Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman &
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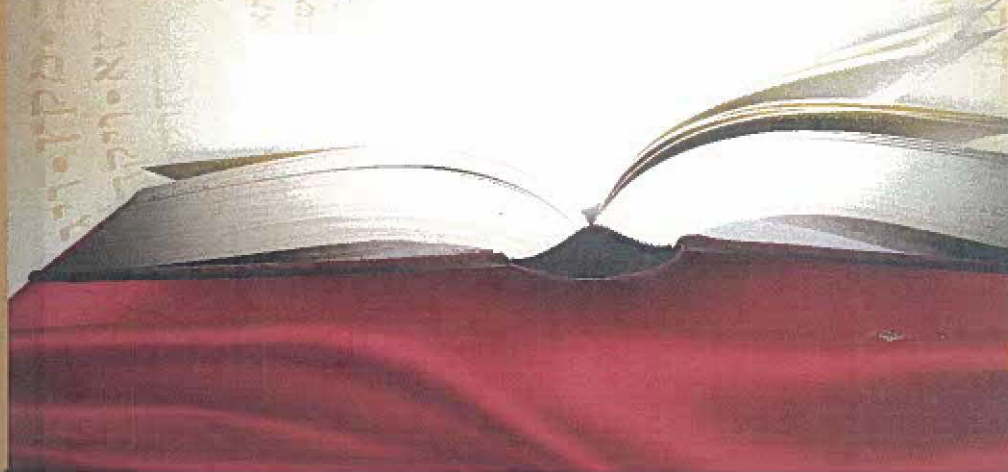
Essays on the Weekly Haftarah Reading from the
Rabbis & Professors of Yeshiva University



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Rabbi Moshe Tessone

Haftarat Shemot (as per *Sephardim*): Are Leaders Born or Self Made?

This devar Torah is dedicated in honor of my dear wife Regine Monavar, whose birthday coincides with the annual reading of Parashat Shemot

INTRODUCTION: THEMATIC CONNECTION BETWEEN *SHEMOT* AND *HAFTARAT YIRMIYAHU*

Parashat Shemot marks the birth and the Biblical introduction of the most profound spiritual leader and prophet that the children of Israel ever had: *Moshe Rabbeinu*. It is also in this *parashah* that Moshe is summoned to lead the Jewish people. He attempts, in his modesty, to resist his calling as the designated redeemer of his brethren on the grounds that he is not qualified to achieve the monumental task that he is called upon to perform. The striking parallels here between the *parashah* and the *haftarah* as read by the *Sephardim* are indeed apparent, as the *haftarah* portrays the young prophet Yirmiyahu, who explicitly conveys, just as Moshe did, that he is not ready for a leadership career. Yirmiyahu, like

Moshe, and unlike other prophets, was a seer whom the text tells us a lot about, not only regarding his prophetic visions, but also about his life's events, his prayers, and his contemplations. In this sense, we are able to derive from the texts of *Yirmiyahu*, and *Parashat Shemot* as well, more about these two visionaries and their personalities and backgrounds.

ANALYSIS: THE PARALLELS BETWEEN MOSHE AND YIRMIYAHU

In our *haftarah*, the similarities between both leadership personalities introduced by the respective Biblical texts are manifested in several ways. First, both Moshe and Yirmiyahu are unique individuals who are portrayed by their texts as having been designated by God and in some way "chosen," and even reared in such a way so as to empower them to fulfill their respective leadership tasks. Secondly, both Moshe and Yirmiyahu claimed that they lacked the necessary skills and upbringing to fulfill their calling, and in doing so effectively resisted their Divine "chosenness" for leadership. Thirdly, and perhaps most ironic, is that both leaders, because of self-described limitations, initially resist the Almighty's call to assume leadership positions, but both, eventually display their unlimited potential as they realize careers of national greatness and self-actualization in their respective leadership missions and in their prophecy.

MOSHE AND YIRMIYAHU: DESIGNATED FOR LEADERSHIP

Although born to a noble Levite family, the son of Amram and Yocheved, Moshe had an upbringing in his formative years in the palace of Pharaoh, the mightiest world power of his day. In spite of the fact that all first born Israelite males that were born during the same period as Moshe were ordered to death by being cast in the Nile, the Almighty, through *hashgachah peratit* (Divine personal intervention) manipulated the events of the day so that Moshe would not only survive the harsh Pharaonic decree, but grew up *in the very home* of the ruler that would, by royal decree, have had him drown in the Nile along with his other Israelite brethren.

