Dr. Yaakov Elman

Haftarat Devarim: The Challenge of Change

"It is harder to remove one very minor character fault than to study the whole Talmud." (R. Yisrael Salanter)

I

The Talmud observes that while "twice six-hundred thousand prophets (*nevi'im*) arose in Israel, only those [prophecies] that were needed for future generations were written down," and those that were primarily oriented for their own time and place were not (*Megillah* 14a). Rashi notes that the "need" in this context refers to *teshuvah* or *hora'ah*, or as we might say, *musar* (ethical instruction) and not information needed for halakhic decision-making – since, of course, prophecy is not a proper mode of reaching halakhic decisions, which must be reached by human reasoning.

It is the first point that Rashi makes that requires elaboration – that the major purpose of prophecy is of course ethical and religious instruction. Indeed, if the study of *Nakh* had not been so neglected for so long, the work of the *Mussar* Movement in the last century and a half would have been unnecessary, for *Navi* provides us with all the *mussar* we need. The prophets spoke both to their own time and to all times; somehow, only Christians seem to have remembered this. Thus, for example, one of the major themes of *Mussar* literature (as we find for example in Rabbeinu Yonah *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 3, and the *gemara* as well), the need to avoid performing the *mitzvot* by rote – *mitzvat anashim me-lumadah* – is taken from *Yeshayahu* 29:13–14:

> וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי, יַעַן כִּי נִגַּשׁ הָעָם הַזֶּה, בְּפִיו וּבִשְׂפָתָיו כִּבְּדוּנִי, וְלִבּוֹ רִחַק מִמֶּנִּי־וַתְּהִי יִרְאָתָם אֹתִי, מִצְוַת אֲנָשִׁים מְלֻמָּדָה. לָכֵן, הִנְנִי יוֹסִף לְהַפְלִיא אֶת־הָעָם־הַזֶּה־הַפְלֵא וָפֶלֶא; וְאָבְדָה חָכְמַת חֲכָמָיו, וּבִינַת נְבוֹנָיו תִּסְתַּתָּר.
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> God said: "This people has approached [Me] with their mouths and honored Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me as if it were a commandment of men, practiced by rote. Therefore, I will continue to astound this people with astonishment upon astonishment. The wisdom of its wise men will fail, and the understanding of its men of understanding will vanish."

As we shall see, this prophecy of Yeshayahu is reflected in our chapter as well.

Rashi's comment, however, does not exhaust all the purposes of prophecy, since the Talmud itself refers to the book of *Yeshayahu* as *nechemta* (consolation) (*Bava Batra* 14b); and indeed, our *haftarah* begins the seven weeks of consolatory *haftarot*. That talmudic passage notes also that the books of *Nevi'im Acharonim* (Latter Prophets) are carefully arranged by theme rather than chronologically, with the book of *Yirmiyahu* following the book of *Melakhim*, followed by *Yechezkel*, with *Yeshayahu* coming only after *Yechezkel*. *Melakhim* ends with the destruction of the First Temple, and Yirmiyahu's prophecies are almost all about *churbana* (destruction), while Yechezkel begins his book with *churbana* but ends with consolation, by providing a description of the future Third Temple. We thus have a progression through four books from destruction to consolation. Printers have

changed this order and opted to print these books in their chronological order, but this was the originally intended order.

Not only are the books of Latter Prophets arranged in this manner, but the book of *Yeshayahu* itself is carefully arranged according to theme, from destruction to consolation. As R. Eleazer of Beugency (Northern France, thirteenth century) observes in his commentary to *Yeshayahu*, the first chapter serves as a prologue to the entire book, introducing and encapsulating the themes that Yeshayahu was to stress throughout his prophetic mission: rebellion against God, insincere worship, injustice, and the need for true repentance to avert the coming "purification by fire." And the next section (2:1–4) describes the Messianic Age. Indeed, the whole book of *Yeshayahu* is arranged in that way itself, since the return from exile is the concern of the second half of the book. At the very end of the book we have the following:

> Every new moon and every Sabbath, all flesh will come to bow down before Me, says God.

II

In providing a summary of the book, this chapter also provides us with a portrait of the sinful society of the two kingdoms of Yehudah and Ephraim. The Northern Kingdom of Ephraim would cease to exist in Yeshayahu's own time, but his preaching succeeded in extending the life of the Southern Kingdom for another century-and-a-half. More to the point, as *Chazal* (our Sages) tell us, his prophecies provide *us* with an enduring lesson in how we are to conduct our spiritual and societal lives.

