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Haftarat Yitro: Yeshayahu's Call to Prophecy and Ma'amad Har Sinai

Hashem sits on His heavenly throne, surrounded by angelic *serafim* ready to serve Him; His presence is felt in the Temple. Voices resonate, filling the inner environs of the Temple with the sounds of the Divine retinue proclaiming the unique qualities of *Hashem*, holy and transcendent, yet immanent and present. The doorposts shake from the resounding echo of their voices, and the Temple fills with smoke (*Yeshayahu* 6:1–4). This is the vision experienced by Yeshayahu prior to being appointed to his prophetic mission, which will determine his nation's fate for generations to come. This is the vision selected as the predominant text for the *haftarah* of *Parashat Yitro*, in which *Benei Yisrael* experience *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. There, they sense the presence of *Hashem*, who descends in fire upon the mountain, which is all in smoke, and who causes the mountain to tremble (*Shemot* 19:18). They hear the voice of *Hashem*, who commands them the laws of the Torah (*Shemot* 20:1) and inducts them as His "treasure (*segulah*) from among all nations" to serve as "a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation (*goy kadosh*)" (*Shemot* 19:5–6).¹

Immersed in the regal atmosphere of Yeshayahu's vision, which testifies to the symbolism of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* as a constant reminder of the *Har Sinai* experience, we are confounded by Yeshayahu's jarring reaction and are later mystified by the difficult mission with which he is charged by *Hashem*. Angelic voices praising *Hashem* reverberate throughout the Temple; yet, Yeshayahu remains silent, deeming himself unworthy of joining the angelic chorus, even deserving of death at having entered into the intimate confines of the heavenly realm without merit.² Classifying himself as "*ish teme' sefatayim*" – "a man of impure lips," who resides within a nation that suffers from this same malady ("*am teme' sefatayim*") (*Yeshayahu* 6:5), Yeshayahu feels a certain irony at having become privy to the loftiness of the Divine domain, while he feels lowly and excluded.³

¹. Note how *Shemot* 20:15 applies the same verb, "*va-yanu'u*," describing the people's recoiling from what they experience, as in *Yeshayahu* 6:4, which describes the movement of the Temple doorposts from the angelic calling. Compare as well the parallel between *Shemot* 24:10, which relates a vision of "the God of Israel," in which only "what is under His feet" is envisioned, paralleling Yeshayahu's perception of "*shulav*" (*Yeshayahu* 6:1), the legs of the Divine throne, filling the Temple, as Ibn Ezra interprets; Rashi, however, renders "*shulav*" to mean the ends of *Hashem*'s garment. For a discussion of the parallels between the *haftarah* and the event of *Matan Torah*, compare Yissachar Jacobson, *Chazon Ha-Mikra: Sugiyot Be-Tanakh al pi Iyunim Be-Haftarot Ha-Shanah* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Pub., 1957), 1:184–85, and Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, ed. Yosef Ofer (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Publications, Mikhlelet Herzog, 2011), 231.

². Compare Ibn Ezra's second explanation and Radak's analysis, in the name of his father, which render *Yeshayahu* 6:5, "*Oy li khi יאמר אצתי*" to mean that Yeshayahu laments his silence (the verbal root of the bolded word rendered as *d.m.m.*). Rashi, and Radak's first explanation, however, interpret it to mean that Yeshayahu fears death (the verbal root of the underlined word rendered as *d.m.h.*).

³. In a parallel manner, *Benei Yisrael* declare to Moshe their fear of death because of their unprecedented experience of hearing *Hashem* speak to them, imploring him to serve as their intermediary between the nation and *Hashem* (*Shemot* 20:16). Nevertheless, their reaction is not precipitated by a feeling of impurity, for they had spent three days preparing and sanctifying themselves for the divine revelation (*Shemot* 19:10–15). Furthermore, when they initially hear from Moshe the conditions of the covenant, they do respond, declaring, "*na'aseh*" – "We will do" (*Shemot* 19:4–8).

