

Zecharia's Prophecy: The Haftarah for Shabbos Chanukah: Zecharia 2:14-4:7

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The immediate memory most people have of the haftarah for Shabbos Chanukah is Zecharia's vision of the seven-branched menorah. For this reason, the haftarah seems to be a perfect choice to be read on Shabbos Chanukah since Chanukah commemorates the lighting of the Menorah by the Chashmonaim at the rededication of the Second Temple.

Yet, the haftarah includes 23 verses, of which only the last seven describe the vision of the menorah. The first two-thirds of the haftarah are rich in images and visions that seem to have little relevance to Chanukah.

What do the verses do to complete, enrich, or expand our understanding of the menorah vision in Zecharia's prophecy? Or are those first verses included merely to ensure that it contains the requisite 21 verses that are generally required for a haftarah?

In order for one to appreciate the message of Zecharia's prophecy, one needs to recall the historical climate he was confronting. Having spent 70 years in exile after the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, the Jewish nation was given permission by Koresh, King of Persia, to return to Eretz Yisroel and rebuild the Temple. Unfortunately, very few actually took advantage of that opportunity. Under the direction of Zerubabel, a descendant of David Hamelech, and Yehoshua Kohen Gadol, a descendant of the last Kohen Godol in the First Temple, a relative handful of Jews returned and attempted to recapture Israel's former glory. They soon realized that their dream of restoring the Jewish kingdom to its former glory was not to be anytime soon.

Shortly after their return, the Persians, influenced by the hatred and jealousy of the enemies of Judah in Jerusalem, halted the building of the Temple. When Darius II finally allowed them to resume the work 17 years later, any enthusiasm for the project had waned due to economic decline, lack of funds, and fear that the local populace would once again use their influence with the Persians to stop the building. The small, physically unimposing structure they could afford to build would be a mere shadow of the First Temple.

The Navi Zecharia was attempting to counter this malaise—to encourage the nation to continue building the Second Temple despite all the impediments, and not to be discouraged if their efforts were failing to restore the glory that once was the First Temple.

How appropriate it is then for Zecharia to begin (our haftarah) with joyous words:

Rejoice and be happy, daughter of Zion, because behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst— the word of God.

Zecharia 2:14

רני ושמחי בת ציון כי הנני בא ושכנתי בתוכך נאם ה'.

זכריה ב:יד

The present and inauspicious beginning should not detract from the joy that should be felt in the beginning of the rebuilding of the Temple.

What follows in the haftarah is a quite curious vision:

And he showed me Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol standing in front of the angel of God and the Satan was standing on his right to prosecute him. And God said to the Satan, May God rebuke you, Satan, and may God rebuke you, who chooses Jerusalem, isn't this [man] a brand saved from fire? And Yehoshua was wearing soiled clothing and standing before the angel. And [the angel] said to those standing before him saying, remove the soiled clothing and he said to [Yehoshua], see that I have removed your sin from you and dressed you with clean clothes.

Zecharia 3:1-4

ויראני את-יהושע הכהן הגדול, עמד, לפני מלאך ה' והשטן עמד על-ימינו, לשטנו. ויאמר ה' אל-השטן, יגער ה' בך השטן, ויגער ה' בך, הבחר בירושלם; הלוא זה אוד, מצל מאש. ויהושע, היה לבש בגדים צואים; ועמד, לפני המלאך. ויען ויאמר, אל-העמדים לפניו לאמר, הסירו הבגדים הצאים, מעליו; ויאמר אליו, ראה העברתי מעליך עונך, והלבש אתך, מחלצות.

זכריה ג:א-ד

Yehoshua Kohen Gadol, the spiritual leader of the nation, is seen in court. The prosecutor, the Satan, stands on the right of Yehoshua, obviously pressing to condemn him for an undisclosed sin, or some other shortcoming.¹⁴ This is alluded to by depicting him as wearing “*begadim tzo'im*,” soiled clothing. God, the judge, stops the Satan in his tracks and doesn't allow the Satan to prosecute Yehoshua because he is an “*ud mutzal me'eish*,” a brand saved from fire.¹⁵ This affirmation allows Yehoshua to escape further prosecution.

Rashi and Radak explain that the Satan represents the "enemies of Judah"¹⁶ who succeeded in stopping the building of the Second Temple in the times of Koresh and were again attempting to stop the building. God tells Zecharia to tell the nation that their enemies will fail in their renewed attempt. They can try to raise Yehoshua's deficiencies before God, but Yehoshua, the saved remnant, will be impervious to their attacks.

Whether the fire referenced is to be taken literally or figuratively,¹⁷ the result is the same: Yehoshua was a survivor. God rejected the Satan's attempt to add fuel to the fire of the past. R' Yosef Kra notes in his commentary on the verse:

There only remains a few of Israel like a brand saved from the fire and you come to prosecute them so I will destroy them?