The first two themes seem contradictory: Why does Yehayahu call the people "sinful" when they bring (as he himself admits in the later verses) burnt-offerings of rams and fat of buffalos, the blood of cattle, sheep and goats, meal offerings and incense?

Yeshayahu's point is that it is not only the peoples' insincerity that rankles, it is also their insistence that as long as they conduct the Temple service (the *avodah*) properly, they have done their duty, even though their society is fundamentally corrupt and unjust.

How is this society, then, judged and condemned?

> Your silver has become debased and your wine diluted with water. Your rulers are knaves, thieves' comrades; they all love bribes and chase gifts. They do not judge the orphan, and the widow's case does not come before them. (1:22–23)

Yeshayahu adds to this charge in chapter 5:

> Woe! You who add house to house and join field to field till no room is left, so only you dwell in the land! As I was listening, the Lord of Hosts [said]: "By My Word! Many homes will become desolate, and large and beautiful [ones] unoccupied." (5:8–9)

Why is there such emphasis placed on the widow and orphan, and on those who cannot defend their titles to real estate from being encroached upon? The message that Yeshayahu wishes to impart is that a society is judged on its treatment of its weakest members. As Rashi notes in his comment on *Shemot* 22:21 ("You shall not oppress any widow or orphan"):

> (כא) כל אלמנה ויתום לא תענון – הוא הדין לכל אדם, אלא שדבר הכתוב בהווה, לפי שהם תשושי כח ודבר מצוי לענותם:
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> This applies to everyone, but the verse speaks of ordinary conditions (lit., "the present"), for they (i.e., widows and orphans, and we might add, *agunot*) are weak, and oppressing them is common.

The leaders of societies that allow the rich and powerful to have their way are called "captains of *Sedom*," and their followers are called "people of *Amorah*."

How would these captains and people respond to Yeshayahu's charge? They would certainly protest that they are pious, *frum* people; why, look at the offerings they bring – burnt-offerings of rams and fat of buffalos, the blood of cattle, sheep and goats, meal offerings and incense! In other words, they worshiped *Hashem* in the way established not only by *Shlomo Ha-Melekh*, but also by the Torah itself. They could certainly claim that they had upheld "traditional, conservative values." They could have called Yeshayahu a "socialist" or a "bleeding heart liberal."

And yet, *Hashem* responds as follows:

> "Why do I need all your sacrifices?" God asks. "I am fed up with your burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of buffalos, and I have no desire for the blood of cattle, sheep and goats. When you appear before Me, who asked you to do this, trampling My courts? Do not bring any more vain meal offerings; [your] incense is offensive to Me! New moons, Sabbaths, proclamation of holy days – I cannot bear sinful gatherings! I hate your new moons and festivals; they are burdensome to Me, and I cannot bear them! When you spread your hands [in prayer], I will turn My eyes away from you. As much as you pray, I will not listen, [for] your hands are full of blood!" (1.11–15)

In other words, prayer and sacrifice are proper when brought by the proper people – but not people whose hands are full of blood. And yet *Chazal* understand sin-offerings in a somewhat different way. Here is a *midrash* found in the *Yerushalmi* (*Makkot* 2:4), but also in *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 24:

> [ז] טוב וישר י״י על כן יורה חטאים בדרך וג׳ (תהלים כה:ח). שאלו לחכמה החוטא מהו עונשו, אמרה להם וחטאים תרדף רעה (משלי יג:כא). שאלו לנבואה החוטא מהו עונש, אמרה להם הנפש החוטאת היא תמות (יחזקאל יח:ד). שאלו לתורה חוטא מה עונשו, אמרה להם יביא אשם ויתכפר לו. שאלו להקב״ה החוטא מהו עונשו, א׳ להם יעשה תשובה ויתכפר לו, הדא היא דכת׳ טוב וישר י״י וגו׳ (תהלים כה:ח). א״ר פינחס למה הוא טוב שהוא ישר, למה הוא ישר שהוא טוב. על כן יורה חטאים בדרך (שם/תהלים כ״ה), שהוא מורה לחטאים דרך שיעשו תשובה. לפיכך הושע מזהיר את ישראל ואו׳ להם שובה ישראל (הושע יד:ב).
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> "*Hashem* is good and proper; therefore He teaches sinners the way, etc." (*Tehillim* 25:8). They asked Wisdom: "As to a sinner, what is his punishment?" [Wisdom] said to them: "Evil will pursue sinners" (*Mishlei* 13:21). They asked Prophecy: "As to the sinner, what is his punishment?" [Prophecy] said to them: "The soul that sins will die" (*Yechezkel* 18:4). They asked the Torah: "As to the sinner, what is his punishment"? [The Torah] said: "Let him bring an *asham*-offering and he will be atoned for." They asked the Holy One, blessed be He: "As to the sinner, what is his punishment"? He said to them: "Let him repent and he will be atoned for." Said R. Pinchas: "Why is He good? Because He is just. Why is He just? Because He is good, and therefore He teaches the sinner the way – for He teaches them the way to repent. Therefore [the prophet] Hoshea says: 'Repent, O Israel'" (*Hoshea* 14:2).