Contrasts and oppositions abound within the context of this *haftarah*. These discordant couplets comprise the thematic framework of this pivotal text that sets the tone for understanding all of Yeshayahu's prophecies. This is particularly significant when we adopt the approach of *Chazal*, who maintain that chapter 6, despite its asequential order, is Yeshayahu's inauguration into his long and illustrious career as a prophet of Israel.⁴ This organization of binary counterparts is a significant commentary on the state of *Benei Yisrael* in the time of Yeshayahu, in contrast to that of the nation when they first received the Torah at *Har Sinai*. Reminiscent of Eliyahu's challenge to the people in the time of King Achav to stop "limping between two opinions" – "*poschim al shetei ha-se'ipim*" (*Melakhim Aleph* 18:21) and "choose" between *Hashem* and the worship of Ba'al, Yeshayahu is commissioned into prophecy by being made aware of the extreme discordance between the Divine and earthly realms, resulting from *Benei Yisrael's* failure to choose the right path. The state of affairs of *Benei Yisrael* is contrasted with *Hashem's* expectations of them as the nation with whom He had entered into a binding covenant at *Matan Torah*, a covenant which brought with it long-lasting consequences. On the other hand, this schema also establishes certain paradoxes, which ultimately prove that while *Hashem* is intent on inflicting hardship upon His nation who betrayed Him, He has determined that they will be given an opportunity to recapture the glory of their youthful beginnings.

From the outset, chapter 6 of *Sefer Yeshayahu* presents a unique contrast between the Divine and earthly realms by introducing the opposition between Uziyahu, "*ha-melekh*," king of Judah (6:1), and Yeshayahu's unprecedented description of *Hashem* as "the King Lord of Hosts" – "*Ha-Melekh Hashem Tziva'ot*" (6:5).⁵ Two "kings" are presented as contraries, an impression that can only be understood against the unusual chronological backdrop of this context; for Yeshayahu's initiation is dated as occurring "in the year of the death of King Uziyahu" (6:1). Adopting *Chazal's* reading that this dating does not refer to the king's literal death, but to his figurative demise due to being stricken with a permanent state of leprosy, one recognizes the consequential importance of Yeshayahu's contrast of *Hashem* with the king of Judah.⁶ As described in *Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet* chapter 26, Uziyahu's arrogance, which results from his extensive military and political successes (26:6–15), propels the Judean king to attempt to establish his authority within the religious domain as well. The text relates, "But when he became strong, his heart grew so haughty to the point of destructiveness. He betrayed *Hashem* his God by entering into the Temple of *Hashem* to offer incense on the Incense Altar" (26:16).⁷ Immediately, Azaryahu, the chief *kohein*, together with eighty other *kohanim*, rebuke the king for trespassing the bounds of the Temple rituals, attempting to add to his resumé the title of priest in

⁴ Cf. *Mekhilta Beshalach (Ha-Shirah)*, *parashah* 7; *Kohelet Rabbah*, 1:31 (on *Kohelet* 1:12). Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 1:1; Ibn Ezra, *Yeshayahu* 1:1, 6:8; and Shmuel David Luzzatto (Shadal), *Yeshayahu*, 6:1, in Pinchas Schlesinger and Meir Chovev, eds., *Peirush Shadal al Sefer Yeshayahu* (Tel Aviv: Devir Pub., 1970), as well as modern commentators, such as Amos Chacham, *Sefer Yeshayahu: Perakim 1–35* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984), introduction, p. 4, and Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 15, 226, 233 n. 27, and idem, *Pirkei Mo'adot* (Jerusalem: Chorev Pub., 1986), 2:457, follow this rabbinic approach. Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 1:1, additionally observes that other chapters within *Sefer Yeshayahu* are not presented in chronological order, but they are organized thematically, as the international prophecies relating the fate of various nations. However, note the dissenting views of Radak, introduction to *Sefer Yeshayahu*, and Abarbanel, *Yeshayahu* 1:1, 6:1, who see chapter 6 as a culmination of the prophecies of chapters 1–5 of *Sefer Yeshayahu*.

⁵ Note the parallel between Yeshayahu's description of *Hashem* and that of the angels in their declaration in *Yeshayahu* 6:3, as observed by Chacham, *Sefer Yeshayahu*, 68, notes on 6:5, and Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 233, n. 26.

⁶ While a literal reading might parallel another similar dating prefacing the prophecy of *Yeshayahu* 14:28, concerning the demise of Achaz, this approach does not illuminate the integral relationship between the timing of Yeshayahu's vision and the content of his mission. This is particularly apparent when one takes into consideration that Uziyahu continued to live through the reign of Yotam and part of the reign of Achaz, who took over for him because he could not continue to perform his royal functions as a leper. For *Chazal's* reading, see *Midrash Tanchuma Zav* 13, and compare *Shemot Rabbah* 1:34, as well as *Yalkut Shimoni* on *Yeshayahu* 6:1, *remez* 404.

⁷ Cf. Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 227, n.5, who observes the parallel between *Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet*, 26:15, which describes how Uziyahu was helped to the point that "he became strong" – "*ad ki chazak*," and 26:16, in which this "strength" is described as causing him to become arrogant ("*u-khe-chezkato gavah libbo*").

addition to that of king. Uziyahu, however, becomes enraged and refuses to back down. *Hashem* then intervenes to stop this mockery of His appointed priestly servants, and while the censer full of burning incense is still in his hand, Uziyahu is stricken with leprosy and hurried out of the Temple (26:17–20). Uziyahu remains banished and secluded from society, residing in a place of asylum until the day of his death (26:21).

