

Derashah Kedoshim 5784: The Corpse Flower Haftarah

R' Mordechai Torczyner – rabbi@ecdp.info

A Rare Event

The corpse flower plant, native to Indonesia, does not produce flowers every year; it builds up energy, and can wait ten years before flowering – at which point it blooms for just a few days. The flowers can be up to eight feet tall! It creates a lot of excitement.¹

Our haftarah this Shabbat is like the corpse flower – it's the rarest of all Ashkenazi haftarot.² It is so rare that it was last read in 1997, the next reading is 2041, and the one after that is 2068.³ People get very excited when it rolls around.

But like the corpse flower, it comes with an unpleasant surprise. The corpse flower gains its name from the fact that it smells like rotting meat, very uncomfortable to be in its vicinity. And when you get excited about this haftarah and actually read it, you find it to be extremely uncomfortable as well. That discomfort is the reason why this haftarah is so rare.

This haftarah has been censored, in a rabbinic plot to make sure you never hear its painful message in shul. The story of that plot provides an important lesson for our times.

Rare on purpose

Here's the two-part plot against our Haftarah:

- First: In regular, non-leap years, Kedoshim is read together with Acharei Mot. We read double parshiyot 7 times. For six of them, we read the haftarah of the second parshah. But when Acharei Mot and Kedoshim are combined, we read the haftarah for the first parshah, Acharei Mot. That's Part 1 of the censorship.
- Part 2 is when Kedoshim stands alone, in a leap year: As a rule, if Kedoshim is alone then it tends to be Rosh Chodesh or Erev Rosh Chodesh.⁴ But even if it isn't one of those, many shuls still don't read the haftarah of Kedoshim. Instead, they read the haftarah of Acharei Mot, from Amos, again, a second time, this Shabbos. We don't do that, but many do.⁵

So in some shuls this haftarah is rare, and in some it's non-existent. What is in this haftarah, that we are so allergic to reading it?

Rabbi Eliezer's Objection

The opposition starts with Rabbi Eliezer, two thousand years ago.

- In a mishnah,⁶ Rabbi Eliezer ruled that we never read a passage from Yechezkel⁷ called הודע את ירושלים as a Haftarah.
 - That passage is extremely harsh. It starts by charging the listener, "Tell Yerushalayim of all her abhorrent behavior!"
 - Then it describes at length how Hashem nurtured, supported and beautified Yerushalayim, and how Yerushalayim has been unfaithful, using the very gifts Hashem gave her to attract other lovers, meaning worshipping idols and assimilating among other nations.
 - Then Hashem describes how He will punish Yerushalayim for doing this; it's all very graphic.
 - Rabbi Eliezer bans it.
- But Rabbi Eliezer was in shul one Shabbat and someone read this banned haftarah, הודע את ירושלים, and Rabbi Eliezer rebuked him: "Before you investigate the abhorrent behavior of Yerushalayim, go investigate your mother's abhorrent behavior!" And in the Yerushalmi's version of the story, they investigated and found that the person leining the haftarah was in fact a mamzer, illegitimate.⁸

¹ <https://www.usbg.gov/gardens-plants/corpse-flowers>

² It is not rare for certain Sephardic communities, which actually lein it for Parshat Shemot. See Rambam, Seder HaTefillot, HaMaftir b'navi

³ It was actually the haftarah on the original Shabbat of Yom ha'Atzmaut, outside Israel, in 1948. In Israel that was Parshat Emor.

⁴ The 15th of Nisan (1st day of Pesach) is always Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday or Shabbat. If it is Thursday or Shabbat then Kedoshim is Erev Rosh Chodesh or Rosh Chodesh. And it is rarely Sunday.

⁵ See Divrei Hashkafah לבין פסח לשבועות, and Nefesh haRav pg 92, and a 1996 letter by Rav Serayah Deblitsky circulated via the RCA

⁶ Megillah 4:10

⁷ Perek 16

⁸ Tosefta Megillah 3:34, Sofrim 9:12, Megillah 25b, Yerushalmi Megillah 4:12

- In truth, that banned haftorah is not the same one found in our chumash for Kedoshim,⁹ but there are striking similarities, and therefore the ban includes our haftorah as well.¹⁰

But here's what I don't understand: Someone was reading this haftorah, or it wouldn't be in our chumashim, and no one would have read it in Rabbi Eliezer's shul. Why did some have it, and some not? What is this debate about?