However, before continuing, let us look at the parallel *Yerushalmi Makkot* 2:4:

> אמר רבי פינחס טוב וישר [ה׳ על כן יורה חטאים בדרך] למה הוא טוב שהוא ישר ולמה הוא ישר שהוא טוב על כן יורה חטאים בדרך שמורה דרך תשובה שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרה להם חטאים תרדף רעה שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרה להן הנפש החוטאת היא תמות שאלו לקודש׳ בריך הוא חוטא מהו עונשו אמ׳ להן יעשה תשובה ויתכפ׳ לו היינו דכתיב על כן יורה חטאים בדרך יורה לחטאי׳ דרך לעשות תשובה.

> Said R. Pinchas: "[*Hashem* is] good and just, [therefore He shows sinners the way]. Why is He good? Because He is just. And why is He just? Because He is good; therefore He shows the sinners the way – He teaches the way of repentance.
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> They asked Wisdom: 'As to a sinner, what is his punishment'? [Wisdom] said to them: 'Evil will pursue sinners' (*Mishlei* 13:21). They asked Prophecy: 'As to the sinner, what is his punishment'? [Prophecy] said to them: 'The soul that sins will die' (*Yechezkel* 18:4). They asked the Holy One, blessed be He: 'As to the sinner, what is his punishment'? He said to them: 'Let him repent and be atoned for.' That is what is written: 'Therefore He teaches sinners the way' – the way to repent."

Note that the *Yerushalmi*, which is the earlier text, lacks one question found in the *Pesikta*: "They asked the Torah: 'As to the sinner, what is his punishment'? [The Torah] said: 'Let him bring an *asham*-offering and he will be atoned for.'" On the other hand, the later *midrash* lacks an exact quotation of a verse from *Chumash* for this question, while the other questions are supported by exact *pesukim*. Moreover, evil and death are indeed punishments, but is the bringing of an *asham*-sacrifice a punishment? The two texts thus address the same issue, but from different points of view. The *midrash* points to a basic tension in the way in which *Hashem* relates to sinners – they can bring sacrifices, or they can repent. If they do not do so, either evil will pursue them – or they will die. But why should a person go to the expense of bringing sacrifices when he can repent? This point is similar to the point that R. Eliezer makes – that there are people whose money is worth more to them than their bodies (see *Berakhot* 61b, but see *Chullin* 91a also).

Although closely related, these two texts highlight different aspects of Divine governance of the world. The *midrash* has an exegetical aim: to resolve the tension between the Torah's emphasis on sacrifice as a means of atonement, and its offer of repentance.

However, by not including the mention of sacrifice, the *Yerushalmi* emphasizes a slightly different aspect of this tension – that *Hashem*'s acceptance of repentance as a valid means of atonement for sin is actually *not fair.* It is an act that is *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* (beyond a just measure), for although the sinner has committed a sin, he can receive atonement "merely" by repenting, without added expense. Of course, *only Hashem* can offer such an option. Not Wisdom, not Prophecy, not even the Torah, but only *Hashem*. And this is an expression of *Hashem*'s love. Indeed, this was the prophet Yonah's contention: Why should the Ninevites have gotten away with merely repenting – shouldn't they have been punished for their sins? *Hashem* answers him that this forgiveness was an expression of His mercy. And this is why we read *Sefer Yonah* on *Yom Kippur.*

Actually, as we know, repentance is hard work – much more so than the mere expense of buying and offering a sacrifice. Indeed, as R. Yisrael Salanter pointed out, it is easier to learn through all of *Shas* than to uproot one bad habit!

It was this lesson that Yeshayahu wished to impart, and which the people of Jerusalem resisted – they thought of themselves as pious individuals who were punctilious in fulfilling their religious vows, and thought the sacrifices they offered would protect them from the consequences of their sins. Repentance requires an admission of wrongdoing and a determination not to repeat the sin; they were unwilling to admit they were wrong, for material success and the need to circumvent both *Hashem*'s law and man's law had become an absolute requirement of their lifestyle. The inhabitants of Yehudah would rather have brought sacrifices than work on changing bad habits and evil ways of doing business, which is why the *navi* called them a "sinful nation."