Uziyahu's behavior is symptomatic of the Israelite society's overall dysfunctional state. Their haughtiness, egotism, and sense of invincibility cause them to turn away from their commitment to *Hashem*.⁸ Their condition translates into a state of impurity, represented by their king's leprous state. By contrast, *Hashem*, the Heavenly King, is described by the angels as "*kadosh*," a Holy Being. The quality of *kedushah* in relation to *Hashem* signifies, as Yehudah Ha-Levi expounds, God's transcendent and inimitable character.⁹ When the earthly king of Judah does not respect the bounds of his domain, attempting to enter into the inner precincts of a relationship with *Hashem* where he does not belong, *Hashem* unseats him from his throne, ousting him to the outlying areas of society where he can no longer influence his subjects.¹⁰ As opposed to *Benei Yisrael*, who prepared to receive the Torah by sanctifying themselves through acts of separation ("*va-yikadesh et ha-am*") (*Shemot* 19:14–15; cf. 19:10) and establishing boundaries between them and the mountain (*Shemot* 19:12–13, 21–24), Uziyahu does not comprehend his limitations as a human king and is remiss in teaching his nation how to conduct themselves properly in their relation to *Hashem*.

This stark opposition between the human and Divine "kings," between impurity and holiness, is graphically elaborated upon by Yeshayahu in his portrayal of himself as a "man of impure lips" (*Yeshayahu* 6:5). Yeshayahu senses the great divide between him and the angels, whose pure voices sing to *Hashem*. Assuming that Yeshayahu has not served as a prophet prior to this encounter, one may logically understand that he focuses on his impurity in relation to his lips, for he senses his unworthiness to participate in their chorus.¹¹ One may also observe that he who will become a

⁸. In fact, the descriptions in *Sefer Yeshayahu*, chapters 1–5, point to the Israelite wealth and arrogance, which resulted in their betrayal of *Hashem* for idolatrous worship.

⁹. Cf. Yehudah Ha-Levi, *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, ed. Yehudah Even Shmuel (Tel Aviv: Dvir Pub., 1972), 4:3, p. 156, cited as well in Radak, on *Yeshayahu* 6:3. Yehudah Ha-Levi observes that this description of *Hashem* segregates the Divine in His loftiness and purity, which can never be tainted by the impurities of the nation, among whom His Glory resides. Note how *Yeshayahu* 40:25 characterizes *Hashem* as "*kadosh*," stipulating that none can be compared or equaled to Him. When *Benei Yisrael* are commanded to be *kadosh* just as *Hashem* is holy, as in *Vayikra* 19:1, the emphasis is on what behaviors Israel should avoid and from what it should distance itself in order to emulate this Divine, lofty quality. On this point, see the analysis of Jacobson, *Chazon Ha-Mikra*, 186–188. On the other hand, as Jacobson, *ibid.*, 188–89, observes, *Hashem* is often described by Yeshayahu and other prophets as "*kadosh*" when He acts by implementing the standards of justice (as in *Yeshayahu* 5:16, 29:19–20, 30:12–18; compare *Yechezkel* 38:22–23). The concept of "holiness" in relation to *Hashem* may also be juxtaposed to the description of "elevated and lofty" – "*ram ve-nisa*" (*Yeshayahu*, 6:1), which some commentators (for example, *Targum Yonatan* and Abarbanel, following *ta'amei ha-mikra*) view as a description of *Hashem* Himself. Compare parallel descriptions applied to *Hashem* in *Yeshayahu* 2:11, 17, 21; 57:15. Other commentators, however, such as Ibn Ezra, maintain that these adjectives describe the throne chair.

¹⁰. The contrast between the Divine and earthly kings as an important motif of this chapter is observed by Mordechai (Martin) Buber, *Torat Ha-Nevi'im* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1961), 117–18; compare the discussion in Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 228, 244. This message is inherent within the parallels in the wording between *Yeshayahu*, chapter 6, and *Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet*, chapter 26, as taught to me by my teacher, Dr. Ayala Levy Feldblum. In relation to this contrast between *Hashem's* holiness and Uziyahu's state of impurity, one may observe how the Priests, descendants of Aharon, are described as "*ha-mekudashim*," consecrated by *Hashem* for service in the Temple, parallel to *Hashem's* depiction as "*kadosh*," whereas Uziyahu is admonished that this role does not belong to him (*Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet* 26:18). See further on in my discussion for additional parallels.

