

Rabbi Eric Goldman

Haftarat Vayakhel (and the Second Shabbat Chanukah): Coming Closer to God

The *haftarah* for *Parashat Vayakhel*, otherwise known as “*Neirot De-Shlomo*,” has many unique characteristics. First, there is the infrequency with which it is actually read. During most years, *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* are read together, and, following the general *halakhah* for double *parashiyot*, the *haftarah* for *Pekudei* takes precedence. Even on leap years, when *Vayakhel* is read on its own, its *haftarah* is often passed over in place of the one for *Parashat Shekalim*.

Secondly, whereas many *haftarot* require somewhat of an analysis in order to connect them to the *parashah* they are paired with, the connection of the *haftarah* for *Vayakhel* and the *parashah* itself is plainly obvious: the *parashah* deals with the fashioning of the vessels of the *Mishkan* and the *haftarah* deals with the fashioning of the vessels for the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.

Lastly, very often the *Ashkenazim* and *Sefardim* choose noticeably different themes on which to base their choice of *haftarat*. However, the *haftarah* for *Vayakhel* according to the *Ashkenazim* is merely the second half of the *perek* that the *Sephardim* use for their *haftarah*. Both traditions chose to focus on the building of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and its vessels, differing only in the particular vessels on which to elaborate.

This *haftarah* does have one unusual factor in that it doubles as the *haftarah* for the second *Shabbat* of *Chanukah*, since one of the *keilim* mentioned in the *haftarah* is the *menorah*. However, this too is somewhat ironic, since *Chanukah* is very rarely spread out over two *Shabbatot*. The *Gemara* tells us that when there is only one *Shabbat* during *Chanukah*, “*Neirot De-Shlomo*” is passed over once again in favor of the section in *Zechariah* (known as “*Neirot De-Zechariah*”) which also mentions the *menorah* of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.¹ However, the *Gemara* does not explain why the *haftarah* of “*Neirot De-Zechariah*” should take precedence over the *haftarah* of “*Neirot DeShlomo*.”

The Ran² explains that really we should be reading *Neirot De-Shlomo* because it precedes *Neirot De-Zechariah*. However, because the *nevuah* in *Neirot De-Zechariah* refers to the *menorah* that will be in the Second *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the very same *menorah* that the miracle of *Chanukah* will take place with, it is this *nevuah* that takes precedence.

R. Yisroel Dov Lerner, in his *sefer Haftarah U-Gemara*, explains that the connection of the *Neirot De-Zechariah* to the *Neirot De-Chashmonaim* may go even deeper than simply being a reference. The *nevuah* of *Zechariah* came after the Jewish people had been placed under the yoke of nations of the world. Likewise, the *Neirot De-Chashmonaim*, the actual *menorah* of the Second *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, burned at its brightest after the harsh decrees and yoke of the Greeks had been placed upon the Jewish nation. Although the miracle of *Chanukah* was a momentous event for the Jewish people, it

¹. *Megillah* 31a.

². *Megillah* 11a (*be-dapei Ha-Rif*), s.v. *Shabbat*.

came during a time when we had otherwise been struggling to feel God's presence, just as in the time that the *nevuah* of *Zechariah* had been given.

Perhaps with this connection between the *Neirot De-Zechariah* and the *Neirot De-Chashmonaim*, we can reach a deeper understanding of the rarity with which our *haftarah*, *Neirot De-Shlomo*, is read on *Chanukah*.

The only time *Chanukah* has two *Shabbatot* is if the first day of *Chanukah* is on *Shabbat*, in which case, the eighth and final day of *Chanukah* will also fall out on *Shabbat*. The eighth day of *Chanukah* is often referred to as "*Zot Chanukah*" ("*This is Chanukah*"). In Jewish thought, the number eight carries with it great significance. The number seven symbolizes the natural order of the world – there are seven days in a week, seven years in a *shemittah* cycle, seven sets of *shemittah* cycles in a *yovel* cycle, etc. On the other hand, the number eight means that something is *le-ma'alah min ha-teva* (above the natural order of things) because it is more strongly connected to God. For example, the *Yom Tov* of *Shemini Atzeret* is an exceptional *Yom Tov* because it is on this day that God tells us "*kashah alai pereidatkhem*" – "your separation is difficult on Me."³ It is a *Yom Tov* that expresses an intense relationship between us and God. Therefore, it is this *Yom Tov* that has to take place on an eighth day (i.e. after the seven days of *Sukkot*).⁴

The only other time we have a celebration on a national level that lasts for eight days is *Chanukah*. It is the eighth day that sets it apart from all of the other *Yomim Tovim* that we have. It is on the eighth day that *Chanukah* rises above the natural order of the world and is *le-ma'alah min ha-teva*, and we are thus able to feel a deeper and more intense connection to God. It is *Zot Chanukah*.

The *gemara* in *Massekhet Yoma* (21b) relates that there were vast differences between the First and Second Temples. The second *Beit Ha-Mikdash* had no *Aron*, no *kaporet*, no *keruvim*, no heavenly fire on the altar, and no *Urim Ve-Tumim* for the *Kohein Gadol*. In stark contrast, all of these were present in the First *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. The First *Beit Ha-Mikdash* had a more open revelation of God's presence, which was something that was severely lacking in the Second. However, there was one time during the period of the Second *Beit Ha-Mikdash* that we were able to feel God's presence more strongly than we had previously. That was during *Chanukah*, when we were *zokheh* to have God perform the *neis nigleh* (the open miracle) of having the *menorah* stay lit for a full eight days. It was during this time that we felt closest to that level of God's presence in this world that we had been *zokheh* to feel during the time of the First *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.

Therefore, when the eighth day of *Chanukah* falls on *Shabbat* and we are given a chance to express the essence of this day, we are able to read about the *Neirot De-Shlomo*. Because it was on the eighth day of *Chanukah* that we were given a taste of the intense closeness to God that we had during the First *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. We can therefore recall the days of old by reading about the *Neirot De-Shlomo*, and reading about a time when God's presence was dwelling tangibly in this world and we were able to experience such a close and intense relationship with Him. A feeling that, God willing, we should experience again shortly.

³. Rashi, *Bemidbar* 29:35.

⁴. *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 115.