

Haftorat Parashat Parah

Yechezkiel 36:16-36

I wish you could have celebrated Purim with us. We had the most awesome Purim at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. The Students' fabulous Purim Shpiel set the tone for both the intellectual and emotional depth of Purim. We continued to cry and laugh throughout the following festive meal, interspersing singing and dancing with prayerful meditation. This week's haftorah includes many of my favorite verses that reminds of my own personal teshuvah process. Please read on, as I nostalgically look back to share some glimpses of my past which tie into our beautiful purifying haftorah.

The Connection between the Haftorah and Parashat Parah

This week's special *haftorah* describes the "purifying waters" that Hashem will sprinkle upon us at the time of the Geulah (Redemption). This purification of the Jewish people ties in with the theme of this week's additional Torah reading – the purifying qualities of the *Parah Adumah* – the "Red Heifer." Yechezkiel, himself, compares this spiritual cleansing to purification from ritual impurity.

Prophesying the Return of Israel to their Homeland while in the State of Impurity

The concept of redemption and returning to the Land of Israel precedes repentance and purification in several verses in the *Tana"ch* (Bible). In his discussion about the fifth of Iyar (*Yom Ha'atzmaut*/ Israel's Independence Day), Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov learns from Yechezkiel that Hashem will gather the dispersed exiles of Israel and return them to the Land of Israel prior to cleansing and purifying them spiritually. "For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you (*Yechezkiel 36:24-25*).

Returning to Israel before Mashiach Comes

These verses are clearly a proof that we are not supposed to wait for Mashiach before making *aliyah* (immigrate) to *Eretz Yisrael*. Although we don't yet have a Torah government in charge of running our homeland, and unfortunately, our leadership is far from ideal, this is not a reason to shy away from returning to the Holy Land. I once heard Rabbi Aviner on the radio explain that just as when a baby is born, we need to take care of his physical needs, and only afterwards, when he turns three, do we start to formally teach him Torah; likewise the physical infrastructure of the Land of Israel must precede its spiritual content. In this week's *haftorah*, the prophet predicts that the process of redemption will unfold in stages. Rather than being the culmination of redemption, the return of the Jewish people to our homeland can be compared to the birth of the baby – one of the early stages of redemption. Only afterwards will all of Israel learn Torah, become cleansed from our assimilation and from the residue of the secular or idol-worshipping cultures where some of us grew up.

The Purity of the Land of Israel brings us to Teshuvah (Repentance)

It is known that "the Land of Israel makes wise" (*Baba Batra 158b*). Many young people from every corner of the earth are inspired to adapt the Torah lifestyle only by coming to Israel. Since a young teenager, I had been searching for truth and meaning in life for many years. Only in the Land of Israel did I find what I was looking for. When as a nineteen year old "flower power" girl, I met Rabbi Weber at the *Kotel* (Wall), something moved in my *neshamah* (soul). The following Shabbat, lighting my first

Shabbat candles at the girls' dorm of *Diaspora Yeshiva* overlooking the *Kotel*, I returned to the Torah of my ancestors. It was as if Hashem had begun to cleanse me from all the impure values of the Western Society with which I was raised. Here, on Mount Zion young hippies became transformed to Yeshiva students. Instead of being on fire with the "Grateful Dead", we became on fire with the "Tree of Life" – the Holy Torah. There is no way I would have been able to do *teshuvah* in Denmark, although my father tried to convince me to return and study Torah in Copenhagen, which has one of the largest Judaic Libraries (so he said). It was the air of *Eretz Yisrael*, and the closeness to Hashem that one can feel here, which enabled me to embrace the Torah lifestyle. It didn't matter that the government was secular; the purity of the Land itself inspires and transforms the many Diaspora Jews who return home. With Hashem's help we will all be purified completely. Very soon everyone in the Holy Land will be cleansed as Hashem "will sprinkle clean water upon" us, speedily in our days!

Receiving a New Heart of Flesh

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh" (*Yechezkiel* 36:26). After all of Israel will become spiritually purified, the next stage of the redemption process is receiving a new heart from Hashem. Removing our heart of stone implies that Hashem will remove our *yetzer hara* (negative impulse), and we will no longer get jealous or lust after things that are not good for us. With our new heart, we will desire to keep all the mitzvot one hundred percent with our entire being. We will no longer have issues and personal struggles. Our will will totally become Hashem's will. We will become an extension of Hashem, like a train-car attached to its engine.

Pesach: the Pre-redemptive Model of Redemption

Parashat Parah with its purifying *haftorah* is very appropriate for the Shabbat following Purim when we begin to prepare for Pesach as it states, "We begin to ask about the laws of Pesach thirty days before Pesach" (*Shulchan Aruch, Hilchot Pesach* 1). As we clean and scrub the walls of our homes, Hashem polishes the walls of our hearts. Pesach is a pre-redemptive model of the redemption process. Each stage of the redemption is exemplified in preparing for and celebrating Pesach. Removing *chametz* (leavened) from our homes, parallels removing the *yetzer hara* – the "heart of stone" from within.

Building a Sanctuary in My Heart

Today, we have begun this process of removing our "heart of stone" which causes the blockages that blocks us from feeling Hashem's presence. An increasing number of Torah Jews are learning the famous book "*Bilvavi*" (In my heart) by Rabbi Itamar Shwartz. His main message is that it is not enough to know about Hashem intellectually. We need to feel Hashem's holiness and rejoice in His presence, the same way that we would rejoice if we won a million dollars in the lottery, as it states "Taste and see how Hashem is good..." (*Tehillim* 34:9). Hashem desires that we partner with Him in the redemption process. In order to receive the spiritual renewal promised in our *haftorah*, we need to do our *histadlut* (effort) by settling in the Land of Israel, and working on bringing the awareness of Hashem into our hearts. "In my heart I will build a *Mishkan* (sanctuary)!" In the merit of building a dwelling place for Hashem in our hearts, may we also become partners with Hashem in building the Holy Temple!