

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

THE WEEKLY HAFTORA
By Rav Yehuda Shaviv

PARASHAT NOAH
No More Destruction (Yishayahu 54:1 - 55:5)
Rav Yehuda Shaviv

a. Waters of Noah

One pasuk from this prophecy seems to indicate the reason for its choice as the Haftora for parashat Noah:

"For this is as the waters of Noah to Me; as I have promised that the waters of Noah shall not cover the earth again, so have I promised that I shall not be angry at you..." (54:9)

The "waters of Noah" clearly refer to the flood waters, and, indeed, Noah and the flood stand at the center of the entire first part of this week's parasha.

But the expression "waters of Noah" is nevertheless somewhat surprising, as noted in the Sefer Ha-Zohar (Vayikra 14b): "Rabbi Yosi said: 'For this is as the waters of Noah to Me, as I have promised...' - this presents a difficulty, for it is written, 'The waters of the flood were upon the earth,' and it is also written, 'And all flesh will not be exterminated again by the waters of the flood.' In both instances the Torah speaks of 'waters of the flood,' not 'waters of Noah'; yet here we find written, 'For this is as the waters of Noah to Me...'"

The Zohar presents a lengthy response to this textual difficulty. Whereas God wants the world to exist, and Moshe Rabbeinu is praised for being prepared to give up his life

rather than allow the nation of Israel to be destroyed as a result of the sin of the golden calf. Moshe's response to the decree of destruction stands in stark contrast to Noah's apathetic reaction upon hearing about the flood:

"It is written, 'And God said to Noah, The end of all flesh has come before Me. Noah said to Him, 'And what will become of me?' God said, 'I shall establish My covenant with you... Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood.' Noah's mercy was not aroused over the fate of the world... and it is for this reason that the flood is here called 'waters of Noah.'

The fact that Noah failed to beseech God on behalf of his generation makes the flood, to some extent, his responsibility. He was a perfectly righteous man, but he failed this test of loyalty to his generation - a test in which Moshe Rabbeinu was far more successful.

This presents a lesson for all generations. From the parasha it would appear that the decree of destruction which had been passed on the world was already beyond question or appeal. Yet, the Haftora hints that the most righteous man of the generation held in his hand the key to the annulment of this decree. Indeed, if Noah's actions AFTER the flood yielded a covenant promising that the flood would never repeat itself, then certainly his prayers prior to the flood would have held the power to at least to postpone the decree - if not cancel it entirely.

This may also hint at the topic addressed by the prophet - future redemption. Not only is the future redemption destined to take place, and not only will all sorts of good tidings accompany this process, but the prophet also adds the following promise: "As I have promised that the waters of Noah

will not cover the earth again, so have I promised that I shall not be angry at you nor rebuke you."

In other words, we are being promised that after this redemption there will be no more exile, just as Noah and his sons were promised that a flood would never again threaten the world. The implication here is that just as Noah is chastised for not acting to prevent the impending flood, so the nation of Israel is covertly being rebuked for not preventing the impending exile, for it is indeed possible to prevent this exile - as the future promise proves.

(It should be noted that some commentaries interpret "mei noah" as similar in meaning to "bimei noah." See Targum and Radak, who bases his commentary here on the written form, depending on whether it is written as separate words - "ki mei noah..." or as one word - "kimei noah.")

b. Sing, O Barren One

The opening of the prophecy may also point to a connection between the beginning of the Haftora and the conclusion of the parasha. At the end of the parasha we read, "And Sarai was barren; she had no child." This state of barrenness on the part of Sarai, Avram's wife, serves as the introduction to the events that will occur in Avram's household and the future complications of his life (marrying Hagar, the birth of Yishmael, his banishment), with all their far-reaching ramifications. The Haftora brings the following promise of hope for the future: "Sing, O barren one who did not give birth... for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife."

c. Extension of the Perimeters

The vision expressed in the parasha is one of a destroyed world which slowly starts to rebuild itself. Correspondingly

our parasha features a covenant between God and man to be fruitful and multiply, and from the ark emerge people who spread throughout the world: "And from these the whole earth was spread." (9:20)

The prophet promises a similar phenomenon, by which "desolate cities will be inhabited" (54:3). Not only will there be a return to the original state, but additionally, "Enlarge the place of your tent... lengthen your cords... for you shall burst forth to the right and to the left..." (2-3).

Once again we need a promise that the trauma of utter destruction will not return - like the covenant which God made with Noah. But this prophetic covenant promises even more, extending beyond the laws of nature: "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My merciful love shall not pass from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed..." (10).

d. Dispersion and Ingathering

According to Ashkenazi custom, the prophecy of "O afflicted one, stormy and not comforted" (54:11-55:5) is included in the Haftora, perhaps suggesting another message. The parasha teaches us about the "dor ha-palaga," the generation that wanted to get together and build a city and towers, but who ended up being dispersed against their wishes throughout the world. Unity and togetherness which are not for the sake of heaven - especially when directed specifically AGAINST God (see Rashi on the beginning of chapter 11) - are doomed to failure and disintegration, even though unity itself is praiseworthy. The haftora speaks of the correction of this mistake, of a gathering for the sake of heaven. Multitudes of Bnei Yisrael, will gather in their land, thus forcing the expansion of their borders. This expansion of Jewish settlement may spread Jewish faith to far-flung places: "You

shall call upon nations whom you do not know, and nations who did not know you will run to you because of the Lord your God..." (55:5).

This entire process will be led, it seems, by the Moshiach, a descendant of David, with whom God will establish "an everlasting covenant, the loyal merciful love of David... I have made him a witness to the nations, a leader and commander to the nations" (55:3-4).

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)