The Goal of the Haftorah: Two Approaches

We need to understand why we read any Haftorah, on any Shabbat. There are two approaches.

The first approach says we read the haftorah for education, as part of a communal experience of learning Torah together. In the most popular version, Rav Dovid Avudraham,¹¹ a 13th century source for much of our knowledge about the siddur, explained that when the Greeks banned public Torah study we couldn't read from the Torah, so we read a parallel passage from the Navi.¹² The haftorah is a passage of Navi echoing, amplifying the lesson of the Parshah.

But there is a second approach, which sees the Haftorah not as education, but inspiration. Rav Soloveitchik was a major proponent of this idea.¹³

- He explained that the Parshah teaches Halachah. The Haftorah inspires us to hold true to that Halachah, by connecting the parshah with a hopeful prophetic vision of the future.¹⁴
- Rav Soloveitchik pointed out the rule that every Haftorah ends with consolation, hope and tefillah, especially for a future Mashiach and a return to Tzion.¹⁵ Indeed, we sometimes skip pesukim, or even go backward and repeat a pasuk from earlier in the haftorah,¹⁶ in order to find an upbeat ending.
- He pointed out how the berachot of the Haftorah declare, *נאמן אתה הוא ד' אלקינו, ונאמנים דבריך, ודבר אחד מדבריך לא ישוב ריקם* – Hashem, You are enduring, and Your words are enduring, and not one of Your words will fail to be fulfilled!¹⁷ It's an affirmation that the Haftorah's hopeful vision will come true.

So we have two approaches to the Haftorah, Education and Inspiration, and the two different approaches lead to two different haftarot this Shabbat.

Acharei Mot and Kedoshim

All year, until the last couple of weeks, Hashem's message to the Jewish people in our weekly parshah was largely upbeat and optimistic. I'm going to bring you into this special land of milk and honey, where your ancestors lived! Here is My precious Torah to follow! Build a sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell in your midst!

But Acharei Mot and Kedoshim went in a much darker direction.¹⁸

- *ולא תקיא הארץ אתכם, כאשר קאה את הגוי אשר לפניכם*. Don't emulate Egypt and Canaan. If you do, you will be evicted from the land.
- *ולא תלכו בהקות הגוי אשר אני משלה מפניכם, כי את כל אלה עשו ואקוץ בהם*. Don't follow the ways of the nation I evicted before you; they did these terrible things, and I became disgusted with them.

⁹ Ours is Yechezkel 22

¹⁰ Starting with the call to inform Yerushalayim of her abhorrent behavior. But see the Levush Orach Chaim 428.

¹¹ Avudraham Shacharit shel Shabbat

¹² This "exempted" us from keriat haTorah – hence the name "haftorah" from "patur". For other explanations of the origin of the name "Haftorah" see my Allentown shiur on Haftorah.

A related reason found in Rishonim is that we read the Haftorah in order to teach the community to honor Navi (Shut Tashbetz 1:131. Some historians suggest that it was a reaction to Sadducee rejection of Navi. I even saw

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/haftarah/> suggest it was anti-Samaritan, which seems anachronistic.), or to make sure people learn Navi (Sefer haPardes pg 306, Shibbolei haLeket haShalem 44).

¹³ Primarily in Divrei Hashkafah, בין פסה לשיבויעת, Excerpts are available at

<https://pedagogy.herzog.ac.il/%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%98%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%90%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%99-%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%A7%D7%93%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%91%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A8-%D7%A2%D7%A6%D7%99/>

¹⁴ Divrei Hashkafah, pg. 93, tied to *אין נביא רשאי לחדש דבר*

¹⁵ Divrei Hashkafah pg 30

¹⁶ Like in the Haftorah of Shabbat HaGadol from Malachi 3

¹⁷ Divrei Hashkafah pp. 30, 93

¹⁸ Even Shemot 34:11-17, after the Eigel, didn't go this far

This is the first biblical presentation of a dramatic, harsh warning: I'm giving you this land, but you can lose it. You can be kicked out.

