

Dedicated in loving memory of Morris Novetsky, Z"L,
on the occasion of his third *yahrzeit* 8 Tammuz,
by his children: Jay and Paula Novetsky,
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THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

HAFTARA - PARSHAT BALAK

"With what shall I come before the Lord, bow before the Most High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriad streams of oil?" [Micha 6:6-7]

Based on this battery of rhetorical questions [found towards the conclusion of this week's Haftara], it certainly seems as though God finds little value in the offering of 'sacrifices', at least according to the prophet Micha!

So why does the Bible dedicate so many laws regarding "korbanot" [sacrifices]? And why are we going to spend the next 'three weeks' lamenting the destruction of the Bet Ha'Mikdash?

In the following shiur, as we study this week's Haftara, we will attempt to answer these questions.

INTRODUCTION

To better appreciate any Haftara, it is always important to take into consideration its historical setting, as well as its context within the entire book. Therefore, we begin our study with a quick overview of the navi Micha and his time period.

THE 'BIG FOUR'

Micha is one of the 'Four Prophets' - Hoshea, Amos, Yeshayahu, and Micha - who prophesied during the same time period. Based on the opening verses in each of these four books, their careers spanned the reigns of Kings Uziyahu, Yotam, Achaz, & Chizkiyahu - of Yehuda, and Yerovam ben Yoash - the Ten Tribes (= approx. 8th century BCE).

It is not coincidental that we find so many prophets during this time period. To understand why, we will use what we refer to as 'the sine-wave model' to highlight how the Prophets identified a correlation between Am Yisrael's behavior and the 'ups & downs' of the first Temple period.

BAYIT RISHON / its UP's & DOWN's

In our 'sine-wave model', the highest point on the graph corresponds to when the overall state of the country is best; i.e. when we find economic growth, prosperity, unity, security, and peace with neighbors etc. In contrast, the lowest point on the graph reflects a pitiable state of affairs, i.e. when there is famine, poverty, internal strife, and a state of war with neighboring countries etc.

If you are familiar with the history of the first Temple period, you'll understand why the chart of the four hundred years of Bayit Rishon would look something like a sine-wave, as we will now explain:

The establishment of the monarchy in the time of King David is indeed the first 'high point' on our graph. The country was united, its borders secure and its economy strong. Even the religious level of the people was at a high, as reflected in the construction of the first Bet Ha'Mikdash by Shlomo ha'melech.

Unfortunately, only one generation later, the monarchy split between YEHUDA (Rechavam) and YISRAEL (Yerovam), causing the country to basically 'fall apart'. Egypt attacked Yehuda and plundered the Mikdash. The ten tribes were plagued with internal strife. Not only did security and prosperity suffer, so too the religious level of the people. Hence, this time period is

marked by a 'low point' on the graph.

About one hundred years later, during the time period of Yehoshafat (King of Yehuda) and Achav (King of Yisrael), the country unified itself once again (the second 'high point') and began to thrive. However this prosperity was short-lived. Despite the efforts of Eliyahu & Elisha, the Ten Tribes did not return to worship God properly. God's anger was reflected by the revolt of Yehu, the fall of Achav's dynasty, and once again civil war between Yehuda & Yisrael (the second 'low point').

It was only several generations later, during the reign of YEROVAM ben Yoash, King of Israel, and UZIYAHU, King of Yehuda, that harmony, prosperity and security finally returned (see II Melachim 14:23-28 & II Divrei Ha'yamim 3:1-15) - and yet another 'high point' was reached. Idol worship, in the likes of Asheyra & Baal - were no longer sanctioned in Yisrael, while Yehuda showed respect for their Temple in Jerusalem (even though the BAMOT remained).

THE BIG OPPORTUNITY

During this prosperous time of the united kingdom of UZIYAHU and YEROVAM, the prophets had high hopes for Am Yisrael to return to God. Finally, after several hundred years, the potential existed for a return to the glorious days of Shlomo ha'melech (King Solomon). It is during this time period that these Four Prophets began their prophesy. This time, God did not want this 'golden opportunity' to slip by.

