

Haftarot Unrolled: Shemot

The mouth that will speak with G-d

The Haftarah of Shemot describes a society drunk on its own wealth and power, arrogant, self-centered and haughty. Yeshayahu attempts to warn them of the approaching disaster, but their cynicism deafens them to the prophet's message. He expresses his frustration at his inability to connect with them:

כִּי בָלְעָגִי שִׁפְהָ וּבִלְשׁוֹן אֲחֵרֶת יְדַבֵּר אֶל הָעָם הַזֶּה

Only with a twisted tongue, and in a different language,
should one talk to these people?! (Yeshayahu 28:11)

Yeshayahu wonders if there is anyone out there that can still be reached:

אֵת מִי יוֹרֶה דַּעְיָה וְאֵת מִי יְבִין שְׂמוּעָה גְמוּלִי מִחֶלֶב עֲתִיקֵי מִשְׁדָּדִים

Whom can one teach knowledge? Who can understand what he hears?
Just-weaned babes, who left the breast (Yeshayahu 28:9)

It is possible that his answer is actually a rhetorical question, and should be read thus: "Who can I talk to? Nursery-school children?!" It is also possible that this is not sarcasm, but rather a genuine answer. The prophet might be saying that even though society as a whole is twisted by its cynicism and arrogance, there is still hope for their children. They might retain enough innocence and purity to hear his message, to accept the Torah that he has to teach them.

In order to highlight the innocence and trust of the children, Yeshayahu uses the imagery of nursing. This is not incidental; the nursing relationship is a symbol of full dependence and full trust. Here is how David HaMelech references it in Tehillim:

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד ה' לֹא גִבָּה לִבִּי וְלֹא רָמוּ עֵינַי וְלֹא הִלְכֹתִי בְגָדֹלוֹת וּבְנִפְלְאוֹת מְמֹנִי:
(ב) אִם לֹא שִׁוִּיתִי וְדוּמַמְתִּי נִפְשִׁי כְּגִמְלָה עָלַי אִמּוֹ כְּגִמְלָה עָלַי נִפְשִׁי:

1) A song of ascent for David-

Hashem! My heart did not become conceited, and my eyes did not become haughty,
and I did not walk in ways too great or too mighty for me.

2) If I did not liken and compare my soul,
to a nursing infant with his mother,
as a nursing infant was my soul.

In order to have a relationship of pure trust with G-d, David visualizes himself as a nursing infant looking up at his mother. By nature, a baby has complete trust in his mother to provide him with what he needs. Our relationship with G-d should be similarly unencumbered by our own conceits and by the self-delusion that we know better than He does.

By using this image, Yeshayahu expresses his hope that children who were only recently weaned retain their ability to trust others to provide them with what they need. If so, they will be able to listen to the Torah that he has to teach them. If not, if they are already cynical, then it will fall on deaf ears.

The Midrash takes the Haftarah's point about the nursing being a prerequisite for being able to absorb the Torah, and applies it to Moshe Rabbeinu.

ותאמר אחותו אל בת פרעה האלך וקראתי לך אשה מינקת מן העבריות: ומאי שנא מעבריות? מלמד, שהחזירוהו למשה על כל המצרות כולן ולא ינק אמר: פה שעתיד לדבר עם השכינה יינק דבר טמא? והיינו דכתיב: +ישעיהו כח+ את מי יורה דעה וגו', למי יורה דעה ולמי יבין שמועה? לגמולי מחלב ולעתיקי משדים.

"His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nursemaid from the Hebrews?": Why the Hebrews? It teaches us that Pharaoh's daughter took Moshe to all the Egyptian women, and he would not nurse. He said, "The mouth that will speak with the Presence will nurse from something impure?!" As it says (Yeshayahu 28): "Whom can you teach knowledge, etc? Just-weaned toddlers, who left the breast" That is, to whom should He teach knowledge, and who will understand what he hears? The one who drew away from the breast. (Talmud Bavli Sotah 12b)

This Midrash points out a gap in Moshe's story: we know that Moshe's sister got his mother to be hired as his nurse, but why would Pharaoh's daughter go out of her way to look for a Hebrew nursemaid in the first place?

Let's look at the verses in the Parsha, right after Pharaoh's daughter draws him out of the Nile:

ז) ותאמר אחותו אל בת פרעה האלך וקראתי לך אשה מינקת מן העבריות ותינק לך את הילד:
ח) ותאמר לה בת פרעה לכי ותלך העלמה ותקרא את אם הילד:
ט) ותאמר לה בת פרעה הילכי את הילד הזה והיניקהו לי ואני אטן את שכרך ותקח האשה הילד ותיניקהו:

- 7) His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a **nursemaid** from the Hebrews, so she could **nurse** the child for you?"
- 8) Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go". The girl went, and called the mother of the child.
- 9) Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take care of this child and **nurse** him for me, and I will pay you." The woman took the child and **nursed** him. (Shemot 2)

This is a lot of detail for a story that is otherwise very sketchy. It might have just said:

His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nursemaid?"
Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go". The girl went, and called the mother of the child.
Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take care of this child and I will pay you."

If all we had was the shorter version, we would have missed the focus on nursing, and the insistence that the nursemaid be "from the Hebrews". But what difference did it make to Moshe's life that he was nursed - not just raised, but specifically nursed - by his mother, and not by some Egyptian woman serving in the palace?

The Midrash takes the verse from the Haftarah and reads it thus: "Who can G-d teach Torah to? One who rejected the breast." It asserts that if Moshe had not rejected Egyptian nursemaids, G-d would not have been able to use him as a conduit for the Torah. He would not have been able to absorb it.

The nourishment that one gets from nursing is not only physical. The baby receives not only the calories and vitamins of the milk, but also the connection with the human being who nurses him. This is why there is an expression that a person absorbs his values "with his mother's milk." And the values and mores of Egypt were not something that Moshe Rabbeinu could absorb and still be able to hear G-d. "The mouth that will speak with the Presence will nurse from something impure?!" It is inconceivable that the person whose mission was to learn and then teach all of the Torah would have nursed from an Egyptian.

The Haftarah teaches us that learning Torah has a pre-requisite: our relationship with G-d. If we are able to trust Him like a nursing child trusts his mother, than we can be open to learning Torah. If we turn cynical and derisive, like Yeshayahu's generation, than our minds will reject His words the way they rejected Yeshayahu's.

The Midrash takes it one step further. If the values that we are fed with our mother's milk are "Egyptian" and incompatible with Torah - such as treating human beings as objects, cynicism and haughtiness - then it will be impossible for us to have a relationship of trust with G-d, and impossible to receive the Torah.

This is why it was important for the Torah to emphasize to us that Moshe Rabbeinu, the conduit of the Torah, refused Egyptian women, and was nursed by his own mother.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

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