¹¹. Compare the second interpretation of Radak, *Yeshayahu* 6:5; his first interpretation, citing his father, interprets Yeshayahu's description of "*temei sefatayim*," based on *Iyov* 18:3, rendering its meaning as one who has *closed lips* because he did not praise *Hashem* along with the angels.

prophet, a “*niv sefatayim*” – “one whose speech will emanate from his lips” (*Yeshayahu* 57:19), is now stymied by the impurity of his lips, which is a stumbling block to carrying out his mission.¹²

However, the significance of this contrast is more acutely understood by discerning how Yeshayahu associates the state of his lips with that of his nation. While Radak and Ibn Ezra relate that Yeshayahu was influenced by the impurity of the nation’s degenerate speech,¹³ the lasting impression etched on Yeshayahu’s lips by the people’s transgressions acquires greater potency when associating Uziyahu’s leprous state with this condition. As noted by modern scholars, one of the unusual restrictions placed on a leper is that he must cover his mouth (“*ve-al safam yateh*” – *Vayikra* 13:45), which Ibn Ezra, in that context, explains as a precaution to prevent the leper from causing harm with the breath of his mouth.¹⁴ The unparalleled description of “impure lips” therefore relates directly to the timing of Yeshayahu’s vision which begins his prophetic career. Having witnessed such a lofty vision of *Hashem* on His throne surrounded by the angels who sanctify Him, Yeshayahu senses how the king’s transgressions have affected the nation at large, producing a toxic atmosphere which creates a wedge between *Hashem* and His people. The king has failed to serve as a true Divine emissary, and this condition has permeated Yeshayahu’s being to the point that he does not feel worthy of serving together with the heavenly beings in *Hashem*’s court.

According to *Chazal*, the juxtaposition between Yeshayahu’s inaugural vision and Uziyahu’s grievous behaviors explains why Yeshayahu envisions *Hashem* situated on His heavenly throne. *Hashem* appears in this manner within the domain of the Temple in order to judge Uziyahu for having attempted to take the “crown of the priesthood.”¹⁵ Similarly, the trembling of the Temple walls, described in *Yeshayahu* 6:4, is interpreted as an inner reverberation of the outer tumult caused by the earthquake that shook the land when Uziyahu tried to offer incense in the Temple.¹⁶

When the Priests cry out to Uziyahu, “There will be no glory in it for you from the Lord, God” – “*lo lekha le-khavod*” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet* 26:18), one is reminded of another reference to “glory” – “*kavod*” within the context of the *haftarah*. This context introduces an important paradox concerning *Hashem*’s relationship with the world and with *Am Yisrael* in particular. When the angels call out to one another, they proclaim, on the one hand, that *Hashem* is “*kadosh*,” separate and distant, and yet, on the other hand, they declare, “The whole world is filled with His Glory” – “*melo khol ha-aretz kevodo*” (*Yeshayahu* 6:3). The message is a relevant one to the misguided theology of Uziyahu and the nation of his time. While *Hashem* sets boundaries and restrictions for his people, even its leaders, it is only He who can determine how His presence, His *kavod*, is manifested within the world. The medium of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the setting of Yeshayahu’s vision, is intended to communicate to the people

¹². Compare the explanation of Shadal, *Yeshayahu* 6:5; cf. Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 233, n. 27, 234, n. 30, and see idem, *Pirkei Moadot*, 2:464, where he juxtaposes “*niv sefatayim*” to “*temei sefatayim*.”

¹³. Radak, *Yeshayahu* 6:5, citing the parallel text in 9:16. Compare Ibn Ezra, 6:5, who observes that in *Yeshayahu* 8:11, *Hashem* has to insist that Yeshayahu not follow “in the path of this people.”

¹⁴. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Vayikra* 13:45; compare the commentary of Chizkuni on this verse. Rashi maintains that covering the mouth is a sign of mourning; this explanation would find support in the parallel texts in *Yechezkel* 24:17–18 and *Michah* 3:7. On the parallel between this restriction on a leper and the description of “impure lips,” see Buber, *Torat Ha-Nevi'im*, 120–21, and compare Yigal Ariel, *Mikdash Melekh: Iyunim be-Sefer Melakhim* (Chispin: Midreshet ha-Golan, 1994), 341–42. Ariel also discerns the contrast between the leper who calls out, “*tamei tamei*” – “impure, impure” (*Vayikra*, 13:45), as opposed to the angels in Yeshayahu’s vision who declare the holiness (“*kadosh*”) of *Hashem*.

