

## Punishment and Hope:

### The Haftora for Tisha Be-Av

By Rav Yehuda Shaviv

It is only natural that the haftora for Tisha Be-Av was selected from among the prophecies of Yirmiyahu (8:13-9:23), who prophesied about the imminent destruction of the Temple and was himself witness to the realization of his prophecies.

#### A. FRAMEWORK OF THE PROPHECY

The expression "says the Lord" serves as a sort of stylistic indication of the boundaries of the prophecy, which opens with the words, "I shall surely gather them, says the Lord" and concludes with "for in these I delight, says the Lord." The expression occurs several more times during the course of the prophecy (8:17, 9:2, 5, 8).

There is also another element that contributes to the structure of the framework: the prophecy opens with the words, "I shall surely gather them [to death]" (asof asifem), and ends with, "and none shall gather them" (ve-ein me'asef) (9:21). This will be discussed further below.

"I shall surely gather them [to death]" - this is an expression of destruction. The prophet here uses the word "asaf," which has a sort of contradictory double-meaning, since it can also connote a positive "gathering," a gathering up that is blessed. It is a great blessing when man gathers up his harvest, and this harvesting (asif) is accompanied with joy and song. Here, instead of blessing we find a curse, and instead of joy - mourning.

#### B. NO GRAPES, NO FIGS AND NO PEACE

The opening verse continues with an image of destruction: "NO grapes in the vineyard and NO figs on the fig tree" (13). The prophet intentionally uses the imagery of the vineyard and fig tree, for their fertility is symbolic of peace and tranquility, as we find in the description of Shlomo's reign and the peace that characterized that epoch:

"And Yehuda and Israel dwelled safely, each person under his vineyard and each under his fig tree, from Dan up to Be'er Sheva."  
(Melakhim I 5:5)

In the next clause of the opening verse, not only is the fruit destroyed, but even the leaves wither, and there are no branches or leaves left to provide shelter and shade. Sitting in the shade of the vine or the fig tree is a symbol not only of economic welfare, but also of security and peace of mind. Now not only will prosperity crumble, but the nation will be threatened by an enemy. Hence the cry in the following verse, "Why are we sitting here?" (14), in a sort of illusion of peace. Rather, "Gather yourselves," echoing the promise, "I shall surely gather them [to death]," "and let us go to the fortified cities." The pastoral peace of the countryside is to be abandoned.

There, in the fortified cities, "we shall be silent there" (following the interpretation of the Radak) - a raging silence, in contrast with the voices of joy that should be heard at a time of harvest and ingathering.

This silence has something of an acceptance of the situation within it - an acceptance that arises from a penetrating look at the roots of the situation: "For God our God has cut us off," and

acceptance of Divine judgment: "for we have sinned to God" (14).

We have not drunk wine of the vineyard, for the harvest has been destroyed. Instead of drinking wine that brings joy, God has given us "water of gall" (14) - a bitter and poisonous drink.

In fact, we find elsewhere a sort of "water of gall" that comes from the vineyard:

"For their vine is of the vine of Sedom and of the fields of Amorah; their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter." ([Devarim 32:32](#))

A summary of the situation is found in verse 15:

"Look for peace - but there is no good; to a time of healing - but behold, terror."

This represents a gradual deterioration: not only is the hope not realized ("there is no good"), but the situation in fact becomes even worse ("behold - terror").

#### C. MESSENGERS OF PUNISHMENT

The terror is already being realized and growing: "From Dan the snorting of his horses can be heard" (16). The mention of Dan here may be meant to serve as a contrast to the epoch of peace when Israel dwelled safely "from Dan to Be'er Sheva." Now from there the sounds of the enemy's preparations for war can be heard, and what was promised to Yirmiyahu at the beginning of his prophecy (1:14) is happening: "The evil will start from the north."

The enemies will consume "the land and its fullness," but also "the city and its inhabitants" (16). If Israel thought that they could protect themselves in the fortified cities, they are now informed that there, too, they face destruction.

The "land" can refer to Eretz Yisrael, and the "city" to the holy city. If so, then the punishment has already escalated one stage further. While in Yishayahu's harsh prophecy - the one read on Shabbat Chazon - "the daughter of Zion remains like a shelter in the vineyard... like a besieged city" (1:8), here punishment is to be expected even in Zion, as is made explicit further on: "I will make Yerushalayim into heaps, a den of jackals" (9:10).

