said: "'And you shall teach them diligently' – the words of the Torah must be sharp in your mouth."... The Ran writes: This does not mean that with this a person is exempt, for a person is obligated to study at all times, day and night, in accordance with his abilities. And we said in the first chapter of *Kiddushin* (30): "Our Rabbis taught: 'And you shall teach them diligently' - the words of the Torah must be sharp in your mouth, so that if someone asks you a question, you shall not stutter, but rather say to him... And reading *Shema* morning and night does not suffice for this." He means to say: Even if the reading of *Shema* could exempt a person from the *mitzva* of study, it does not exempt him from the *mitzva* of knowledge, for the reading of *Shema* does not suffice so that a person should know how to answer another person's questions... What then is taught by the verse, "And you shall meditate therein [day and night]"? Even if a person is very busy with his livelihood and

cannot study Torah all the time, nevertheless he is obligated to establish times for Torah [study] by day and by night, even one chapter in the morning and one chapter at night. About this they said: "In a time of need, when a person's preoccupations are excessive, and he has no time for even a single chapter, he can fulfill his obligation with the reading of *Shema* by day and by night in order to fulfill the *mitzva* of "And you shall meditate therein day and night," it being a time of need and there being no alternative.

Rav Zevin means to say that the command given to Yehoshua does not relate to knowledge of the Torah. Yehoshua occupied himself with acquiring Torah knowledge throughout the years that he ministered to Moshe in the wilderness. But this chapter in his life ended when he was appointed leader of Israel charged with conquering the land. From now on, he will have little time for study, because he will be busy fighting the Canaanites and governing Israel. Therefore, the commandment that falls upon him is not to increase his knowledge, but to maintain an existential connection to Torah through brief daily study. The purpose of this study is not the knowledge to be gained therefrom, but putting his daily personal schedule into a framework in which the connection to God and Torah are basic components of his consciousness. Accordingly, this commandment was given to him at this time, at the beginning of the book of *Yehoshua*, when he became leader.

In light of this, reading this chapter as the *haftara* for *Simchat Torah* is meaningful even for us. It comes to teach us that *Simchat Torah* is not the personal holiday of scholars who spend most of their waking hours amassing Torah knowledge, but rather it is the holiday of the entire Jewish people, who are busy earning their livelihood. It comes to teach about the relationship of the entire people to Torah. The *siyyum* that is celebrated on *Simchat Torah* relates to the cycle of weekly Torah readings in the synagogue, which is also a practice directed at man's existential situation inasmuch as it provides him with a connection to Torah and the revelation at Mount Sinai, and not a rabbinic ordination program or material that merely provides intellectual knowledge. Every year we return to that same cycle of reading, without making any changes, because the goal is experiential, and all of Israel are partners in that experience. *Chazal* have already commented on the *mitzva* of bringing children to the *hakhel* ceremony, that it is to "to reward those who bring them," which should be understood to mean that it involves educational and experiential gain, because even the connection of a child who does not understand what is written in the Torah must be strengthened. The *Tosafists* (*Chagiga* 3a) transferred this principle from the reading of the *parasha* of *Hakhel* in the Temple to the weekly reading of the Torah in the synagogue, and saw a reason to include

children in that as well. R. Yitzchak Or Zaru'a expanded upon this idea writing (II, no. 48):

After he has read, the prayer leader goes and sits on a chair and all the children go and kiss the Torah scroll after it is rolled up. This is a good custom to train and encourage children in *mitzvot*. This is similar to what is found in tractate *Soferim* which concludes that they would not leave their minor children behind, but rather they would bring them to synagogue in order to encourage them to perform *mitzvot*. On the day that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryahu was established in his position, he opened by saying: "You stand this day all of you before the Lord... your little ones, your wives..." – the men to hear, the women to receive reward for coming, by why do the children come? To reward those who bring them. From here it has become customary for Jewish girls to come to synagogue in order to reward those who bring them... And also because children come to synagogue, the fear of heaven enters their hearts. As we have learned: Yehoshua ben Chananya, happy is she who gave birth to him. And it is explained in the *Yerushalmi*, in the first chapter of *Yebamot*: Because his mother would bring him to the study hall so that his ears should cleave to words of Torah, as this is the meaning of the Mishna: "[Yehoshua] ben Chananya, happy is she who gave birth to him."

Allowing the entire community to participate in Torah study is the underlying message of *hakhel*, the mitzva of meditating upon the Torah day and night, and our joy on the holiday of *Simchat Torah*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] Comprehensive documentation of the various sources dealing with this issue may be found in A. Ya'ari's *Toledot Chag Simchat Torah* (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1998), pp. 55-62. It should be noted that attempts were made to combine the two customs, as is explained there.

[2] See *ibid.*, pp. 32-34. It may be added that "blessing" is one of the characteristics that set *Shemini Atzeret* off as a separate festival. See *Rosh ha-Shana* 4b, and *Tosafot*, ad loc., s.v. *PaZaR*).

[3] See *Bamidbar* 27:15-23, and *Devarim* 31:14.

[4] "Talmud Torah ve-Yedi'ata," in *Le-Or ha-Halakha*, pp. 204-212.