¹⁵. Cf. Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 6:1, 4, and compare *Seder Olam Rabbah*, 20; *Midrash Tanchuma Zav*, 13; and *Yalkut Shimoni*, on *Yeshayahu*, 6:4, *remez* 404.

¹⁶. The earthquake in Uziyahu’s time is described in *Zechariah* 14:5; compare *Amos* 1:1. Cf. Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 6:4, and compare his midrashic sources, cited in the previous note. Appropriately, the smoke that fills the Temple in Yeshayahu’s vision recalls the smoke of the incense; see Shadal, *Yeshayahu* 6:4, who maintains that as the angels sang, they offered incense to honor *Hashem*. One might, however, relate this incense smoke to Uziyahu’s failed attempt to perform this special priestly ritual.

that they will feel the Divine providence among them through adherence to the conditions of the covenant established at *Har Sinai*. The juxtaposition of *Hashem's* ever-present Glory in the world with His quality of *kedushah* is associated with His relationship with *Benei Yisrael*, for in *Sefer Yeshayahu*, more than other books of *Tanakh*, *Hashem* is repeatedly designated as “the Holy One of Israel” – “*Kedosh Yisrael*.”¹⁷ On the other hand, because *Benei Yisrael* do not understand the parameters of their relationship with *Hashem*, *Hashem* will have to reveal His presence in the world in a negative manner, through punishment and suffering, in order to teach the consequences of not behaving as a “holy nation.”

In order for Yeshayahu to perform his prophetic mission, he must be separated from, and elevated above, his people. While *Hashem* reaches out and plagues Uziyahu with leprosy (“*nigeo Hashem*” – *Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet* 26:20), one of the “fiery angels (*saraf*)”¹⁸ reaches out with a hot coal taken from on top of the altar (*Yeshayahu* 6:6), touches Yeshayahu’s lips (“*naga zeh al sefatekha*”), and purifies him from all taint of sin and iniquity (6:7).¹⁹ Applying the same verbal root, נ ג נ, the text sets up the opposition between the leader who is demoted from his lofty position among his people, stained with the impurities of an everlasting affliction, to the newly Divinely ordained leader who has been purified and raised up to serve his people for a noble purpose. Contrary to expectations, the burning coal does not harm him, but it brings about the atonement needed for Yeshayahu to assume his new prophetic role.²⁰

Consumed with gratitude for his transformation, Yeshayahu readily volunteers for the Divine mission: “Here I am! Send me!” (*Yeshayahu* 6:8).²¹ Paradoxically, however, *Hashem* sends him on a mission that is not only doomed for failure, but it seems that the prophet himself is to act as the agent who will ensure its failure.

¹⁷. On the meaning of this Divine epithet, see Yehudah Ha-Levi, *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, 4:3 (Even Shmuel, p. 156), and compare Jacobson, *Chazon Ha-Mikra*, 189, and Breuer, *Pirkei Mo'adot*, 2:460.

¹⁸. Cf. Radak, *Yeshayahu* 6:2, who also applies the angel’s fiery form paradoxically to connote the nation’s sinful state that warrants their destruction. Compare Shadal, *Yeshayahu* 6:2, who observes that “*saraf*” refers to a poisonous snake (as in *Yeshayahu* 14:29); contrarily, in this context, the angel heals rather than causing death. Interestingly, one might associate this imagery with that of the snake in *Bereishit* chapter 3, who incited the first humans to make the wrong choice and eat from the “Tree of Good and Bad.” In the topsy turvy Israelite society of Yeshayahu’s times, in which “they say of bad that it is good, and of good that it is bad” (*Yeshayahu* 5:20), Yeshayahu, having been influenced by this atmosphere, needs to be purified before he can set out to rebuke his people.

¹⁹. On this parallel, see as well Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 228. One may correlate this touching on the mouth to *Yirmiyahu* 1:9, where *Hashem* sends forth His “hand” and, touching Yirmiyahu’s mouth, places His words into them. On this observation, see Breuer, *Pirkei Mo'adot*, 2:464, who notes that with this purification, Yeshayahu is now inducted as a prophet; compare *Targum Yonatan* on *Yeshayahu* 6:7. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Yirmiyahu has already been pre-ordained from the womb to be a prophet of Israel, and the act of touching the mouth signals the beginning of his mission, receiving the words of his prophecy. Yeshayahu, however, is touched on the mouth so that he is purified as a prerequisite for becoming a prophet to his people. *Hashem* does not inform him of his mission until he volunteers for it in *Yeshayahu* 6:8.

