

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

THE WEEKLY HAFTORA
By Rav Yehuda Shaviv

Haftora for Shabbat Para
(Yechezkel 36:16-38)

The third of the four special parshiot deals with the purification from the impurity of death. This is achieved through sprinkling special water mixed with the ashes of a burned red heifer, as specified at the beginning of parashat Chukat. This reading is meant

"to remind Israel to purify themselves, in order that they may (be ready to) bring the Pesach sacrifice in purity" (Rashi on Megilla 29a).

a. Impurity vs. Purity

The haftora, too, speaks of impurity and purity. It begins with impurity:

"When Bnei Yisrael dwelled in their land, they defiled it with their deeds; like the impurity of a nidda was their way before Me." (17)

It progresses towards purification:

"And I will sprinkle over you waters of purification and you will be purified, from all your impurities and from all your idolatry I will purify you." (25)

However, there is a great difference between these two types of impurity. The parasha describes real impurity contracted through contact with a corpse or remaining under the same roof as a corpse, while the haftora is describing a symbolic, metaphoric impurity. Here it is not the person who is defiled because of his location (i.e., under the same roof as the corpse); rather, it is Bnei Yisrael themselves who have defiled their land through idolatry; they have become the cause of impurity. The haftora speaks not of impurity of the body but rather of impurity of the soul.

Thus, the common theme lies not in the impurity but rather in the purification.

b. Two Types of Purity

There are two actions that bring about purification. One is common to all types of impurity – immersion in a mikva. The individual who has become ritually impure immerses himself (for some types of impurity living waters are required), and he emerges purified (in some cases he must wait a whole day and then bring a sacrifice). The impurity brought about by contact with the dead is unique in that immersion is not sufficient to cancel it; a mixture of water with ashes of the red heifer must be sprinkled over him on the third day and on the seventh day, and only thereafter is his immersion effective. What is the difference between immersion and sprinkling? Immersion is in the hands of the individual himself. If he is at the sea or at a river or at a mikva, he may immerse himself, of his own initiative. Sprinkling, on the other hand, requires someone other than himself who will sprinkle the waters over him. In the act of sprinkling, it is the other person who is active while the individual who is impure is passive. This would seem to imply that the gravity of the impurity of death is so great that the individual himself is actually incapable of acting for his self- purification; he requires someone else to assist him. The encounter with death leaves the individual helpless; he needs those around him to help him regain his strength, his purity.

It is this second type of impurity that is discussed in the haftora: "And I will sprinkle over you waters of purification and you will be purified."

c. Two Types of Correction

Just as we distinguished two possibilities for purification from impurity of the body, so there are two possibilities for purification from impurity of the soul. One is well known – teshuva. In the process of teshuva the sinner is active; he regrets what he has done, corrects his deeds and commits himself not to repeat his sin, confessing verbally. Doing teshuva is like immersing oneself in a mikva (and hence the imagery of the Rambam in his Laws of Teshuva, chapter 2 law 3, based on Taanit 16a:

"Anyone who confesses verbally but does not commit himself in his heart to abandon his evil way is like someone who immerses himself (in a mikva) while holding an insect in his hand; his immersion is of no avail until he throws the insect away."

But sometimes the sinner is so bound up in the impurity of his sins that he is powerless to extricate himself, and he needs active help from Hashem. His own heart has turned to stone and he is devoid of all feeling; how can he give himself a new heart?

Here we find the second possibility, as promised in the prophecy of the haftora:

"And I will sprinkle over you waters of purification... and I will give you a new heart, and I will place within you a new spirit, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and will give you a heart of flesh, and I will place My spirit within you and I will make you walk in My statutes." (25-27)

d. Exile and Redemption

The haftora describes a process of dwelling in the land, exile and return, with neither the exile nor the return done willingly, but rather forced from Above. With respect to exile this is obvious: exile is perceived as a punishment; Bnei Yisrael defiled their land with the blood that they shed upon it and with the idolatry that they performed (18), arousing Hashem's anger, and He therefore dispersed them among the nations.

But – and this is an innovative idea introduced by the prophecy – even the redemption will be at Hashem's initiative:

"And I will take you from among the nations and I will gather you up from all the lands, and I will bring you to your land." (22)

Not only are they not returning on their own, but even the fact that Hashem is bringing them back is not in their own merit: "Not for your sakes do I do this," the prophet emphasizes twice (22,32), for the sins that brought upon them the disaster of exile have not yet been corrected.

Thus the redemption itself is also a sort of sprinkling of waters of purification from Above, the fruits of external initiative. Likewise we find in the case of the first redemption, the redemption from Egypt. According to Chazal Bnei Yisrael were so immersed in the impurities of Egypt that there was no possibility whatsoever of their being redeemed on their own merit. The

Holy One had to reveal Himself to them and extricate them from Egypt just as they were, in their impurity – and then to undertake the process of purification after their redemption.

Thus the haftora is connected in another way to Pesach, the festival of the redemption from Egypt. Just as in the redemption from Egypt it was emphasized over and over that the exodus, with all its miracles, was in order that both Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians would know that "I am Hashem," so, too, in this prophecy "the nations will know that I am Hashem" (23), "And the nations that are left around you will know that I am Hashem" (36). And the haftora concludes with these words: "And they will know that I am Hashem."

e. The "Trap" of Exile

In case we had any illusion that exile had some element of curing or purification, the haftora comes to teach us that the opposite is true. Not only does exile not bring any benefit, it in fact makes the situation worse. The dispersion of Israel among the nations without any improvement in their ways brings about a terrible "chillul Hashem" (desecration of Hashem's name):

"And they profaned My holy name, for they said of them, This is Hashem's nation, and they have gone out of His land" (20).

In order to put a stop to this great desecration of Hashem's name there is an urgent need to gather the scattered nation of Israel and to return them to their land, even though they have not yet repented for their sins.

This being the case, it is difficult to understand the reason for the exile and all the suffering that it entails. Moreover, according to the description in the haftora, Hashem's ways of punishment for sins have already been sealed, for punishment will only make the situation worse. Apparently, Hashem's guidance of His nation contains some elements that are beyond human understanding. And perhaps this, too, connects the prophecy with the Torah reading, for parashat Para concerns a "chok," a statute, a law for which no reason is provided: "I have made a statute and decreed a decree" (Tanchuma and Midrash Rabba, beginning of Chukat). It is as if we are being told,

"You wish to understand the meaning of exile and its explanation? Look at the (laws of the) red heifer: just as in that instance you are unable to descend to the secret of its meaning, so with regard to the painful exile (you will not understand)."

f. "The Flock of Jerusalem at her Appointed Times"

The conclusion of the prophecy (according to Ashkenazi custom; Sefardim do not read pesukim 37-38) echoes with the joy of the Pesach sacrifice in Jerusalem. Hashem promises that in the future He will increase Bnei Yisrael like a human flock. Like which flock? "The sheep of the sacrifices; like the flock of Jerusalem at her appointed times." The Targum Yonatan explains: "Like a holy nation, the nation that is purified and comes to Jerusalem at the festival of Pesach."

There is no more beautiful description to be found for the approaching festival.

[Translated by Kaeren Fish]