But God informs them here that not only the enemy - whose horses can already be heard from afar - awaits them, but also "poisonous snakes that make no whisper" (17). The harm caused by these latter is even worse, for, since they give no warning sound, their attack is unexpected and it is impossible to defend oneself against being bitten.

#### D. DIALOGUE OR TRIALOGUE

In verses 18-23 we hear different voices. Some of the words seem to be spoken by the prophet, others by the nation, and still others by God. Some are painful questions and some expressions of pain. It appears that this whole cacophony of words arises from the prophet's heart, since he simultaneously represents God and the nation, and in the midst of their words he also gives vent to his own feelings, since this dialogue takes place within himself and not directly between God and Israel.

While previously we heard the snorting of the enemy's horses from afar, we now hear a human cry - for the nation has already been exiled and is now in a far-off land (according to Targum Yonatan; according to Radak, the cry is one of fear of the enemy's approach, and thus the cry still comes from within the land). The voice is weak; they are astonished: "Is God not in Zion, is her King not within her?" (19). How is it possible that the enemies are prevailing over her? God's response is also in the form of a question: "Why have they made Me angry with their carved idols?" (19).

Again we hear the cry of the nation: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (20) - indicating that even after the evil befell them, they still hoped for salvation.

#### E. THE DAUGHTER OF MY NATION

Now come the verses of the prophet's lamentations "for the hurt of the daughter of my nation" (21). This expression recurs in this section six times. There are three other places where it occurs in Yirmiyahu's prophecies, and five more times in his book of Lamentations - Eikha. Other than these, there is only one other mention of this expression in Tanakh - in Yishayahu's prophecy, and there too it is found in the context of mourning:

"Therefore I have said, Take your eyes off me, I will cry bitterly; do not try to comfort me for the hurt of the daughter of my nation." (22:4)

This phenomenon seems to confirm that the expression "daughter of my nation" is reserved for use in describing the brokenness and destruction of the nation, and lamentation over it. The expression itself connotes a feeling of mercy and sorrow for the fate of this foolish "young girl" who has lost her beauty, her honor and her status.

#### F. IS THERE NO BALM IN GILAD? (22)

The prophet's rhetorical question is a sort of continuation of the hope previously expressed - "Hope ... for a time of healing." This hope had some basis, it seems, for there was balm (tzori) and there were doctors in Gilad. Hence the painful questioning: "Why is the health of the daughter of my nation not restored?" (22)

Gilad is the northeastern region of Eretz Yisrael. Apparently, not only the evil began from the north - the salvation could have come from there too. But salvation did not come. Why did it not come, asks the prophet, and he gives no answer. Perhaps the answer is hinted at in the very question itself - for the balm of

Gilad is associated with an image from Bereishit: "And behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites came from Gilad, their camels bearing gum and balm" (37:25). This convoy not only failed to bring healing at the time, but in fact brought the sickness to the point of terrible crisis. Yosef's brothers used this convoy as their opportunity to sell him to Egypt - a sale which is a terrible expression of fraternal hatred.

Here the answer is hinted at: Why was the health of the daughter of my nation not restored? Because the Satan of fraternal hatred still exists among them and claims its casualties, as described by Yirmiyahu further on in his prophecy, in chapter 9.

And since there is no longer any hope of healing or restored health, there is nothing left to do but to cry over the dead: "Oh, that my head were waters... that I could weep day and night" (23) – for regular tears cannot possibly suffice for so many who have been slain.

#### G. FROM ONE EVIL TO ANOTHER

Up to now we have heard about the punishment and the pain, and the hope for healing that has not been realized. The question that echoed until now was, "Why has the health of the daughter of my nation not been restored?" An answer is provided in the opening verses of chapter 9. The nation is described as a collection of adulterers and treacherous people (whether this is meant on the literal level or as a metaphor, perceiving the relationship between the nation and God as that between a woman and her husband – in which case the nation's involvement in idolatry can be compared to adultery and treachery), of slanderers and liars, each of whom seeks evil for his neighbors. Therefore the prophet – or God – asks to be cut off both socially and geographically from the nation: "If only I was in the desert, in a lodging for wayfarers, that I might leave my nation..." (9:1).

Among the evils listed we find also, "And they do not know Me." Worse still: "Through deceit they refuse to know Me" (5). The significance of this lack of knowledge of God can be discerned from the conclusion of the haftora.