²⁰. Cf. Shadal’s explanation, *Yeshayahu* 6:2. Fittingly, the incense smoke is also associated in various Biblical contexts with atonement, as in *Vayikra* 16:12–13 and *Bemidbar* 17:11. On this, cf. Binyamin Uffenheimer, “*Ha-Reka Ha-Nafshi Le-Yeshayahu Vav Le-Or Ha-Parshanut Ha-Kedumah*,” in *Iyunim Be-Sefer Yeshayahu*, ed. B.Z. Luria (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Pub., 1976), 2:78. One may also observe that that root, נ ג נ, occurs in *Shemot* 19:12–13, with regard to the prohibition not to touch the mountain upon which *Hashem* will appear at the giving of the Torah; in that context, the emphasis is on establishing the proper boundaries between the human and the Divine.

²¹. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Yeshayahu* 6:8, who observes that Yeshayahu’s unwavering acceptance of his mission after being purified is also proof that he had not been a Divine messenger until now.

Go and say to this people:²² Hear and hear (*shimu shamo'a*), but do not understand. And see and see (*ure'u ra'o*), but (*ve'al*) do not perceive. Make the heart of this people fat (*hashmein*), and its ears heavy (*hakhbeid*), and shut its eyes (*hasha*), lest it see with its eyes, and hear with its ears, and understand with its heart and repent (*vashav*) and be healed. (*Yeshayahu* 6: 9–10).²³

The people of Israel were warned that they need to “listen to My voice” and observe *Hashem's* covenant (*Shemot* 19:5). They heard *Hashem* speak to them and to Moshe at *Har Sinai* (*Shemot* 19:9, 20:1), responding, “Everything that *Hashem* has said, we will do and we will hear and obey” – “*na'aseh ve-nishma*” (*Shemot* 24:7).²⁴ Yet, they have strayed so far from fulfilling their Divinely ordained role to the point that they will not be allowed to comprehend and absorb the prophet's rebuke. Repentance and healing will be thwarted in order to implement punishment and devastation.

Yeshayahu, who had listened to the voices from heaven, has been charged to do the exact opposite with regard to his intended audience; he is to ensure that they do not heed his message. Some commentators, aware of the unusual grammatical construct of *Hashem's* command which consists of an imperative (“*shimu*”; “*re'u*”) followed by a corresponding infinitive absolute form (“*shamo'a*”; “*ra'o*”), maintain that this declaration intends to describe the Israelites' apathetic and obdurate state that will continue even during the prophet's tenure.²⁵ However, other commentators, particularly Rambam, read the overall tenor of this declaration as an imperative (supported by the negative particle, “*al*,” and the imperative tone of the causative verbs, “make fat, heavy, shut”), signaling that the prophet's preaching is meant to bring about this state of indifference among the nation at large.²⁶ Combining the conceptual implications of the two readings results in the understanding that because *Benei Yisrael* have independently chosen to rebel against the Torah's commandments, *Hashem* has determined that they have earned the consequence that repentance is no longer an option. Judgment and punishment are unavoidable.²⁷

²². Note the distancing in the tone of *Hashem's* command: “this people (*am ha-zeh*),” as opposed to “my people.” For this observation, cf. Chacham, *Sefer Yeshayahu*, 69, notes on *Yeshayahu* 6:8. Compare Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9–10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation*, JSOT Supplement Series 64 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 18. See parallel applications of this expression in *Yeshayahu* 28:11, 29:13–14.

²³. I have applied the translation cited in Evans, *ibid.*, 18, with some variations.

²⁴. Note, moreover, how the *parashah* to which this chapter from *Sefer Yeshayahu* is associated begins with the opening words of hearing: “Yitro heard” (*Shemot* 18:1), and he absorbed the lessons of the Exodus from Egypt about the greatness of *Hashem* and His ways (*Shemot* 18:1, 10–11). Furthermore, as Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 17, observes, *Hashem* warns in *Shemot* 15:26, that only if Israel listens, then “all disease” that He brought upon the Egyptians will not affect His people, but healing and health will be bestowed upon them. Cf. *Devarim* 28:15, 59–62, for the plagues that will beset *Benei Yisrael* if they do not listen to *Hashem* and His commandments.

²⁵. For this reading, see Rashi and Radak's second alternative, *Yeshayahu* 6:9–10, which interpret verse 10 as a description, in which the verbs relate a state of being: “Fattening are their hearts, sealed are their ears, closed are their eyes...”