It is even more compelling that Moshe also grows up *in the very home* of the ruler that he eventually confronts head on, challenges, and overcomes as he becomes the redeemer of Israel. The very fact that

Moshe was raised by spending the better part of his formative years in such close proximity to the world's most powerful noblemen and rulers who dwelled amongst the Egyptian royalty was in effect part of a Divinely engineered "leadership training program," tailor-made for *Moshe Rabbeinu*. If Moshe was to challenge, and ultimately overpower, the Egyptian political machinery to benefit his people, then it was certainly a prerequisite for him to have had an intimate and deep understanding of the inner workings of Egyptian leadership and its psyche – something that could most effectively, and perhaps only, be attained by being raised in that environment from a very young age. Furthermore, Moshe's being born into the tribe of Levi and to parents as noble and influential as Amram and Yocheved, speaks to his having inherited a unique spiritual preparedness for leadership, one that could only arise from being the product of such a home dedicated to Jewish spiritual leadership. It is from this same home that Moshe's siblings, Aharon and Miriam, emerged and became distinguished national leaders in their own right.

Yirmiyahu is similarly born into distinguished lineage, part of a priestly family from the village of Anatot. Anatot was a place that was in relatively close proximity to *Yerushalayim*, to where *Evyatar Ha-Kohein* was exiled in the days of *Shlomo Ha-Melekh*, and was in effect rendered unable to serve *Hashem* in a priestly capacity (*Melakhim Aleph* 2:26–27). It is very probable that Yirmiyahu hails from this particular priestly family, as the text relates that he was "*min ha-kohanim asher be-Anatot*" (*Yirmiyahu* 1:1). This fact is particularly noteworthy because it points out that even though Yirmiyahu was of kohanic descent, he still was not operating within the leadership framework of *kehunah*, nor in any form of official priestly service, when he heard God's calling.

At this point, *Hashem* tells him that he was consecrated from conception, and sanctified for leadership, before he exited his mother's womb and entered the world. *Hashem* further tells him "*navi la-goyim netatikha*" – "I have set you as a prophet onto the nations" (*Yirmiyahu* 1:3), which clearly indicates to Yirmiyahu that *Hashem* had designating him for prophecy, and that, similar to Moshe, he was "born to lead," as it were. From this *pasuk*, we also derive that it was quite explicitly relayed to Yirmiyahu that even though his leadership birthright in the technical sense may have been some form of priestly office, nonetheless, his

Divine mission was broader and more global in scope, as he was destined to serve in prophecy not only to the Israelite people, but also to the nations of the world.

Both Moshe and Yirmiyahu's prophetic "chosen-ness" are clearly apparent from the texts at hand, and the similarities between them continues into the next phase of our discussion which will compare their respective reactions to God's calling and the subsequent deliberations that ensued between each prophet and the *Borei Olam*.

MOSHE AND YIRMIYAHU: RESISTING LEADERSHIP

It is in *Parashat Shemot* that God reveals himself to Moshe for the very first time, when Moshe witnesses a fascinating and nature-defying phenomenon, a burning bush upon the mountain, which was not being consumed by the surrounding fire. It was at this juncture that *Hashem* charges Moshe with the task of becoming the redeemer of Israel, thereby instructing him to confront Pharaoh and demand the release of his people. Moshe's response was one of doubt and refusal, and he even argued with *Hashem* about the viability of his leadership mission. Moshe's resistance was based on three key points. First, he contended that he lacked the skills that were needed to achieve this mission. Second, he did not have the confidence that Pharaoh would believe him and that the Israelite nation would be receptive to his words (we will later see that Yirmiyahu shared this exact sentiment upon his being called). Third, Moshe also felt that perhaps his brethren in Egypt were not worthy of God's miraculous salvation.

One of Moshe's arguments was that he had a speech impediment, as he tells the Almighty *"lo ish devarim anokhi"* – "I am not a man of words ...," and he continues *"ki khevad peh u-khevad lashon anokhi"* – "for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech" (*Shemot* 4:10). According to our Sages, *Hashem* continued to charge Moshe, for a period of seven days, to go and talk to Pharaoh on behalf of the Jewish people. For an entire week Moshe refused, until God finally assigned this task to his brother Aharon.