Just as the nation expects salvation and healing (8:20, 22), so God also has expectations. Before He brings the punishment He wishes to test (by means of suffering) whether there has been any change – "Behold, I smelt them and test them" (6), but the test demonstrates that still "their tongue is a sharpened arrow, it speaks deceit" (7).

Once again, the sounds of weeping. While at the end of chapter 8 there was weeping over "the slain of the daughter of my nation," here the weeping is for the destruction of the mountains and the pastures of the desert, for Yerushalayim and the cities of Yehuda, which are desolate and without inhabitants.

#### G. WHY HAS THE LAND PERISHED?

Since the land has perished and become desolate, the question echoes: "Why did it perish?" (11). This question, it seems, is not directed just at anyone; rather, it is addressed to the wise man and the prophet ("to whom the mouth of God has spoken"). But even they have no answer, and they require an answer from God.

But has the prophet not already listed (at the beginning of chapter 9) the religious and moral sins which caused the destruction? Why is there still a question?

Perhaps it is nothing more than a rhetorical question, uttered with irony and mocking: does one need to be a wise man or a prophet in order to understand why these events have taken place? Is God's response really required? In truth, they saw and knew everything.

Or perhaps the extent of the destruction is so terrible that the mind cannot comprehend it.

Perhaps in the very midst of the destruction the mind cannot remain clear and understand. In order to reach some explanation, there is a need for an external source of understanding.

And maybe the description in verses 1-7 is really insufficient, for when one becomes used to something then it becomes a norm of behavior, and society can still believe that it observes the commandments despite the deceit of their tongues and their slander. Therefore God tells them, "Because they abandoned My Torah... and did not listen to My voice... and went after the stubbornness of their hearts" (12-13).

#### H. FROM WEEPING TO MORE WEEPING

We read previously of God's weeping and the weeping of the prophet; now we hear the weeping of the nation. Just as previously a way was sought to increase the weeping – "If only my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears" (8:23), so too here some external means is sought: "Call for the mourners that they may come" (16), for they will "take up a wailing for us" so that "our eyes may run with tears" (17). But it seems that the professional mourning women are not sufficient for this task, and therefore the women must teach their daughters to wail, "and each [to teach] her neighbor lamentation" (19). It may be that they were called upon to do this even prior to the destruction (for during the destruction the tears and wailing would surely come of their own accord). The lamentation called for here is not that which follows death, but rather lamentation in the face of death that "comes up into windows and has entered our palaces" (20). This weeping might awaken regret and repentance, and might have the power to stay the punishment.

#### I. THERE IS NONE TO GATHER THEM

Verse 21 appears to conclude the prophecy of punishment. There are two indications of this: firstly, "So says the Lord" – echoing the beginning of the prophecy, and secondly, "there is none to gather them," echoing "I shall surely gather them up." The conclusion is a painful contrast: at first the prophecy spoke of destruction, and here it appears that the destruction is not yet complete – the corpses will fall on the battlefield with none to gather them.

#### J. THAT HE UNDERSTANDS AND KNOWS ME

The final two verses sound like a new prophecy, which seems entirely unrelated to the previous section. But there is in fact a connection between them. God complained, as it were, that "they do not know Me" (2), and that "through deceit they have refused to know Me" (5). Here He declares that a person can rightfully glory in "understanding and knowing Me." Thus we learn that understanding of God involves knowledge; it is a matter for intellectual involvement.

But the continuation of Yirmiyahu's words shows that knowledge of God means proper social leadership. God presents Himself, as it were: "For I am God who performs faithful love, justice and righteousness in the earth." It turns out that understanding God means knowing Him through these attributes.

And what does God desire? That man should follow His ways and likewise perform faithful love, justice and righteousness. These deeds are the key to redemption, as we read in Mincha of Tisha Be-Av, from the prophecy of Yishayahu:

"Keep judgment and do justice, for My salvation is near to come, and My righteousness to be revealed." (56:1)

The prophet Zekharia gives a similar response when asked – following the return to Zion – whether it is proper to continue to

fast. His lengthy response is summarized in the words, "You shall love truth and peace" (8:19).

Judgment and righteousness are the outgrowth of love and truth, while faithful love and judgment arise from love of peace. There is hope for us when we adopt these values and thereby imitate God.

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