²⁶. For this reading, see Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 6:4, and compare his introduction to *Peirush Ha-Mishnayot*, chapter 8. On the reading that Rambam's view of *Yeshayahu* 6:10 conveys a “loss of free will” as punishment for the people's transgressions, compare the discussion by R. Netanel Wiederblank, “*בשלה: Free Will and the Exodus: Is It Ever Too Late to Turn Around?*” In *Mitokh Ha-Ohel: Essays on the Weekly Parashah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, eds. Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman and Stuart W. Halpern (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 169, n. 16, as well as 170, n. 17. Radak, *Yeshayahu* 6:9–10, in his first alternative, agrees with this view; compare as well Ibn Ezra, *Yeshayahu* 6:9–10. Cf. comparable approaches in Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 236, and Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 18–19. Buber, *Torat Ha-Nevi'im*, 121–22, posits that the prophet will accomplish his mission through prophecies of consolation and announcements of impending redemption, which will have the effect that his words of rebuke will fall on deaf ears.

²⁷. Note that this is what Rambam, *ibid.*, emphasizes. The gates to repentance are only locked once an individual becomes entrenched in his own iniquitous path. There are a number of other passages in *Sefer Yeshayahu* which describe *Benei Yisrael's* inability to see, hear, and comprehend; compare, for example, as noted in Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 42–

Nevertheless, Yeshayahu refuses to accept that his only task is that of prophet of doom.²⁸ Perhaps he perceives the paradox of his mission. As Mordechai Breuer astutely observes, the very fact that he has been sent to tell the people not to understand so that punishment can be carried out, provides them ironically with the recipe for their salvation. While *Hashem* does not want to absolve the nation as a whole from the punishment that they deserve, He will not forego the possibility that if individuals among them decide to do the opposite of what the prophet tells them, then healing may take place.²⁹ One might indeed maintain that Yeshayahu views his mission as a personal challenge: how will he be able to serve as a Divine messenger, while at the same time aiming to assist his people, with whom he has identified until now? Having been given the unique opportunity to purify himself from the stains of his sinful nation, Yeshayahu feels that it is also his mission to try to purify those whom he can influence. While *Hashem* has sent him to fatten their hearts and cause their eyes and ears to close against his words, Yeshayahu refuses to settle and seeks to extract from *Hashem* a guarantee that there is hope.

Responding to Yeshayahu's cry from the heart, "Until when?" (*Yeshayahu* 6:11), *Hashem* affirms that although the decree is sealed and devastation will occur (*Yeshayahu* 6:11–12), it will not be complete. Hope is offered in the form of a small remnant that will survive the judgment and create the possibility for renewal (*Yeshayahu* 6:13). This remnant will be the "*matzevet*," the stump that endures even after the "tree" of Israel has shed its leaves and appears barren (*Yeshayahu* 6:13), carrying the potential for a new seed to emerge and revitalize the nation.

Yeshayahu's experience has highlighted many oppositions and contrasts: the Divine king/the human king; a king's leprosy/a prophet's inauguration; impurity/holiness; *Hashem's* lofty stature/man's lowly status; angels singing/the silence of a man with impure lips; transgression/atonement; a burning coal/purification; a prophet's seeing and hearing/his people's incomprehension; a Temple standing in all its glory/a punishment of ruin, where houses (*battim*) will remain without their inhabitants (*Yeshayahu* 6:11); a land (*aretz*) filled with *Hashem's* glory/a land deserted, the population banished because of sin (*Yeshayahu* 6:12); cities without people (*Yeshayahu* 6:11)/the hope of a remnant that will survive.

Nevertheless, in order to bring about restoration, this text circles back to the beginning; yet this time it invokes complementary couplets, which reflect the healing that will occur through merging the people with their prophet and ultimately with *Hashem*. Just as Yeshayahu underwent a process of purification, similarly, as Rashi explains, this surviving remnant will endure repeated acts of purging ("*ve-shavah ve-haytah le-va'er*") (*Yeshayahu* 6:13), until only the purest core of Israel, consisting of righteous people, will remain.³⁰ As Yeshayahu declares in a later context, "And your people will all be righteous...They are the shoot that I planted, My handiwork in which to glory" (*Yeshayahu* 60:21). Noting, however, the double entendre of the term "*ve-shavah*," Rashi observes that *Hashem* will purify those who "return" and repent with all of their hearts.³¹ Those righteous individuals, who challenge

46, *Sefer Yeshayahu*, 1:3, 5; 29:9–10; 44:18; 59:9–10; note that in 63:17, *Hashem* is described as hardening the people's hearts.

²⁸. This aspect of his mission is also important, however, in order to inform the people of the Divine cause of their suffering; as *Yechezkel* 2:5 emphasizes, even though the prophet is being sent to a rebellious people who will not listen, nevertheless, "They will know that a prophet has been among them."

²⁹. Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu*, 236–37.