Moshe Rabbeinu's resistance to leadership is clearly apparent from the text of *Shemot* and the accompanying midrashic commentaries. In spite of this, the scope of Moshe's life mission and what he was to

become – which in essence was to be not only the redeemer of Israel but also to be the most profound and pre-eminent spiritual guide that the Jewish nation ever had – speaks to the fact that leaders may not always see themselves as such; nevertheless, that does not preclude them from achieving enormous heights in communal service. In *Moshe Rabbeinu's* case, the vastness of his impact on the Jewish people and their eternal spiritual heritage was felt for some three millennia, and is amazingly still an essential and indispensible part of the practice of Judaism even today.

In a similar vein to Moshe, Yirmiyahu resists becoming a prophetic leader to the *goyim* (the world's nations), as he, just like Moshe, tells God that he "knows not how to speak," and he further relates *"ki na'ar anokhi,"* – "for I am merely a lad" (*Yirmiyahu* 1:6), thus implying that he is not fit for leadership. Rashi explains here that Yirmiyahu was really reflecting his inadequacy in comparison to Moshe. *Moshe Rabbeinu* had led the nation from the hands of Egypt's cruelest tyrants, through the barren dessert and the splitting of the sea, and through him the nation witnessed a Sinaitic revelation and miracles that were unimaginable and never to be seen again. It was only after Moshe had accomplished all of this that he had achieved the complete confidence of his followers, and was able to prophesize on the tribulations and afflictions that were to befall Israel. Yirmiyahu, in comparison to this, was not only much younger than Moshe was when he began to prophesize, but also had not been given the opportunities to achieve the popular rapport and national trust that Moshe, after much personal effort and toil, later enjoyed, in order to prophesize as he did. It is for this very reason that Yirmiyahu was concerned that his prophecies would not be well received.

The time period in which Yirmiyahu begins to prophesize is of particular significance to our analysis as well. Yirmiyahu operated during the years 626–586 BCE, which effectively was during the generation that preceded the destruction of the First Temple, and he continued prophesying during and after its destruction as well. During Yirmiyahu's time, the nation in Jerusalem was confident that God would not let His Sanctuary and His people falter despite their sinful ways. This was another reason that the prophet resisted his mission – knowing that the nation would not take favorably to his words, but rather, would treat his warnings of impending doom with skepticism and even belligerence.

Thus, in similar ways, both Moshe and Yirmiyahu resisted leadership to varying degrees, at different stages in their lives, and even more surprisingly, they did so despite God's personal invitation. Nonetheless, in both cases, the Almighty did get His way (as always is the case). Despite their resistance, both of these men delivered a stellar performance in fulfilling what *Hashem* asked of them, and they did it with the utmost commitment in honor and dignity.

MOSHE AND YIRMIYAHU: THE RISE TO LEADERSHIP

While Moshe's resistance, in comparison to Yirmiyahu's, was more drawn out, in the end, they *both* assumed their respective national leadership missions. The central question, that is relevant to our discussion of both leaders and their respective texts (in *Shemot* and *Yirmiyahu*), is really aimed at understanding what element of leadership-making is particularly unique to Moshe and Yirmiyahu. Did these noble men become great leaders because of their respective "chosen-ness" and because they were reared to such a calling from birth (as was the case with Moshe), or were consecrated from the womb (as was the case with Yirmiyahu)? Or is there some other operating factor in the consciousness of these leaders that can enlighten our understanding of how leaders came to be?

In order to gain insight to this question, we must first realize that in both *Parashat Shemot* and *haftarat Yirmiyahu* it is the *hakdashah* (sanctification) of leaders as depicted in these texts that speaks to the issue of leaders and how they are made. The ultimate common denominator in our comparison of Moshe and Yirmiyahu, and what really defined their leadership, is that the *consecration* of both Moshe and Yirmiyahu takes place through some sort of Divine inner revelation that occurs at a critical juncture in the lives of both of these great men.