Those who see the Haftorah as an educational lesson reiterating the parshah choose to read the harshest of threats for Yerushalayim, warning that Hashem will evict us if we embrace the ways of Canaan. "Tell Yerushalayim of her abhorrent conduct!" And the ending is utterly hopeless, "I will scatter you among the nations, I will spread you in the lands, I will eradicate your impurity, and you will fall ill before the eyes of the nations, and then you will know that I am Hashem." Read that, don't skip it! This is how we will reinforce the warning of our parshah.¹⁹

But according to Rabbi Eliezer,²⁰ the Haftorah is supposed to inspire hope, and so we really need something different this week, of all weeks.²¹ After the horrifying image of becoming like Canaan and being evicted, we need not a rebuke, but a hug! Indeed, last week's Haftorah, for Acharei Mot, included this hopeful promise from Amos: "I will restore the captives of My nation, Israel, and they will rebuild ruined cities and settle them, they will plant vineyards and drink their wine, they will create gardens and eat their fruit." That's an inspiring message for a frightened nation! That will inspire us not to despair, and not to abandon ship Gd forbid. And so some shuls say, better to read that upbeat message twice, a re-run, than to terrify the Jews with Yechezkel's horrific vision.

Yom haZikaron and Yom ha'Atzmaut

In our own lives, we, and especially our community's children, need to follow Rabbi Eliezer. What we need is not an educational message warning that we'll be kicked out and suffer in exile. We've been kicked out, we've already suffered in exile, it's not news. We are an עם שרידי חרב, a nation that has survived many swords.²² We need what Rav Soloveitchik saw at the core of the Haftorah: Hope. Inspiration. Tefillah. A vision of Mashiach. Chizuk. And not just in the haftorah, but all week.

This Monday, on Yom haZikaron, we will gain inspiration as we remember chayalim who gave everything they had so that our nation could live in our land. Here in shul on Monday evening we will learn Torah and light candles in their memory, and recite the Kel Malei for them.

As Yom haZikaron transitions into Yom ha'Atzmaut we will gain inspiration by realizing that what Amos said last week has come true. Hashem has made it all come true. "They will rebuild ruined cities and settle them, they will plant vineyards and drink their wine, they will create gardens and eat their fruit."

I know that people are busy. I know that Monday nights are often particularly busy. But if you can be here, Yom haZikaron and Yom ha'Atzmaut will be a time for that chizuk that is so vital. If you can't be here, then participate in Israeli ceremonies online. And on Tuesday evening, come to HANC for the Boots for Israel program to help our chayalim. The inspiration, especially with the year we've had, is so important.

This morning we read from Yechezkel here, because that's our shul's minhag. But I'd like to read you the end of Amos. May we merit to soon see the fulfillment of his final words: "ולא ינתשו עוד מעל אדמתם אשר נתתי להם, אמר ד' אלוקיך. I will plant them upon their soil, and never again will they be plucked from their soil, which I have given them. So declares Hashem, your Gd."

¹⁹ Along these lines see Rabbi Meir Stolevitz in Tevunah #3, הפטרות אחרי מות וקדושים, pp. 123-125 of <https://hebrewbooks.org/22883>

²⁰ One wonders if this is part of the perspective that inspires Rabbi Eliezer's best-known talmid, the ever-hopeful and inspiring Rabbi Akiva. Cf Makkot 24 for a clear example.

²¹ It seems, from Rav Soloveitchik's writing, that one distinction between the negative message of Yechezkel and other harsh haftarot is the timing, needing comfort due to Acharei Mot and Kedoshim. But it's also very worth noting that the other negative haftarot, like the דפירענותא and שבת הגדול, have upbeat endings. Yechezkel's message has no such upbeat ending.

²² We are now fighting in an operation known as הרבות ברזל, Iron Swords.