לא נשתייר מישראל כי אם מעט מאוד שניצל משריפה ואתה בא לקטרג עליהם שאשחיתם.

¹⁴ According to *Sanhedrin* 93a, his sons had married women who kohanim were forbidden to marry and he had not protested.

¹⁵ *Ud* is actually a type of wood that burns slowly.

¹⁶ *Ezra* 4:1.

¹⁷ *Sanhedrin* 93a, understands it literally as Yehoshua having survived being thrown into an actual furnace by Nebuchanetzar. Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, understands it figuratively as Yehoshua having survived the "fires" of exile.

Radak goes one step further:

You were saved from the fire of the exile in order for you to come to Jerusalem and build the Temple and be a kohen there.

וכן זה מוצל מאש הגלות לבא לירושלם ולבנות הבית ולכהן בו.

Yehoshua's survival has a purpose—God won't allow “the enemies of Judah” to succeed in harming him, or the returned Jewish people, because He had a plan for Yehoshua. The *ud mutzal me'eish* is an integral part of the rebuilding of the Second Temple.

I remember vividly learning this haftarah for the first time from an outstanding teacher who had fled Telz via Shanghai before coming to America. I sat riveted as she demonstrated through her personal experience the concept of the Jewish people being an *ud mutzal me'eish*—a people who had been singed by the “fires” of all too many tragedies. She explained ever so powerfully the sense of urgency she felt to rebuild and pass down the legacy of the past to future generations. To survive the pain of *galus* and have the will, desire and strength to rebuild is to be like Yehoshua Kohen Gadol, an *ud mutzal me'eish*. She needed us to know, as Yehoshua did, that imperfections and suffering are no bar to carrying on the *mesorah*.

This part of the vision concludes with God having an angel remove the “soiled clothing” from Yehoshua and dressing him in “*begadim machalatzos*,” clean clothes, an allusion to God having forgiven him for any past sin, and “a priestly hat.” Yehoshua now stands dressed ready for his duties in the Temple. His stature grows before our very eyes.

The haftarah then continues with the navi turning his attention to the political leader of the return to Zion—Zerubabel—a descendant of David Hamelech. Were it not for the dominance of the Persian kings over Eretz Yisroel, he would have been king of an independent Jewish state. Instead, he was merely *pachas Yehuda*—an appointed viceroy.¹⁸

Zerubabel led the *shivas Tzion* (return to Zion) in the heady days of Koresh. It was he who led the first, faltering steps toward rebuilding the temple—but it was also he who had been unable to prevent the Persians from stopping the rebuilding. Now, years later, the nation needed to have its confidence in Zerubabel restored. God instructs Zecharia to tell Yehoshua and his Kohanim: “כי הנני מביא את עבדי צמח,” Behold, I am bringing my servant, the budding one (Zecharia 3:8). Just as a seedling grows slowly, yet steadily, beneath the ground, so too, Zerubabel's stature will gradually, but steadily, emerge and his influence will be felt¹⁹ as he finds favor in the eyes of the Persian king.²⁰

Only after the public image of the two leaders of *shivas Tzion* were bolstered does the navi proceed to the famous vision of the menorah.

In this vision, an angel helps Zecharia decipher one of the most cryptic of his prophecies:²¹

And he said to me, what do you see and I said, I saw and behold there was a candelabra made entirely of gold with a

ויאמר אלי, מה אתה ראה ואמר ראיתי והנה מנורת זהב כלה וגלה על-ראשה,

¹⁸ Chaggai 1:1

¹⁹ Radak on Zechariah 3:8.

²⁰ Rashi on Zechariah 3:8.

²¹ Rashi on Zechariah 1:1.

bowl on its top and there were seven lamps on it—seven pipes flowing to the lamps on its top. And there were two olive trees on top of it, one on the right of the bowl and one on its left.

Zecharia 4:2-3

ושבעה נרתיה עליה--שבעה ושבעה מוצקות, לנרות אשר על-ראשה. ושנים זיתים, עליה: אחד מימין הגלה, ואחד על-שמאלה.
זכריה ד:ב-ג

Zecharia sees a seven-branched menorah that is flanked by two olive branches. A receptacle on top of the Menorah collects olives from those branches, converting them to oil, which then flows directly into the menorah. Zecharia questions the meaning of the vision because, as Radak explains, the entire process was done without human intervention—from the growing and picking of the olives, to the crushing of the olives into oil, to the pouring of the oil into the menorah.

The Angel then explains the meaning of the vision of the menorah by telling Zecharia:

And he answered me saying, "This is the word of God to Zerubabel, saying: Not by armed might and not by strength but rather by my spirit, so says the Lord of Hosts.

