

UNDERSTANDING THE HAFTAROT

By Harav Yaakov Medan

The Haftara for Yom Kippur

They will say, "Mark, mark a road here; clear a way. Lift out of My people's way all that could make them fall." Thus says the high, the exalted One, abiding forever, whose name is holy: High and holy I abide, yet I am with the crushed and humbled, giving life to the humbled, giving life to crushed men's hearts. I will not forever contend with you, will not rage to the bitter end. When the spirit faints before Me, I created these souls. I have raged at the sin behind their profits, have struck them, have hidden My face and raged as they went wayward on the path their hearts beat out. I have seen their ways and will heal them. I will lead them, will reward them in comfort, them and their mourners; I form the words: Peace, peace to those far away and near – so the Lord speaks – I will heal them. The wicked are like the ocean surging, unable to be still; its waters fling up mud and filth. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.

Shout out loud; do not hold back; raise up your voice like a ram's horn. Tell My people of their rebellion; tell the House of Yaakov their sins. Day after day they search for Me; they desire to know My ways, like a nation that always did right and never forsook its God's justice. They ask for rulings in law. They say that being close to God is all that interests them. "Why do we fast and You not see it, oppress ourselves and You acknowledge it not?" But even on your fast days you press your interests, extort a profit on all that you own. Contending and fighting each other, you fast while you beat with the fist of evil. The fast you perform today will not carry your voice on high. Is this the fast I have chosen, a day for man to oppress himself? To bow his head like a rush in the wind, to lay his bed with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, "a day for the Lord's favor"? No! This is the fast I choose: Loosen the bindings of evil, and break the slavery chain. Those who were crushed, release to freedom, and shatter every yoke of slavery. Break your bread for the starving; bring dispossessed wanderers home. When you see a man naked, clothe him; do not avert your eyes from your own flesh. Then will your light break forth like sunrise, and healing will grow fast over your wound. Your righteousness will go before you, with the Lord's presence your rear guard behind. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; when you cry out, He will say, "I am here"; if you cast the chains of slavery from your midst, the raised fist and ruthless words; if you give of your soul to the starving and answer the hunger of souls oppressed – then your light will shine out in darkness; your very night will shine like noontide. The Lord will ever guide you, and answer your thirst in arid places; He will fortify your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of waters that will not fail. Places ruined long ago will be rebuilt in you; you will raise up houses from age old foundations, be known as mender of the ruptured wall, as the one who restored the paths for living. If you keep your feet from roving on the Sabbath, from pursuing your interests on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight, the Lord's holy day to be honored, if you honor it by not going your own way, attending to your own affairs, or speaking idle words, then you will find joy in the Lord; I will set you astride the

heights of the earth to feast on the inheritance of your father Yaakov, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (*Yeshayahu* 57:14-58:14)¹

I. The Connection Between the *Haftara* and Yom Kippur

On Yom Kippur, we read *Acharei Mot*, and we read as the *haftara* "Thus says the high, the exalted One." (*Megilla* 31a)²

The *poskim* (see *Beit Yosef* OC 621) offer two explanations for reading this *haftara* on Yom Kippur. The first relates to the fasting and repentance mentioned at the heart of the prophecy (*Yeshayahu* 58:1-12), and the value of a fast in relation to the *mitzvot* that accompany it. The prophet asserts in our *haftara* that fasting has no value without observance of those *mitzvot*; this message brings to mind again the *mishna* we saw in the context of the *haftara* for Shabbat Shuva, which addresses the value of a fast:

What is the order [of service] for fast days? The ark is taken out to the open space of the city, and wood ashes are placed on the ark, on the head of the Nasi, and on the head of the Av Beit Din. Everyone else puts ashes on his own head. The elder among them addresses them with words of admonition [to repentance]: Our brethren, Scripture does not say of the people of Nineveh, "And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting," but "And God saw their actions – that they had turned away from their cruel practices" (*Yona* 3:10). And in the Prophets it is stated: "Rend your hearts, not your clothing" (*Yoel* 2:13). (*Taanit* 2:1)

The second reason for reading this *haftara* on Yom Kippur relates to the end of the *haftara* – the verse "if you honor it by not going your own way" (58:13), which the Gemara expounds as referring to the honor of Yom Kippur, as we will see below.