This potential is reflected in one the opening prophesies of Yeshayahu - delivered during the reign of Uziyahu (see 1:1-3):

"The words of Yeshayahu concerning Yehuda and YERUSHALAIM: it shall be in the 'end of days' - [or the days that may soon come] - the Temple Mount shall stand firm above all mountains and tower above all hills; and **all the nations** shall flock to it saying: Come let us go up to the Temple Mount to the house of the God of Yaakov, that He may **teach us His ways**, and that we may walk in His paths... nation shall not lift sword against nation... (see Yeshayahu 2:1-4)
[See also inscription outside the United Nations]

Yeshayahu, in the time period of Uziyahu, foresees the unfolding of a messianic era, when Am Yisrael can realize its Biblical destiny to become a source of guidance for all mankind. It is BECAUSE Yehuda and Yisrael have achieved the status of a 'superpower', and BECAUSE the Temple & Jerusalem have become its national and religious center, that Yeshayahu anticipates this potential fulfillment.

It was God's hope that Am Yisrael would utilize their newfound prosperity towards achieving this messianic goal - the ultimate 'high point' on the sine wave. After all, it was for that purpose that He had blessed Israel with wealth and security. The prophets of this time first try to help Am Yisrael reach this goal. Upon their failure, they explain God's anger with His nation, for they failed to listen - and didn't grab this opportunity.

ENTER MICHA

Micha, a contemporary of Yeshayahu, delivers a very similar prophecy in chapter 4 [compare Yeshayahu 2:1-5 to Micha 4:1-5], reflecting this same hope. However, by then (the time period of Yotam & Achaz), both Micha & Yeshayahu had realized that the people were far from worthy for the prosperity that God had bestowed upon them. They both foresee yet another 'low' before this messianic 'high' would finally materialize. They also both explain HOW and WHY this would come about:

Yeshayahu explains that Ashur will come and punish both Yisrael & Yehuda (see 7:18 & 10:4-11); Shomron will be totally destroyed, while in Yehuda only Yerushalayim will be spared, and at the last moment and only in merit of a king who will act righteously (see 10:20->11:9). [See also Hoshea chapter 1.]

Micha's opening prophecy foresees a similar fate, however he describes Am Yisrael's fall to their enemies as though God Himself is leaving His Temple to punish His nation for their sins (see Micha 1:1-11).

However, most important is the reason that both these prophets give for Bnei Yisrael's forthcoming punishment. Both Yeshayahu and Micha focus their rebuke on social injustice, corruption, dishonesty, etc. It would not be fair to cite only one example - for there are so many, simply read from Micha chapters 2->3 & Yeshayahu chapters 2->5. Note their call for "tzedeq u'mishpat" - justice & righteousness. [Even though "avodah zarah" is mentioned, it does not appear to be their primary sin.]

THE DANGER OF RITUAL

We will quote however one short section from Micha, as it reflects not only this moral corruption, but more so the people's haughtiness. Their false security, as they feel that 'nothing is wrong'; all is fine; God is on 'our side':

"Hear this, you rulers of Yaakov... who detest justice and crooked look straight, who build Zion with crime, Jerusalem with iniquity! Her rulers judge for gifts, Her priests [i.e. rabbis] give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay, YET they RELY UPON GOD saying: HASHEM IS WITH - nothing bad will happen! - Therefore: because of you - Zion will be plowed as a field and Yerushalayim will become a heaps of ruins, and the Temple Mount a shrine of woods." (3:9-12)

This prophecy of Micha implies that even though the people are corrupt, THEY think that they are fine - because everyone feels 'frum' - they are sure that God is with them. After all, all of them frequent the Bet Ha'Mikdash - they all offer their necessary sacrifices, and even volunteer some 'extras'.

Nonetheless, they had become affluent and haughty. It is this hypocrisy that so angers God that He decides that the Mikdash must be destroyed.

This topic emerges as the primary thrust of the first three chapters of Micha. After this harsh rebuke and warning of imminent punishment, chapter four provides us with some hope as Micha reminds Bnei Yisrael that one day ["b'acharit ha'yammim"] a true redemption will take place - the remnant will return, but only when Bnei Yisrael will become truly deserving (see 4:1-7).