Zecharia 14:8

ויען ויאמר אלי לאמר זה דבר ה' אל זרבבל לאמר לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי אמר ה' צבאות.
זכריה יד:ח

Rashi explains:

I will put my spirit into Darius and he will allow you to build and provide all your needs for the building: wheat, wine, oil and trees . . . and you will not need the aid of man.

אני אתן את רוחי על דריוש ויצוה לכם לבנות ולעשות כל צרכי יציאת הבנין משלו ולעזור אתכם בחטין ויין ושמן ועצים ... ולא תצטרכו לעזרת אדם.

The fears, inadequacies, and trepidations of both Zerubabel and the people must be put aside. It is the spirit of God that will be the determinative factor—not the efforts or strength of man. God will see to it that all that is needed to rebuild the Temple will be provided for; nor will any enemy stand in the way. As the haftarah says in its closing words:

Who are you, grand mountain? Before Zerubabel you will become a plain. He will bring out the cornerstone with great excitement for it.

Zecharia 4:7

מי אתה הר הגדול לפני זרובבל למישר והוציא את האבן הראשה תשאות חן חן לה.
זכריה ד:ז

Those that attempt to block Zerubabel and the builders of the Temple will be crushed. Zerubabel is told to continue building on the cornerstone that was set in the days of Koresh. As the rebuilding is continued, sounds of joy and happiness will be heard. Our haftarah then concludes on the same note as it began—the imperative of *simcha*. We began with “רני ושמחי בת” ציין, Rejoice and be happy, daughter of Zion, and the promise that the Divine Presence will eventually return, and we conclude with the joy of rebuilding the Second Temple.

This concept of “לא בחיל ולא בכח,” not by armed might and not by strength, is an important theme of Chanukah as evidenced in God's intervention to ensure the victory of *rabim beyad me'atim*, the many in the hands of the few. This too, then, is a reason Chazal chose to read this haftarah on Shabbos Chanukah.

Surprisingly, the haftarah for Shabbos Chanukah ends at this point in the prophecy. The navi, however, continues elaborating on the meaning of the menorah vision for another seven verses. In the section that is not included in the haftarah, Zecharia asks for an explanation of the two olive branches that stand to the left and right of the menorah. The angel replies:

And he said: These are the two anointed men who are standing by the Master of the land.

Zecharia 4:14

ויאמר אלה שני בני היצהר העומדים על אדון כל הארץ.
זכריה ד:י"ד

The two olives represent Zechariah and Yehoshua Kohen Godol, the political leader and the spiritual leader.²² They stand at the helm of the nation having been anointed by God to do His bidding; ready to illuminate His ways to His people.

Why were these last verses excluded from the haftarah? We read Zechariah's vision, but omit part of its explanation.

Perhaps the answer lies in one of the major themes of Chanukah. Both the miracle of the oil lasting eight days and the miraculous victory over the Syrian-Greeks were outcomes that were impossible in rational terms. Rashi explains the message of the menorah being lit spontaneously as: “לא תצטרכו לעזרת אדם,” You will not need the aid of man. The rebuilding of the Second Temple was to be directed by God, and God alone, much like it was God's spirit that drove the victory of the Chashmonaim and caused the oil to burn for eight days. This idea, of God's power to override the natural order, is central to our commemoration of Chanukah. It is for this reason that Chazal chose to close the haftarah with its lesson of “לא בחיל ולא בכח,” “Not by armed might and not by strength but rather by my spirit, so says the Lord of Hosts.”

It is true that there are two olive branches present in Zechariah's vision, representing man's obligation to work towards implementing God's will. If man was to simply sit back and rely on God there would have been but one olive branch above the menorah as a source of oil.²³ The Chashmonaim had to resist the Syrians despite the odds. The one jar of oil had to be lit despite its inability to last eight days. Nevertheless, we end the haftarah where we do to stress, not our own responsibilities, but God's ability to do the impossible.

It is appropriate, then, that the haftarah begins with the joy that we feel in knowing that God will return and rest His presence in our midst, and ends with the joy the Jews felt in the building of the Second Temple. This joy emanates from the fact that we know that God is the ultimate source of our success—be it in building the Second Temple in the days of Yehoshua and Zerubabel, in the rededication of the Temple in the days of the Chashmonaim, and, ultimately, in the building of the Third and final Temple *b'meheirah b'yameinu* (speedily in our days). As Chaggai HaNavi states:

... My spirit stands in your midst, fear not.

Chaggai 2:5

... רוחי עומדת בתוכם אל תיראו.
חגי ב:ה

²² Radak on Zecharia 4:14.

²³ See *Chazon HaMikrah* V. I, p.369.