They were thus in a state of denial with regards to their own sins, and refused *Hashem*'s offer. This, then, is why Yeshayahu could call them "sinners" while simultaneously extending the possibility of repentance – an offer they rejected. And that is why *Hashem* was "fed up" with their sacrifices.

How then will they be redeemed?

> Learn to do good, seek justice, and support the oppressed. Demand justice for the orphan, and plead the cause of the widow! (1:17)

III

Repentance requires a change in one's actions, or, in this case, in a society's lifestyle. This applies not only to one generation, but across the generations as well. All of the Congregation of Israel is considered as one, not only those Jews living at one time, but as a collective across time. As the *Yerushalmi Yoma* 1:3 has it:

> מצאנו שלא חרב הבית בראשונה אלא שהיו עובדים עבודה זרה ומגלים עריות ושופכי דמים וכן בשיני רבי יוחנן בר תורתא אמר מצאנו שלא חרבה שילה אלא שהיו מבזים את המועדות ומחללין את הקדשים מצאנו שלא חרב הבית בראשונה אלא שהיו עובדי עבוד׳ זרה ומגלי עריות ושופכין דמים אבל בשיני מכירין אנו אותם שהיו יגיעין בתורה וזהירין במצות ובמעשרו׳ וכל ווסת טובה היתה בהן אלא שהיו אוהבין את הממון ושונאין אילו לאילו שנאת חנם וקש׳ היא שנאת חנם שהיא שקולה כנגד ע״ז וגילוי עריו׳ ושפיכות דמים
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> דלמה רבי זעורה ור׳ יעקב בר אחא ורבי אבונה הוון יתבין אמרין ביותר שבראשון נבנה ובשיני לא נבנה אמר רבי זעורה הראשונים עשו תשובה והשניים לא עשו תשובה
>
> אמר רבי אלעזר הראשונים נתגלה עוונם ונתגלה קיצם השניים נתגלה עוונם ולא נתגלה קיצם
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> שאלו את רבי אליעזר דורות האחרונים כשרים מן הראשונים אמר להן עידיכם בית הבחירה יוכיח....
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> **אמרו כל דור שאינו נבנה בימיו מעלין עליו כאילו הוא החריבו**

> We find that the Temple was destroyed the first time because they worshipped idols and committed sexual crimes and were shedders of blood, and so too the second time. R. Yochanan bar Torta said: "We find that *Shiloh* was destroyed because they were contemptuous of the festivals and profaned holy things, [but] we find that the Temple was destroyed the first time because they worshipped idols and committed sexual crimes and were shedders of blood, but in regard to the second time we recognize that they labored in Torah and were careful regarding *mitzvot* and tithes and every good practice was prevalent among them – except they loved money and hated one another for nothing. Baseless hatred is [thus] to be weighed as equal to idol worship, sexual crimes and shedding of blood."
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> A story: R. Zeurah and R. Yaakov bar Acha and R. Avuna were sitting [and studying]: They said: "All the more, for the first [Temple] was rebuilt, but the second was not rebuilt."
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> Said R. Zeurah: "The earlier ones, [who came after the First Destruction], repented, while the later ones [who came after the Second Destruction], have not repented."
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> Said R. Eleazar: "[As to] the earlier ones, their sin was revealed [by the prophets], and their end [of their exile] was [also] revealed; [as to] the later ones, their sin was revealed [by the Sages] but their end [of their exile] has not been revealed."
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> They asked R. Eliezer: "Are the later ones more pious than the earlier ones?" He said to them: "Your witness is the Temple, [which has not been rebuilt; thus, the earlier ones were more pious]…."
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> They said: "*Every generation in whose days* [*the Temple*] *is not rebuilt* [*is considered*] *as though they destroyed it*."

Thus, we must read Yeshayahu's words as though he had addressed us directly. While we might not want to, since after all, there are more people devoted to Torah study than ever before, and devotion to Torah and *mitzvot* is more widespread than in several generations, it is important to remember that the Temple has not yet been rebuilt.

We – the Orthodox community – have improved, no doubt. But are we willing to reexamine basic lifestyle issues? Are we as a community willing to correct certain societal norms that continuously to lead to *Chillul Hashem*? We perform wonderfully in many *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom* (commandments that relate to ritual matters), and in many *mitzvot bein adam la-chaveiro*, (commandments that relate to societal issues), especially charity – but problems remain, especially problems that lead to *Chillul Hashem* in our modern world of instant communication. What would Yeshayahu have said? How would we respond?