II. The Meaning of the Prophet's Rebuke

Regarding the matter of fasting and repentance, it is possible that the connection to Yom Kippur is even greater, and that the prophecy was in fact delivered on Yom Kippur itself, in the Jubilee year:

Shout out loud; do not hold back; raise up your voice like a ram's horn. Tell My people of their rebellion; tell the House of Yaakov their sins. (58:1)

"Why do we fast and You not see it, oppress ourselves and You acknowledge it not?" (3)

No! This is the fast I choose: Loosen the bindings of evil, and break the slavery chain. Those who were crushed, release to freedom, and shatter every yoke of slavery. (6)

These words appear to have been uttered on a fast day observed by the general public. Comparing the prophet's words to the blowing of a ram's horn (a shofar) brings to mind the Torah's description of Yom Kippur of a Jubilee year:

Then you shall sound the ram's horn. On the tenth day of the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the horn all across your land. You shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. This

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural references are to the book of *Yeshayahu*.

² See also *Tur* and *Shulchan Arukh* OC 621:1.

shall be your Jubilee; each person shall return to his hereditary home, each to his family. (*Vayikra* 25:9-10)

The fiftieth year, the Jubilee year, is consecrated by the blowing of the shofar on Yom Kippur, and on that very day, slaves are supposed to be released and returned to their families and hereditary homes. The main rebuke of the prophet seems to be that the slaves instead remain in their chains, bound to the yoke of slavery. The mitzva of freeing the slaves was apparently forgotten and abandoned, and it is possible that the count of the years in the Jubilee cycle was forgotten and neglected along with it. Yet, the people pray to their God in all innocence, "like a nation that always did right and never forsook its God's justice" (58:2), and seek His closeness, wondering why God has not seen their fast and afflictions.

How do they know He has not seen their fasting? Perhaps we can assume that the clearest sign of God's being pleased by the people's fasting on Yom Kippur – the whitening of the scarlet thread in the Temple – was not evident that year. The chosen goat was slaughtered and its blood was sprinkled before God in the Holy of Holies, and the other goat brought with it was properly sent away to Azazel in the wilderness (and according to the tradition of *Chazal*, was thrown from the top of a cliff) – but the scarlet thread did not turn white, and the terrified people do not understand why God was not pleased with their fasting. The prophet thus informs them, from the mouth of God, that God will not be pleased with their fasting unless they observe the primary mitzva of Yom Kippur in the Jubilee year. The fast is not only about abstaining from food, wearing sackcloth and ashes, and bowing the head while the fist pounds the chest. The main point of fasting and repentance lies in liberating the slaves. Failure to do so reveals the fist with which they beat their chests while fasting and reciting the confessional to be "the fist of evil" (58:4), with which they force their slaves to work rather than releasing them to their homes as commanded.

II. When will the scarlet thread turn white?

This may not have been Yeshayahu's first Yom Kippur on which the scarlet thread did not turn white. It seems that this prophecy was preceded by another prophecy, on a different Yom Kippur (not necessarily in a Jubilee year), which related to similar sins. There it is stated:

When you spread your hands out skyward, I must turn My eyes away; when you pray with such verbosity, I am not listening. Your hands, they are covered in blood. Wash them, be clean now, remove your terrible deeds from My sight; stop bringing about such evils. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct what is cruel. Rule justice for orphans. Fight the widows' cause. Come, let us argue this out; so says the Lord. Though your sins may be like scarlet, they will grow whiter than snow. Though they redden you more than dye worms, they will be clean wool again. (*Yeshayahu* 1:15-18)

Yeshayahu conditions the whitening of the scarlet thread on fulfillment of the *mitzvot* mentioned in the prophecy, and his words suggest that this severe prophecy was delivered following an instance of non-whitening of the thread on Yom Kippur.