³⁰. Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 6:13, explains "*ve-shavah ve-haytah le-va'er*" to mean that *Hashem* will "return" His "hand" repeatedly over the remnant, "purification after purification" – "*tzeruf achar tzeruf*," and "it will be purged until only completely righteous men will remain." For a different reading of this phrase, cf. Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Shadal, *Yeshayahu* 6:13.

³¹. Cf. Breuer, *Pirkei Mo'adot*, 2:468, 474–75, who follows and expands upon Rashi's reading in his analysis of 6:13, noting that Rashi also bases his explanation on the parallel to "*va-shav ve-rafa lo*" in *Yeshayahu* 6:10, as well as the corresponding text in *Yeshayahu* 1:25, "I will return My hand on you and I will purge your dross" – "*ve-ashivah yadi alayich ve-etzrof*..."

the prophet's message of doom and work to forge a harmony once again between themselves and *Hashem*, will form the rooted stump that stands firm and from which a new generation of Israel will emerge. Paralleling the angels' description of *Hashem* as "*kadosh*" at the beginning of the *haftarah*, Yeshayahu is informed at the end of this vision, that the remnant will consist of a "holy seed" – "*zera kodesh*" (*Yeshayahu* 6:13).³² Identifying itself with the greatness of *Hashem*, this remnant will create a merging between the lofty vision which Yeshayahu experiences and *Benei Yisrael's* spiritual experience at *Har Sinai*. Like the people who stood together at the foot of the mountain awaiting *Hashem's* words ("*va-yityatzevu*") (*Shemot* 19:17), this *matzevet* will stand permanently, for it will be comprised of a remnant that is *kadosh*, as *Hashem* is *kadosh*.

Perhaps this structural organization of chapter 6 of *Sefer Yeshayahu*, which sets the tone for the entire *sefer*, explains why *Ashkenazim* do not conclude the *haftarah* at the end of this chapter, as do *Sephardim*, but they supplement with selections from chapter 7, describing Yeshayahu's confrontation with King Achaz, great-grandson of Uziyahu, and from chapter 9, which predicts the birth of a son, presumably Chizkiyahu, who would be called a "prince of peace" (*Yeshayahu* 9:5) and sustain the throne of David through justice and righteousness (9:6).³³ Yeshayahu confronts Achaz with the proposition that if he trusts in *Hashem* and remains alert but calm ("*hi-shamer ve-hashket, al tira*" – *Yeshayahu* 7:4), then *Hashem* will vanquish the oncoming enemies from Aram and Ephraim. In order to hone his message, Yeshayahu brings his son with him, whose name evokes the memory of his inaugural experience in chapter 6: "*She-ar Yashuv*" (*Yeshayahu* 7:3).³⁴ Yeshayahu is challenging Achaz to decide which aspect of Yeshayahu's prophetic mission will this king bring to fruition: devastation, or, as his son's name indicates, the hope of a remnant that will return to *Hashem* and survive.³⁵ Achaz's refusal to heed Yeshayahu's message testifies to the justification for *Hashem's* determination that punishment is inevitable. In contrast, Chizkiyahu, the son of Achaz, demonstrates that he can bring about peace and stability within the Judean kingdom because of his righteous ways. The success of Chizkiyahu in preventing the Assyrian forces from conquering Jerusalem is credited to this Judean king's repentance, as is recorded in *Melakhim Bet* chapter 19. By juxtaposing these two kings of Judah, each of whom chooses a different path, the *haftarah* presents two illustrative examples of the effects of Yeshayahu's mission, a mission of contrasting rebuke and consolation, of punishment and survival.

Today, when hearing the words of *Parashat Yitro* alongside the prophecies of Yeshayahu, we come to the realization that we must understand and obey the *berit* that we made with *Hashem* at *Matan Torah* so we can bring about the final healing and redemption of *Am Yisrael*.

³². Compare a similar description of the remnant in *Yeshayahu* 4:3.

³³. While medieval commentators identify the "son" of *Yeshayahu* 9:1–6 as Chizkiyahu (cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Abarbanel, Shadal), it is noteworthy, as pointed out by Chacham, *Sefer Yeshayahu*, 100–102, that the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 94a) maintains Chizkiyahu could have been the *Mashiach*, had Chizkiyahu lived up to expectations. Since the prophecy of these verses has not been completely fulfilled, it is intended to be realized in the future messianic times.

³⁴. Compare the meaning of this son's name to *Yeshayahu* 10:21–22. Note that in *Yeshayahu* 8:18, the prophet acknowledges that his children are "signs and portents" for impending events that will befall Israel.

³⁵. Compare Rashi's interpretation of the son's name, *Yeshayahu* 7:3.