Afterward, Micha speaks about how Israel will one day counter and defeats its enemies (4:8->5:5) - even Ashur!

At this point our Haftara begins (see 5:6). Micha speaks of this 'remnant' who will no longer be dependant on any other nation, rather on God alone (see 5:6-7).

[Note the textual parallel to "shirat ha'azinu" (Devarim 32:1-2/ "tal", "rivim" etc.). There are numerous parallels to Shirat ha'azinu in both Yeshayahu & Micha, most probably because God's impending punishment and later redemption of Am Yisrael during this time period reflects the principles which 'shirat ha'azinu' discusses. Note especially the aspect of affluence and indulgence after God had granted prosperity (see Devarim 32:13-15), and how God will punish (32:16-22!).

Note also how God will finally redeem His nation (see 32:36). [Compare 32:19-21 with Micha 3:1-4!]

Micha continues in 5:9-14 to describe how (at this ideal time) after their victory, Am Yisrael will no longer need their weapons and fortified cities, nor any type of 'future-tellers'

In chapter 6, Micha returns to his own generation, explaining to them WHY God is so angry. Again he reminds them that all that God asks from them is to follow the ways of "tzedeq u'mishpat". However, it is interesting to note how the prophet refers to this as a "riv" - a 'quarrel between God and His people' [see 6:1-8].

When two sides quarrel, usually BOTH sides think that they are right. Again, Micha's description reflects the people's misunderstanding that things aren't so bad, and if they do sin, why offering a korban can 'fix' any transgression.

This can explain Micha's rhetorical question:

"With what can I approach God - to pay Him homage -

Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings?

With calves a year old?

Would not God be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my TRANSGRESSION, the fruit of my body for my sins?" (see 6:6-7)

This question reflects the people's understanding that no matter how they act, no matter what they may do wrong, to appease God they need only bring a 'korban'.

According to the navi - this attitude reflects a total misunderstanding of korbanot [& in fact most any type of ritual]. If God has allowed us to offer korbanot, it is not simply to counter-balance any bad deed or behavior. Rather, the primary purpose of korbanot (and the Bet Ha'Mikdash) was to serve as a vehicle through which Am Yisrael can perfect their relationship with God. But when the essentials of Judaism are missing, if there is no "tzedeq u'mishpat" - then korbanot become a farce and even counterproductive. If man allows himself to become slack in his behavior towards his fellow man, thinking that he can balance his flaw simply by offering God some extra korbanot - then he has totally misunderstood what korbanot are all about.

Therefore, Micha concludes this section [and this week's Haftara] with his famous statement concerning what God truly wants from man:

"He has told you what is good and what God requires of man:

Only to do JUSTICE [mishpat],
and to love KINDNESS [chessed],
and to walk modestly with your God" (6:8)

SO WHY BILAM?

So why (in the middle of all this) does Micha mention Bilam. Why does he remind Am Yisrael to:

"...Remember what Balak plotted against you, and how Bilam responded to him..." (see 6:5)

In our study of Parshat Balak, we noted Bilam's 'protocol' of building a mizbayach [an altar] and offering korbanot to God - before each attempt to curse Bnei Yisrael. It certainly seems as though Balak assumes that a few choice korbanot can appease God in such a manner that He would actually allow Bilam to curse Bnei Yisrael.

Here again, we find a similar misunderstanding of korbanot. Bilam sees God as working in a 'mechanical' manner - like a 'vending machine'. You can achieve any result you wish with God, as long as you 'pump in' enough korbanot [sort of like how money works with man]. Bilam understands that God is PRIMARILY interested in korbanot, and hence - for enough korbanot - God would be willing to 'bend a few rules'.

During the time period of Micha, Am Yisrael suffered from a similar misunderstanding, thinking that by offering korbanot they could 'counterbalance' their haughty behavior.

Micha's conclusion is not to abolish the concept of korbanot altogether (note 4:1-5). Rather, he wants to make sure that their purpose is properly understood. After all, what good are korbanot if they hinder the perfection of that relationship - rather than enhancing it?