Another allusion to Yom Kippur in the prophecy in chapter one is found in Yeshayahu's words: "When you pray with such verbosity [*ki tarbu tefilla*, lit. "when you increase your prayer"], I am not listening":

From where is the *ne'ila* service derived? Rabbi Levi said: "[Even] when you increase your prayer" – from here we derive that [usually] anyone who increases prayer is answered. (*Yerushalmi, Berakhot* 4:2)

The *Ne'ila* service falls into the category of "increased prayer" because, unlike the other prayer services, it does not correspond to a sacrifice.³ *Ne'ila* is the service of Yom Kippur (and public fast days), and it is possible that this verse offers another hint that the prophecy of chapter one was delivered on Yom Kippur.

Even though Yeshayahu's prophecies speak of two different Yom Kippurs and two different scarlet threads, there is a similarity between the sins the prophet addresses in each. The prophecy in chapter one deals with bloodshed, and the prophecy in chapter 58, in our *haftara*, deals with the failure to free slaves in the Jubilee year – a sin that is equated to a certain degree with the sin of enslaving a person against his will, which the Torah views with severity similar to that of bloodshed: "If someone is found to have kidnapped another Israelite, enslaving or selling him, the kidnapper shall die. You must purge the evil from your midst" (*Devarim* 24:7). Therefore, because of this sin as well, the scarlet thread did not turn white.

III. Repairing the Sin

In order for the scarlet thread to turn white, it is not enough to avoid the sin of bloodshed or to ensure the release of slaves. The prophet also requires positive acts of righteousness and justice, as he states in chapter one:

Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct what is cruel. Rule justice for orphans. Fight the widows' cause. (1:17)

And similarly in our chapter:

Break your bread for the starving; bring dispossessed wanderers home. When you see a man naked, clothe him; do not avert your eyes from your own flesh. (58:7)

Why mention specifically these commandments? There seems to be a connection between them and the negation of forced slavery. Let us examine once again the verses in the book of *Devarim*:

Do not take an upper or lower millstone as security for a debt, for that would be taking a person's livelihood as security. If someone is found to have kidnapped another Israelite, enslaving or selling him, the kidnapper shall die. You must purge the evil from your midst... When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, do not go into his house to take his pledge. Wait outside while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, do not go to sleep with the pledge in your possession. You must return his pledge by sunset, so that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. This will be accounted to you as a righteous act before the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 24:6-13)

We have here four *mitzvot*, three of which clearly deal with collecting a debt from a borrower who does not have the money to repay what he owes. It is permissible to take

³ Though there was no evening sacrifice in the Temple, the evening service corresponds to the organs that were burnt on the altar at night.

virtually anything from him as security for the debt – except for three things which are considered basic necessities, and there are three prohibitions in their regard:

- a. It is forbidden to take as security for an unpaid debt an implement used for the grinding of flour, the upper millstone or the lower millstone, because without these implements, the impoverished borrower will not have bread to eat.
- b. It is forbidden to enter the borrower's house to take a pledge for the debt. One should wait outside the house, and not give the insolvent borrower the feeling that he has lost his last bit of personal ownership.
- c. It is forbidden to take the borrower's last garment, with which he covers himself while sleeping at night.

Reason dictates that the other mitzva found in the passage – the severe prohibition and the harsh punishment for forcefully enslaving a free man – also comes to exclude using such enslavement as a form of payment of a debt owed by an insolvent borrower. Indeed, according to the laws of the ancient world in many places, both in the East and in ancient Greece, a person who failed to pay a debt was sold into slavery in exchange for his debt. This phenomenon is also found in the Bible, in chapter 5 of *Nechemia* and in the story of Elisha:

A woman – the wife of one of the brotherhood of the prophets – cried out to Elisha, "Your servant, my husband, is dead! You know that your servant always feared the Lord. Now a creditor has come to take my two children away to be his slaves." (II *Melakhim* 4:1)

The Torah firmly establishes that one who forcefully enslaves or sells his fellow, even if the victim is someone who is unable otherwise to repay his debt,⁴ is liable for the death penalty. Yeshayahu sees a person who keeps his slave in servitude even in and after the Jubilee year as violating a secondary level of this severe prohibition. The prophet demands more in order to repair the sin that resulted in the scarlet thread not turning white on Yom Kippur:

No! This is the fast I choose: Loosen the bindings of evil, and break the slavery chain. Those who were crushed, release to freedom, and shatter every yoke of slavery. Break your bread for the starving; bring dispossessed wanderers home. When you see a man naked, clothe him; do not avert your eyes from your own flesh. (58:6-7)

In addition to releasing one's slaves, one must share his food with the hungry – "Break your bread for the starving" – and not take from him his last loaf of bread: "Do not take an upper or lower millstone as security for a debt, for that would be taking a person's livelihood as security." He must bring the poor man into his house – "Bring dispossessed wanderers home" – and not invade his home, his sole corner of privacy: "When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, do not go into his house to take his pledge. Wait outside while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you." He must clothe the poor person – "When you see a man naked, clothe him" – and not take from him his last garment: "If the person is poor, do not go to sleep with the pledge in your possession. You must return his pledge by sunset, so that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you."

⁴ Unless his debt resulted from theft, in which case it is the court that sells him.

V. Shabbat and *Shabbat Shabbaton*

The prophet also speaks about Shabbat in our chapter:

If you keep your feet from roving on the Sabbath, from pursuing your interests on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight, the Lord's holy day to be honored, if you honor it by not going your own way, attending to your own affairs, or speaking idle words, then you will find joy in the Lord; I will set you astride the heights of the earth to feast on the inheritance of your father Yaakov, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (58:13-14)

The suggestion that the prophecy as a whole deals with fasting on Yom Kippur may explain the words of the Gemara mentioned above, which interprets these verses about Shabbat as alluding to Yom Kippur:

The Exilarch said to Rav Hamnuna: What is meant by the verse: "[If you call...] the Lord's holy day to be honored"? He said to him: This refers to Yom Kippur, on which there is neither eating nor drinking, [hence] the Torah instructed: Honor it with clean [festive] garments. (*Shabbat* 119a)

According to their plain sense, however, these verses speak of Shabbat. What, then, is their connection to our prophecy?

It may be that Yeshayahu is referring to Shabbat as described in the book of *Devarim*, which emphasizes the complete stoppage of work by one's entire household, including slaves:

Six days you shall work and carry out all your labors, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, do no work at all – neither you, nor your son or daughter, your male or female servant, your ox, your donkey, nor any of your livestock, or the migrant within your gates, so that your male and female servants may rest as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an arm stretched forth. That is why the Lord your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (*Devarim* 5:13-15)

And similarly in the book of *Shemot*:

For six days carry out your work, but on the seventh you must cease, so that your ox and donkey may rest, and even the children of maidservants and strangers be revived. (*Shemot* 23:12)

Shabbat is a kind of miniature Jubilee year. The slave and the animal rest on that day, and are not subjugated to work. However, even if no actual work is done on Shabbat, if the master thinks about his work, talks about it, and worries about what needs to be done, the slave will have no true rest. Thus, Yeshayahu introduced in our chapter the prohibition of "attending to your own affairs, or speaking idle words."

The prophet makes a promise to one who keeps Shabbat with these new prohibitions: "I will set you astride the heights of the earth to feast on the inheritance of your father Yaakov, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." *Chazal* expounded these words as follows:

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yose: He who delights in the Sabbath is given an unbounded heritage, as it is stated: "Then you will find joy in the Lord; I will set you astride the heights of the earth to feast on the inheritance of your father Yaakov." (*Shabbat* 118a-b)

Yaakov's inheritance was unique in that it was not assigned any boundaries. But how does that relate to the observance of Shabbat?

Perhaps we can find the connection in the harsh words of Yaakov to Lavan, his father-in-law and employer:

By day I was ravaged by the heat; at night by the freezing cold. Sleep fled from my eyes. Twenty years I spent working in your household – fourteen for your two daughters and six for your flock – and ten times you changed my wages. Had the God of my father – the God of Avraham, the Fear of Yitzhak – not been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my plight and the toil of my hands, and He rebuked you last night. (*Bereishit* 31:40-42)

Lavan tried to enslave Yaakov for all time and without rest, but God saved him. One who observes the mitzva of the Jubilee year by releasing his slaves, and one who keeps Shabbat properly by allowing his servant to truly rest on it, will feast on the inheritance of Yaakov, who acquired eternal freedom for himself and his descendants.

(Translated by David Strauss)