Granted that both Moshe and Yirmiyahu were consecrated from early on, nevertheless, their *hakdashah* was only consummated at that particular juncture because they were *tuned in* to their inner purpose in life, and thereby, they were both able to *hear* the Divine calling prompting them to reach higher and become the extraordinary historic personalities that they were meant to be. The fact that Moshe was prepared from birth to lead, and that Yirmiyahu was designated from the womb to prophesy, is only significant because they both "heard" the message

of their *hakdashah* and responded in kind. Pre-designation alone does not always lead to leadership, but it very well may if the designated one actually "hears" his or her calling and becomes pro-active in fulfilling their personal mission.

In a similar vein, one may also argue that the resistance to leadership that is common to both Moshe and Yirmiyahu is ultimately not as important as the fact that they both actually *heard the calling* and acted on it, despite their shared initial resistance. The mere fact that they both articulated their arguments vis-à-vis the Almighty, further proves that both these great prophets really *heard, understood, processed,* and *internalized* the essence of God's message to them. Their mutual deliberations, whereby each prophet engaged the *Borei Olam* with regards to their qualifications for leadership, are evidence of a self-evaluation that they were experiencing. This self-analysis and soul-searching is in-and-of-itself a vital first step that any new leader must undertake if he or she is to become committed to the cause of any nation.

CONCLUSION: A MESSAGE FOR TODAY'S NEW LEADERS

Perhaps too many "would-be" leaders, both historically and in our day, never seize leadership opportunities that they may encounter because they are not properly tuned in, and thus never even really *hear* that they are being called to rise to the challenge. It is exactly those very deep and personal inner messages of one's leadership mission, and Israel's national purpose – which Moshe heard at the burning bush in *Parashat Shemot,* and that Yirmiyahu correspondingly tells us about in our *haftarah* – which are the central points of similarity in both their careers, and the very defining attributes that enabled them to rise to unimaginable heights in service to their people.

It is precisely this concept of *hearing the inner voice* that speaks as a subtle and yet powerful lesson to all who would lead, but all too often never actually do. These two truly remarkable men *enabled* their very own *hakdashah* into leadership responsibility by tuning in and connecting to "the calling" that all those who aspire to, and have potential for leadership, must hear and must pay close attention to in order to begin envisioning themselves as true leaders. By doing so, they will gain a sense of what real leadership entails and requires of them.

The self-analysis described above, that both Moshe and Yirmiyahu underwent, is what forced them to take a step forward for a brief moment and think of themselves for the first time as possible leaders. In so doing, they had to ask themselves the hard question: "Am I truly fit to lead?" In order to evaluate their fitness for leadership, they had to first envision themselves in leadership roles, thereby effectively enabling their own consecration to begin to take effect. This is the contemplative dynamic that must be awakened today in the consciousness of all individuals who possess the character traits and skill sets needed for great communal vision and national leadership. If our generation is to produce more leaders who emulate the likes of *Moshe Rabbeinu* and *Yirmiyahu Ha-Navi* and the many others who were inspired by them and followed in their path throughout the generations, each prospective leader must be sensitive to the responsibilities of leadership, both on a local and a global level.

In this way, both *Moshe Rabbeinu* and Yirmiyahu set a gold standard in our understanding that great national figures are *born* but also are simultaneously *self-made*. They exemplified that truly celebrated leaders most certainly do come to be through some form of Divine and/or preordained consecration and *hakdashah* exercise, but ultimately, such individuals are only able to actualize their true potential for astounding leadership by staying tuned in to the deep inner voice that emanates from their personal consciousness of God's presence. By allowing that voice to direct their purpose in life in a way which propels them to *nurture*, *serve*, and *lead* their people with distinction and honor, these individuals can be truly great leaders.

APPENDIX: AFTERWORD ON THE *HAFTAROT OF PARASHAT SHEMOT*

Connecting *Parashat Shemot* with the *Haftarot*

The previous essay, entitled "*Are Leaders Born or Self Made?*," draws on thematic parallels between *Parashat Shemot* and *haftarat Yirmiyahu*, and establishes striking and profound similarities between two illustrious prophets, *Moshe Rabbeinu* and Yirmiyahu. While for *Parashat Shemot*, the *haftarah* that is read by *Ashkenazim* (from *Sefer Yeshayahu*, ch. 27) is different from that which the *Sephardim* read (from *Yirmiyahu* ch. 1),

there is also a thematic connection between the *haftarah* in *Yeshayahu* and *Parashat Shemot*.