TAKING A CLIENT 'OUT TO LUNCH'

In Parshat Balak, there is a very interesting (but often overlooked) pasuk that serves as the introduction to Bilam's three blessings. Recall the basic 'format' of each blessing routine:

A. Balak takes Bilam to a 'high place'

[see Bamidbar 22:41, 23:13, and 23:27]

B. Bilam instructs Balak to build 7 altars & offer sacrifices

[see 23:1, 23:14, and 23:29]

C. Bilam delivers a blessing instead of a curse

D. Balak is angered, and Bilam responds 'I told you so...'

[Note how the 'aliyah' division reflects this format]

However, right before this entire unit begins, we find a different type of a "zevach", for as soon as Bilam arrived in the

land of Moav, Balak takes him 'out to (a fleishig) lunch' :
"Balaam went with Balak, and they arrived at Kiryat Huzoth
- **va'yizbach Balak baker v'tzon** - then Balak
slaughtered/offered cattle and sheep and sent them to
Balaam and to the dignitaries with him..."
[see Bamidbar 22:39-40]

Note that even though the Torah uses the word "zevach", it is not referring to a sacrifice to God, rather this is simply the story of how Balak sends a 'proper meal' to the important guests who have just arrived. But why should the Torah bother to tell us this detail?

We know how hard Balak was trying to convince Bilam to come, but also how he worried that Balak may not want to curse Am Yisrael. Balak makes a very logical assumption; that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. For the same reason that a businessman invites a potential client 'out to lunch' (in the hope that a nice meal will help 'close the deal') - so too Balak hopes that by honoring Bilam with a fancy meal - there would be a better chance that he would agree to curse Am Yisrael.

And sure enough, the same logic that Balak uses to entice Bilam, Bilam himself uses to 'entice' God - he also takes God 'out to lunch', before each one of his attempts to cause God to allow him to curse Am Yisrael. [Recall how each unit began with building 7 altars, and then offering a "par v'ayil" on each mizbayach / see chart above.]

'GODS' ACT LIKE MAN - or MAN ACTS LIKE GOD !

This assumption, that one can 'buy' God, just like he can 'buy' his fellow man - stems from a very basic misunderstanding of God [or 'gods'] in the ancient world - that gods, even though they carry great powers - act like humans. Therefore, I can affect their behavior by bribe and false flattery etc.

Micha is worried that even the God of Israel may be misunderstood by His own people to act in a human fashion; Just feed Him & flatter Him, and He'll be on 'my side'. Instead, Micha insists exactly the opposite - that God created man - **so that he would act like God** - to emulate Him. As Moshe Rabeinu explains in Sefer Devarim:

"...For the Lord, your God, is God of gods and the Lord of the lords, the great mighty and awesome God ["ha'Kel ha'gadol ha'gibor v'hanora..."], Who will **show no favor, nor will He take a bribe**. He executes the **judgment of the orphan and widow**, and **He loves the stranger**, to give him bread and clothing.

[THEREFORE - you must emulate Him:]

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord, your God, worship Him, and cleave to Him and swear by His Name. He is **your praise** and **He is your God...**

(see context in Devarim 10:12-21, note how the first bracha of shmoneh esray is based on these psukim!)

To find favor in God's eyes, we must 'walk in His ways' (see Devarim 10:12-13 & Breishit 18:19). And if we are instructed to offer Him sacrifices, it is not because God behaves like man, rather it is a symbolic act (like Tefilla) to remind ourselves **that we must act like God**.

[See also Yirmiyahu 7:21-25 (& 7:1-12) & 9:22-23, Hoshea 2:21-22, Yeshayahu 1:11-17, 1:21-27 - etc.]

THE FAST DAYS

The same is true in relation to our mourning for Jerusalem today. Do we pray for the Bet HaMikdash to be rebuilt so that we gain yet another avenue for 'instant spirituality'? Are we looking for the 'easy life'? - Or are we looking for an avenue to perfect a relationship built on solid pillars of "tzedek u'mishpat"? If we can answer that question properly, then hopefully God will answer our prayers properly.

shabbat shalom,
menachem