Just as the ancient Israelites in Moshe's days, who were enslaved in Egypt, as depicted in *Shemot*, were doubting of the deliverance that was to ensue, so too, the Jewish nation in Yeshayahu's age mocked the prophecies and challenged the validity of God's intervention. In both the case of the generation that was to be redeemed from Egyptian bondage, and with Israel in the days of Yeshayahu, the nation finally came to the realization that the Divine will always prevails, and it permeates and defines the ultimate destiny of humankind.

There is also still yet another connection between the two separate *haftarot*. Similar to Yirmiyahu (and Moshe), who at times contended with a belligerent nation, Yeshayahu, too, deals with a people that are resistant to his prophecy, as he tries to guide a nation that at first has difficulty accepting his forewarning. In fact, part of Yeshayahu's message is that the natural leaders of the Jewish people have let them down, and a change in leadership is needed. As this *haftarah* states, "the priest and the prophet reel through strong drink, they are confused because of wine, they stagger because of strong drink; they reel in vision, they totter in judgment" (*Yeshayahu* 28:7). The *kohanim* and *nevi'im* had failed to act as proper guides to their people. This message of rebuke was a prophecy that was certainly quite difficult for both the leaders themselves, as well as the laymen, to accept. Despite the harshness of Yeshayahu's message, however, like Yirmiyahu (and Moshe), Yeshayahu's leadership was ultimately recognized by the nation, and the validity of the Divine promise inherent in his words prevailed.

ASHKENAZIM ALSO READ THE *HAFTARAH* FROM *YIRMIYAHU*

Eventually, as the yearly cycle of *haftarot* progresses after the reading of *Haftarat Shemot*, *Ashkenazim* (and *Sephardim*, for the second time in the yearly cycle of *haftarot*) do read this very *haftarah* from *Yirmiyahu*, concurrent with *Parashat Matot*.

When it is read during the *Shabbat* of *Parashat Matot*, it marks the beginning of the cycle of *haftarah* readings that precede the "Three Weeks" and *Tishah Be-Av*. *Chazal* note that whereas the *haftarot* of each of the first forty-one *parashiyot* that are read in the *sefarim* of *Bereshit*,

Shemot, Vayikra, and *Bemidbar* up until *Parashat Matot,* represent in some form or manner a thematic connection to the corresponding weekly *parashah,* that dynamic shifts during the reading of the *parashiyot* beginning with *Parashat Matot* and continuing through all the *parashiyot* of *Sefer Devarim* (*Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim,* 428:8).

At this point in the yearly cycle of *haftarah* readings, the *haftarot* now take on a dimension of a national message that does not necessarily tie in thematically to the corresponding *parashah,* but rather corresponds to the national spirit and mood of the Jewish nation during the said time of year. This dynamic in *haftarah*-reading continues until nearly the end of the yearly cycle of *haftarah* readings, and is known as the *haftarot* of "*Telata De-Puranuta*" (three *haftarot* of affliction/tribulations) and "*Shevah De-Nechemta*" (seven *haftarot* of consolation/comfort) (*Megillah,* 31b, *Tosafot*).

The three *haftarot* of *puranuta* (affliction) begin with this *haftarah* which we discussed from Yirmiyahu, concurrent with *Parashat Matot,* and ends with the *haftarah* of *Shabbat Chazon* whereby "*Chazon Yishayahu*" is read on the *Shabbat* immediately preceding *Tishah Be-Av. Chazal* decreed these three particular *haftarah* readings after the destruction of the Second Temple, including among them a reading from the first chapter of *Yirmiyahu,* which forewarns the nation of the impending affliction and destruction of the First Temple.

The seven *haftarot* of consolation begin with *Shabbat Nachamu* (immediately after *Tishah Be-Av*) and continue for seven consecutive weeks, through the reading of *Parashat Nitzavim,* which usually falls on the *Shabbat* that immediately precedes *Rosh Ha-Shanah.*

We might also note with regard to the *haftarot* and their thematic connection to the time of year, that the last two *haftarot* in the yearly *Shabbat* cycle (namely, *Vayeilekh* and *Ha'azinu*), deal with the timely themes of repentance and God's salvation, which reflect the prevailing national mood and spirit during the time of *Yamim Nora'im* and *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah.*